

A Historical Perspective on the Work and Rest Dynamic in the Romanian Ethos

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ABSTRACT: For Romanians the work-rest dynamic is a product of historical forces unique to this population. Therefore, the factors that have influenced the relation of Romanians to the work and rest dynamic and fatigue were examined. The factors are the turbulent medieval history of the Romanian people, the Orthodox Church, whose teachings have played an essential part in the development of the Romanians' relation to work and rest, as well as the communist regime and the social and economical dynamics specific to the post-1989 era.

KEY WORDS: work, rest, exhaustion, history, Romania, Comunism

Medieval History and Its Impact on the Romanian Work Ethic and Rest Habits

“Rest is a historical, cultural, political an social concept” (Sharpe 2017, 912) and as such, it cannot be understood without the examination of its multiple formative influences. Similarly, although “there is no doubt that the increased preoccupation with exhaustion coincided with the rise of modern capitalism (...) exhaustion and its various symptoms have also been a serious concern in other historical periods” (Schaffner 2016, 9). Over the centuries, due to its geographical position, the population of Romania has been faced with countless invasions born out of the ambitions of the great powers and

empires that have been established around it. From the Roman Empire to the Ottoman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the position of Romania during the two World Wars, there have always been external forces that exerted pressure on the Romanian people. Successive waves of invasions, especially in the south of Romania, had a very important impact not only on the historical course of the Romanian provinces, but also on the society on the whole, and on the Romanian ethos.

The need to cope with these pressures and invasions has created a feeling of anxiety in the psyche of the Romanian people. Granted, the wars and countless invasions have not been the only factors responsible for the formation of the Romanian collective psyche; after all, every European nation had their share of wars, conflict, and calamities. However, in the case of the Romanian people, these things happened when the structure of the collective psyche was immature, thus relatively underdeveloped. As the adverse life experiences have a greater impact earlier in life, in the same way, centuries of turbulent history had a powerful impact on the Romanian identity, which was still in the development process at that time. Thus, an incursion in the history sources beginning with the 15th century until the 19th century depicts a portrait of the Romanian in full process of metamorphosis.

It must be mentioned here that, when the texts refer to Romanians between 15th and 19th century, they have in view mostly Romanian peasants (in most cases, merchants and craftsmen were foreigners). This is an important aspect, since in general, the Romanian peasant's life was trapped in a poverty cycle that was subjected to the conditions imposed by his relation with the nobility (*boieri*). Although the relationship between the peasant and the noble took different forms over time, this factor controlled almost exclusively (sometimes, totally) the way the peasant worked. If we look at the Romanian peasant's situation over the centuries through contemporary lens, it could be said that they experienced a total lack of control in their relation with their work, which is a burnout factor in relation to work (Maslach 2017, 57) as well as a trauma generating factor.

Therefore, the Romanian work and rest related ethos was formed in a context of adversities and lack of control, which guarantees the presence of exhaustion to a certain degree. Moreover, it seems that these adverse

contexts have led to the gradual degradation of the Romanian attitude towards work. For example, sources from the 15th to the 17th century describe the inhabitants of the Romanian Countries as being hardworking, clean, interested in the hygiene of their close habitat, hospitable and cheerful, party lovers and good soldiers. In addition, we are told that “the Romanians’ native intelligence is remarkable and, although the people is uneducated, they are rather cunning than simple” (Tighiliu 1995, 127). It seems that “in a country where everything is marked by instability, the mentally dominant feeling is that of insecurity, which is seen in every layer of society, from peasant to the noble. This general insecurity, capable of generating existential terrors, reaches its peak in the 17th century. (...) The ever-increasing taxes have led to the most extreme poverty, pushed people to hopelessness, depression, on the verge of despair. As despair leads to carelessness, they give themselves to an intemperate life of eating and drinking” (Tighiliu 1995, 128).

In 15th to 17th century a portrait takes shape of the Romanian people as hardworking people, initially, but one that was crashed by waves of adversities. Under the burden of this trauma, people began to focus exclusively on survival, trying to manage their collective trauma by means of the only coping behavior at hand – food and drink, and even so, only when these were available.

Unfortunately, because of these difficult circumstances and with strong feeling of lack of control over his work and his life, the Romanian individual seemed to relinquish his diligence as a virtue of his culture. This is why he began to be described in not quite laudatory terms by foreign travelers who visited the Romanian provinces. Bartolomeo Geymet, who was an Italian traveler, wrote in 1838 that, “the peasant is an uncivilized, stubborn species, who only works for fear of bludgeoning” (Geymet 1838, 737). Raoul Perrin, a French traveler from the same period, despite the fact that he praised the landscapes, the resources, and even the inhabitants of the Romanian Countries, also added that “there is nothing Romanians delight more in than the intoxicating *dolce far niente*” (Perrin 1839, 753).

That said, these observations need to be understood taking into consideration the larger context of poverty and difficulties caused by political and economic unfavorable dynamics, which oftentimes have been even abusive towards the peasants. This state of affairs has lasted for centuries

and led to a profound feeling of hopelessness. The lack of proportion or connection between the quality and the amount of work, on one side, and personal prosperity, on the other, forced the Romanian peasant to be set in a perpetual struggle for survival, even when it could have been different. Charles Lemerrier, another French traveler who described the Romanian men as being lazy, also said about Romanian women that they “would not be lacking in beauty if their appearance were not so spoiled by excessive fatigue” (Lemerrier 1839, 778).

Under these circumstances, there is not a straightforward correlation between work and an improvement of the standard of living, because there are external factors – the nobles, the high taxes, invasions, wars – that come between the work done and the reaping of the fruits of one’s labor. Thus, it should not come as a surprise that there is at least an ambivalent attitude towards work in the Romanian ethos. Work was necessary for survival, but the efforts of doing more than was strictly necessary proved to be useless, and thus they were often abandoned. This discrepancy between work and its results would only amplify during the communist regime.

Between 15th and 17th century, rest was considered a physiological need that is met by sleep, but also as a recurring period (weekly or annually), when work stops and it is replaced by social and recreational events. In addition, rest has different significance for the Romanian peasant and for the nobles.

For the Romanian peasant, over time, sleep has been the main method to regain one’s strength, especially for those who did demanding physical work. It is difficult to recreate an image of sleep among the Romanian peasants from classic sources, because this was not a topic worthy of the interest of the writers of those times. This is why, in order to understand this topic, researchers have used ethnographic sources. The peasant’s sleep seems to be fragmented by various elements of rural life,

(...) Romanian peasants, as well as other traditional population subjected to this kind of study, do not sleep uninterrupted for a number of hours every night. Their sleep, including the night sleep, is always fragmented by various events and activities. The peasant must avoid falling into a deep sleep, because he needs to be able to hear the babies crying, the noise made by the animals, the singing of the rooster, and many other noises that can be heard at night. He keeps the fire on, gets up to feed the animals (especially

in winter), goes back to bed, uses the backyard toilet, makes love. He falls asleep again and again, learning to sleep with interruptions, and to sleep with one eye open, so that he could “steal a nap” (Mitu 2014, 31).

It is worth noting that the existential anxiety mentioned earlier, as a result of a turbulent course of history, does not leave the Romanian peasant, not even in his sleep. In order to enter a state of deep sleep, one needs a feeling of safety, both immediate and general safety, a feeling that was absent from the most part of the Romanian peasant’s experience over the centuries.

The Influence of the Orthodox Tradition on the Attitude towards Work and Rest

The Romanian ethos cannot be discussed without mentioning the Orthodox tradition as an important formative factor. It is through the Orthodox Church that the tendency to accentuate the eastern characteristics permeate the Romanian spirit, this including the relaxed way of relating to work. The words of Priest Antonie Plamadeala, found in his book, *Tradition and Freedom in Orthodox Spirituality*, are representative of this idea. During a discussion about the Western (Roman-Catholic, Anglican, Protestant) and the Orthodox Eastern spirituality, he says, “among us, the Romanians, we have never made a big deal out of obeying the Rules. (...) The explanation for this lack of interest in the Rules in the East may be given, mainly, by the more independent and relaxed spirit of the oriental Orthodoxy, for sure this is the case with the Romanian one (...)” (Plamadeala 2010, 19). Romanians, as almost all the easterners, are rather emotional than rational, more used to let themselves be guided by their own feelings than by a firm set of laws or rules, whether they are written or not. This contrast between the eastern and western spirituality illustrates well the way the Romanians relate to work, rather with a certain relaxation than with the tension that is necessary for work done with excellence.

Actually, he is also the one who states that, “in every day Orthodoxy, what is exceptional is precisely the absence of the exceptional, that is, there is balance on the way, in everyday life” (Plamadeala 2010, 26). The Romanian spirit in Orthodoxy is not defined as an endeavor to reach excellence, even less

the excellence in work. Work must not be left undone, laziness is sometimes sanctioned, at least verbally, but there is no such thing as a culture of excellence in work, in Orthodoxy (whether we talk about manual or intellectual work).

By contrast, for the Western work ethic, especially that of the Protestants, excellence is the main value, based on and preserving the rigorous principles of the Puritans, according to Max Weber. The Protestant approach to work tends to be different from the Orthodox, and these two influences can be found in the minority evangelical population of Romania.

It may be said that the contribution of the Orthodox Church to the Romanian ethos was to place a greater emphasis on rest than on work, judging by the seriousness in dealing with the violation, through work, of the rest days stipulated in the Church calendar. Indeed, this cannot be blamed solely on the Orthodox Church, but it should rather be attributed to an eclectic mix of orthodox faith and pagan superstitions, a combination that is a characteristic of the Romanian religious life.

Thus, in Romanian mentality, it is considered a “great sin”, even today, to work on Sunday or other days of religious holidays. Moreover, in popular legends, Sunday is “a holy woman, so sacred that instantly kills the women who knead bread on a Sunday” (Anghel 2001, 81). Similar punishments await those who, according to popular Romanian beliefs, spurn other religious holidays. For example, all the Thursdays between Easter and Pentecost are sacred days, and it is strictly forbidden to do any kind of work then. “If anyone disregards Thursdays and goes plowing on the field, or does any other work in the field, in summer, that work will be ruined by hailstone” (Pamfile 2018, 21). As for the rest days or holidays during the whole year, Romanians celebrate days according to the Church calendar – Sunday, saints days, Christmas, Easter etc. – and they also have holidays from the popular calendar, such as Dragobetele, for example (Ghinoiu 2003, 1).

Over the centuries, in the mainly rural and agricultural Romanian society, rest on a feast day meant not only avoiding doing any work, but also spending time in community or with the family. Relatives in a larger family would go and visit other members of the family who lived in the neighboring villages. In most cases, though, the local community – the village – would celebrate together. On feast days, “many householders gather together, relatives and neighbors, and celebrate in the most pleasant way.” (Pamfile

2018, 22). On feast days, locals went to special traditional gatherings (*șezătoare*) with music, jokes, crafts, and danced a folk dance called *hora*. It is important to note that, according to Romanian mentality, individual rest means only sleep (and even this takes place together with family members). Besides that, any other time without work – whether it is time spent in religious activities or celebrations – means time spent in community, with the others. By definition, rest for the Romanians is community rest, not individual rest, at least as long as they live mainly in rural areas.

With the arrival of the 19th century (surely in the 20th century, with its urbanistic expansion), Romanians who live in towns begin to have leisure activities more and more similar with those of the people in Occident, as a reflection of the interest and new loyalty of the society that distances itself from Turkish and Greek influences, showing an increased interest for the West.

In his short history of Bucharest, Constantin Moisil describes the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century as a moment of change,

(...) new habits began to be introduced, along with the Parisian fashion, and thus life and social conventions were changing, little by little. When at a party given by the French consul, the Romanian nobles came accompanied by their wives – which was unheard of before – and when the ladies showed up at soirees with dresses like those in Paris, and danced European dances, that was the first signal that the society began to be transformed and take on Western spirit. (Moisil 1932, 34).

The construction of the National Theater (Scurtu 2003, 170) was a result of the growing interest demonstrated by the Bucharest inhabitants for the theater performances, which increased in number. Gradually, Romanians began to refer to Bucharest by the name of “little Paris”, and this reflected in the way they choose to spend their free time. The urban areas had been different from the rural areas anyway, as far as the question of rest and leisure is concerned, but now rest and leisure gain an even more pronounced individual character, becoming more and more distinct than the traditions of spending the free time collectively. Going to the theater, or for a walk, having a cake in a sweets shop, even the visits to family and friends were not completely individual and devoid of the presence of the community, but they surely prepared the way for the almost exclusively individual leisure activities that were to come in a few decades. „Since the Second World War

the importance and roles of traditional social communities and networks such as the church, the neighbourhood, and the family have gradually been eroded” (Schaufeli 2017, 110)

The First World War brought along great changes in the structure of the Romanian society. Between the two great wars, free time was spent differently even in villages,

the feast day were observed; most peasants used to go to church on Sunday mornings. In the afternoon they would meet in front of the town hall or in the pub and they would discuss matters related to the life of the village, county, or even country, political parties of political people. In some villages there were community cultural centers where children, talented people or artistic groups and bands from the city would come and perform for the villagers. (Scurtu 2003, 170).

The changes in leisure time habits that began taking place in the beginning of the 18th century are well grounded in the interwar period. An evolution could be noticed regarding the way Romanians related to work and rest. Adversities had fractured the connection between the quality and the amount of the peasant’s work and the fruit of his labor, which in turn led to an ambivalent mentality regarding work, marked by discouragement. Rest, on the other hand, became a more pronounced individual activity in urban areas, especially in Bucharest, as opposed to the collective activity centered in community, in the rural areas.

Work, Rest and Exhaustion During and After the Communist Regime

With the arrival of communism, particularly of Ceaușescu’s rule, the mentality of Romanians in matters of work, rest and fatigue, changes significantly. “After the second World War, Romania went through the most rapid and most visible change, especially in terms of people’s relation with property, which indirectly led to a change in work relations” (Pisica 2018, 59). The dissolution of private property, collectivization and the “patriotic” activities of forced labor, as well as the almost total control exerted by the State over the individual work options have once again fractured the connection between the work done and its results. The communist politics have also a

great impact on the leisure activities. This was realized by limiting the hours of free time and a drastic censorship of entertainment resources.

During the communist regime, work was declared to be one of the core values. In the very first article of the Socialist Republic of Romania Constitution it was stated that, "The Socialist Republic of Romania is a state belonging to the working people, both in towns and villages" (The Constitution 1965, 1). It is relevant to mention that, "during the communism regime, unemployment was not recognized, nor allowed. Consequently, in the official records, the active population equaled the employed population" (Pisica 2018, 54).

Nevertheless, in real life, people's relation with work in those years was marked by the same ambivalence due to the effort to maintain a balance between elements at opposite poles of the spectrum: the public discourse image about work versus the real work situation; the image of work as means for individual growth and work as means for punishment and re-education; and lastly, the reward promised for the work done (a generalized good for the whole society) versus the actual reward that was received (extremely limited buying options and a precarious standard of living). In addition, there was also a tension between paid work and domestic work, the latter being used in an effort to compensate for the shortages caused by the general economic situation.

In order to better understand this process, it is important to consider these aspects in the larger context of the economic and political situation during, and immediately after, the two World Wars. In 1944, Romania was a country deeply affected by war, with scarce resources, with external debts, and a population psychologically marked by all the losses, but at the same time, willing (and forced by necessity) to work in order to change the current state of things. The following years, 1945-1950, are years of intense work for the Romanians, and as a result, "it is almost unanimously admitted that the relaunching of the Romanian economy was achieved between 1945-1950" (Tismaneanu 2006, 411).

However, 1951-1989 were years marked by the policies of industrialization and urbanization, when Romania had to make the transition from a mainly rural and agricultural state to a state where the majority of the

population lived in towns and worked in factories and industrial plants. There appeared the need for these towns and industrial plants to be built, and to this end, the population had to work hard. Unlike the post-war period, when the population was willing to make efforts to rebuild the country, under the influence of the growing control exerted by the State, under the pressure of the propaganda that accompanied the unrealistic five-year plans, along with the official system abuse, Romanians would no longer engage with these ideals.

This is where the ambivalence of the Romanian towards work was formed. On one hand, the reshaping of industry and the relocation of the population from the rural to the urban areas involved strenuous work. On the other hand, there was a generalized attitude of resentment and lack of trust caused by the work directives and the five-year production plans. In addition, Romanians experienced an acute lack of control in everything related to their work, their options being limited, not only when it came to choosing a particular job, but even the town where they were to work. Moreover, the personal benefits received for the work done (salary, career mobility) did not reflect the work done, and did not proved to be a good enough incentive for the individual to continue investing in his work.

Under these circumstances, both time and quality of rest suffer, despite the fact that the Communist Party tried to elaborate on a work-rest ratio more favorable to the working class.

After 1948, the establishment of the communist regime in Romania was followed by a series of social protection measures for the working class, such as, increased number of days for the paid annual leave, free medical assistance and sick leave, the introduction of union-subsidized leisure and treatment tickets (subsidy ranging from 30% to 100%). (Banu 2013, 22)

Nevertheless, the low standard of living – limited access to food, endless queues, frequent power cuts, shortage of hot water and gas – leads to an increased amount of work done by the citizens in order to survive. The free time is spent waiting in queue. Summers are spent in the countryside, helping elderly parents to cultivate the little land they still had, so that in the fall they could supplement their food resources with canned food for the winter.

Free time was actually limited and the way it was spent was directly or indirectly controlled. If initially the working week was six days of eight hours each, in 1977 the process was set into motion to transition to a reduced working week. The reduced working week increased leisure time only to the minimum, and even this could only happen if the production plans were fulfilled. This fulfillment of the production plan of the employment institution did not guarantee, however, that the employees were given free time. It was possible for them to be called to do “voluntary” work and to participate in other Party ordered activities.

Under these circumstances, the assertion could be made that, generally speaking, rest was not a priority for the Romanians, as they were mainly focused on survival. The feeling of security and having the basic need met are precursors necessary for rest, and more often than not, they were absent in communist years. In this context, the preexisting influence of Orthodox spirituality was helpful, and determined many people to avoid working on Sundays or on religious feast days, if and when the work schedule allowed them to do it. Although less people attended church, for fear of negative consequences (at least in urban areas), it was not unusual for many to secretly continue to observe elements of their religious faith, and avoiding work on Sundays was one of the actions that they could take.

Apart from the absence of work on the rare occasions when they had this option, Romanians during the communist period use their free time to connect relationally. Reciprocal home visits, as well as small parties organized on the occasion of anniversaries, are frequent ways of spending free time. This trend is fueled by the absence of other forms of entertainment of an individual rather than community nature, such as television programs or even access to fiction, which were significantly censored at the time.

In the absence of other more sophisticated ways of recreation, during the communist period, Romanians also focus on the time spent in nature. When the weather allowed it, people would go on a picnic. Through this, the Romanians tried to make the most out of the shorter periods of free time; longer periods, such as paid holidays or annual leaves, were reserved for either returning to one’s home village to help with household chores or, (for the few who could afford it) tourism.

Obviously, in these conditions, the level of fatigue in communist Romania seemed to be high, both physically and mentally. Physical fatigue was due not only to the extended work schedule of both workers and intellectuals, but also to the fact that the hours spent at work were added to hours spent in queues, or, especially for the inhabitants of Bucharest, hours spent on the way to and from the place of work. Domestic work, such as doing laundry or cooking, also took longer than would be necessary, when electricity, hot water, or gas were often cut off, motivating people to find creative solutions.

There were also a number of factors that contributed to fatigue from a mental point of view. Among these there was the constant fear that a joke or a comment that would be taken out of context could come to the attention of members of Securitate, the feeling of lack of control regarding the most important aspects of life, as well as the discrepancy between the official discourse of the Party and the grim reality of day to day life in Romania.

The revolution of 1989 revealed a people that was eager to exercise personal autonomy in terms of both work and rest. "Autonomy first emerged as a collective aspiration in Western societies between the end of the Second World War and the 1970s: it entailed liberty of choice, based on self-ownership, and thus normative diversity regarding life- styles and achievements" (Ehrenberg, 2017, 160). However, the population of Romania was inexperienced in making such decisions and it was also placed in an extremely unstable economic context. The power vacuum created after the abrupt fall of the communist regime destabilized all national structures, including the economic ones - industry and agriculture - which provided jobs for the majority of the population. It should be noted that the long duration of the communist regime meant that, in 1989, the entire working population was one that was formed in relation to the communist system, which not only provided jobs, but it also chose them for the working people, and punished those who dodged work tasks.

In the first years after the revolution in 1989, Romanians experienced a sharp devaluation of the national currency and mass job losses. This scenario inspired a new-found respect and appreciation, among Romanians, for the ability to work, as well as timid attempts at entrepreneurship – the so-called

“bisnitari”. This did not mean that the work ethic had undergone a radical transformation – Romania continued to be the country of the “anything goes”, and the nepotism system went on being valid many years after the revolution. However, in the absence of a collective system that made room for everyone in the workforce, Romanians were forced to take ownership of their relationship with the workplace on an individual level.

This new dynamic led to two new trends: the phenomenon of emigration (temporary or permanent) and the growing interest in acquiring higher education as a gateway to better paid jobs. Thus in the 90’s the phenomenon of “strawberries pickers” appeared. Romanians, often college educated ones, or students, who would go to perform various agricultural work in Western Europe – Spain, Italy, England. In the following decades, the workforce exodus would continue, through the emigration of higher education professionals – doctors, accountants, computer specialists – as well as qualified workers or craftsmen.

The interest in higher education led to the emergence of many private higher education institutions, thus dissolving the monopoly that state universities had on higher education and allowing a much larger number of college graduates to enter the labor market.

This factor, added to that of the foreign investment stimulus policies and especially after Romania joined the European Union made it possible, two decades after the revolution, for many foreign corporations to come to Romania in search of well-trained and cheaper workforce than in Western Europe. This has created a new employee profile in the big cities – the corporate. The appearance of corporations on the labor market scene in the big cities (and specifically in Bucharest) has had a strong impact on life in the city. Better paid jobs attracted professionals from other cities, or retained those who had come to study. This increase in income and population has led to the development of services to the benefit of the growing number of residents of large cities, especially Bucharest and Cluj.

Conclusions

It is difficult to talk about the Romanian perspective on work and rest as a unitary concept, because the concepts of work and rest in Romanians have

had different valences not only throughout history but also in different communities.

In general, there is an ambivalence towards work in the Romanian ethos. This ambivalence is due to the lack of continuity between the quantity and quality of work, on one hand, and its results, on the other, as elements pertaining to the political situation of the time come between the two. This is how a defeatist attitude of the Romanians towards work is formed, being generated by the futility of their efforts. However, in the Romanian ethos, this attitude coexists with an appreciation of work and hardworking people.

Thus, different systems of political organization were interposed between the average Romanian and the results of his work. Those systems were represented initially by the nobility, then by the foreign administrations (Turkish, Greek) and, in more recent times, by the communist regime. The latter, through the close control over individual work, suffocated personal initiative in the work process.

The post-communist era set into motion a series of changes that caused Romanians to own their own relationship to work, since, for the first time in centuries there was a direct connection between the quality and quantity of work and results. Especially in big cities, work became not only a value, but also a means to acquire social and economic capital.

In terms of rest, this has always been an integral part of Romanian culture, both due to the more eastern spirit, eager to enjoy life, and also due to the influence of the Orthodox Church. For the average Romanian, observing Sunday as a day of rest, as well as religious holidays by avoiding work, was a way to exercise their faith, even if sometimes it had a superstitious touch. Caught between traditional approaches to rest – time spent not working and in community – and modern leisure activities, the Romanian perspective on rest seems to have shifted, and it has yet to be crystallized in a new form.

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