

## Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea’s Economic Writings – Between Tradition and Modernity

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### Abstract

*Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea (1855-1920) was an economist, a philosopher, a sociologist and a literary critic who had a major contribution to the spread of Marxism in Romania and who studied the relations in our country through this current of thought. Amongst his most relevant preoccupations was the study of the agrarian issue, which led him to formulate the theory of the neo-serfdom. He painted a very realistic picture of the European economic world of his time and worked out the thesis of development from forms to the roots in the less developed countries. The purpose of this paper is to emphasize the specific features of Gherea’s economic thinking and the historical context of his main ideas.*

**Key words:** socialism, nationalism, neo-serfdom, development theory

**J.E.L. classification:** B31

### 1. Introduction

Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea was born in Slavianka (Ekaterinoslav region in Tsarist Russia). Some biographic sources indicate the fact that his name was Solomon Katz, which points out to his Jewish origins. He was a student in Harkov, but eventually he did not graduate any systematic training in any field of study. At the age of 20 he came into conflict with the Tsarist authorities and found refuge in Iași, in Romania. There he contacted the representatives of the local revolutionary social movement (Eugen Lupu, Nicolae Codreanu, Gh. Marinescu, C. Stăuceanu). During the Russo-Turkish War he was arrested and taken back to Russia, where he was imprisoned in Mezen, in the Arhanghelsk region. After escaping from there, he stayed for a period of time in Paris before coming back to Romania in 1879.

He carried out an intensive socialist revolutionary activity, but, in order to support himself, he received a concession from the Romanian government to administer the restaurant in Ploiești railway station, and Titu Maiorescu did not miss on the opportunity to call him a “saloon keeper”/ *birtaş*. Meanwhile, he published a lot and helped edit some magazines such as *Contemporanul* / The Contemporary, *Revista socială* / The Social Magazine) and *Critica socială* / The Social Critique.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea was considered to be the most prominent personality of the socio-political thinking and social ideological activity in Romania. He initially had crossed paths with another current of thought, revolutionary populism, and had gotten himself involved into it in his early youth.

After over four decades of activity, Gherea left behind a collection of works that is impressive not only through its extent but also through its contents. Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea was a dominant personality of the Romanian socialism who clashed with representatives of the main currents of thought of those times: conservatism, junimism, liberalism, semanatorism, and poporanism. The Romanian socialist thinker permanently kept in touch with important representatives of the international socialist movement: F. Engels (whom he personally met in 1893), G.V. Plehanov, V. Zasulici, K. Kautsky and C. Racovski.

Nowadays there are two major directions in terms of the options Romania has got to evolve: one towards its communist and state-controlled past, under the Russian influence, and the other towards a European economic model and towards the democratization of society. Similarly, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, there was an ideological and doctrinaire polemic between Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea and Titu Maiorescu, which was the expression of the bipolarization of the Romanian elites of those times: one towards the past, towards the ideal of the agrarian and the patriarchal, which opposed the progressist bourgeoisie, and one towards the future, towards the economic and political modernization of the country through European integration.

Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea tried to apply the Marxist analysis to the realities in Romania and wrote a series of studies.

*Karl Marx și economiștii noștrii* (1884) (Karl Marx and Our Economists) is a study in which he presented the Marxist economic theory and examined the main political economy concepts (value, labor, capital, rent, profit, etc) from a Marxist perspective. Yet, he did not neglect presenting the ideas of the representatives of classical economic liberalism (D. Ricardo, J.-B. Say, F. Bastiat).

*Ce vor socialiștii români?* (1885-1889) (What Do Romanian Socialists Want?) is yet another study of his, in which he presented the principles of scientific socialism, but also emphasized the need for the proletariat to fulfill certain practical duties, such as class conflict or struggle.

In his study titled *Robia și socialismul* (1884-1886) (Servitude and Socialism) he looked into the concept of freedom, having H. Spencer's *De la libertate la robie* as a starting point.

*Anarhia cugetării* (1892) (The Anarchy of Thinking) is an article that the author considered as a “monography of anarchism” in which he rebutted this current of thought that he labeled as “metaphysic simplism” (Dobrogeanu-Gherea, 1976, p. 452) as well as individualism taken to extremes and the utopist idea of “absolute freedom”.

Gherea carried on his antithetic analysis of anarchism in his 1901 study *Deosebirea dintre anarchism și socialism* (The Difference between Anarchism and Socialism) and showed that anarchism in those days represented the individual's interests against society. He placed the individual higher than society, deified him and by doing so annihilated and dissolved society itself (Dobrogeanu-Gherea, 1977, p. 344).

*Concepția materialistă a istoriei* (1892) (The Materialist View on History) was an article that probably best illustrates the essence of Gherea's Marxism in that the author clearly stated that the decisive factor in the historical evolution of mankind were the natural resources, the means of production and the distribution of the goods necessary for living. Other factors such as intellect, urges, passions, religion, morals, in his opinion, they all have their importance, but are not decisive.

## 2. Theoretical background

Constantin-Dobrogeanu-Gherea was both a sociologist and a literary critic. As such he published extensively and his works have been analyzed and commented upon in numerous specialized papers. Probably the most significant of them are the two volumes by Zigu Ornea, *Viața lui C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea* / The Life of C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea (1982) and *Opera lui C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea* / The Work of C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea (1983). Zigu Ornea also published the article *Opera sociologică a lui Gherea – reevaluări necesare* / Gherea's Sociological Work – Necessary Re-evaluations in the volume *Studii și cercetări* / Studies and Research, in 1972.

Another well researched paper is Damian Hurezeanu's *Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea* published in 1973, which presents the main characteristics of the economic, social and political thought of the Romanian sociologist's leader. The historian D. Hurezeanu also wrote the introductory study for the 1968 volume titled *C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea. Scrieri social politice* / C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea. Social and Political Writings.

A quite literary bibliographical brochure was written in 1947 by Felix Aderca, titled *C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea. Viata si opera* / C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea. Life and Work.

Cristian Preda was yet another author to thoroughly look into Gherea's writings and in 2002 he wrote the volume *Staulul și sirena. Dilemele unui marxist român* / The Stable and the Siren. Dilemmas of a Romanian Marxist. In 2003 he wrote the chapter *Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea* in the paper *Contribuții la istoria intelectuală a politicii românești* / Contributions to the Intellectual History of the Romanian Politics. This is a landmark paper that analyzes two other great classic

thinkers in the Romanian politics, Ștefan Zeletin and C. Rădulesu-Motru.

Marcel Crihană wrote a PhD thesis titled *Opera lui C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea* in 2003 and in it he emphasized the literary side of Gherea’s writings.

### 3. Research methodology

The methodology of our research paper was predominantly analytical and it mainly implied a documenting activity during which primary and secondary sources such as encyclopedias, economic, historic and philosophical dictionaries have been thoroughly explored.

### 4. Findings

#### 4.1. Evolutionist sociology of development and orbiting theory

According to some authors from a comparative historical perspective, historical processes unfold neither in similar economic environment nor in the same historical moment (Madgearu, 1999, p. 99). The moment the bourgeois revolution started in Romania was the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after the industrial revolution in England, when there had appeared a supplementary need for raw materials and markets. Once the Peace Treaty of Adrianopol was signed in 1829 and the commercial routes were opened, the demand for Romanian grain increased and so did the price.

As a consequence, landowners tried to restrain the rights of the peasants to use the land. Through the *Regulamentul organic* / Organic Regulations issued in 1831-1832, the right to use the land was set to be two thirds of the surface of the entire agricultural land. For over two decades, between 1830 and 1854, western capitalism created its own private property institutions that were necessary for its development (transport, credit, a new law order).

The 1866 *Tocmeli agricole* / Agricultural Agreements *manu militari* (through the power of the military) forced the peasants to work on the landowner’s land thus establishing a *neo-serfdom regime*, according to Gherea’s terminology. Madgearu called it *neo-feudal*.

The English, French, Austrian and German manufactured goods that invaded the Romanian markets destroyed the local classical industry. In the neo-serfdom stage, landowners constantly tried and succeeded in increasing their profits at the expense of the peasants who got poorer and poorer, especially since they kept on cultivating the same crops, since the population was growing and the properties were divided through inheritance. The normal stage evolution of capital (commercial capital, industrial capital, financial capital) was affected by the persistence of the feudal relations and the increasing influence of the guilds. Commercial capital was prevented from turning into industrial capital. It was used to commercialize the household industry and town crafts and therefore favored the emergence of manufactures.

In well developed countries, given the bourgeois revolution carried out under the conditions of an “enlightened absolutism”, the development of the economic life generated a series of revolutionary social transformations that progressively wore down the very juridical and social basis of feudalism, which led to the establishment of a state apparatus that ensured the conditions for the development of capitalism.

Gherea noticed that when the bourgeois juridical institutions were introduced in Romania, there were no social structures within the economic life to allow the disappearance of feudalism. The result was the consolidation of a political oligarchy, a “bureaucratly parasite” class, as he called it. This approach was similar up to a certain point to that of the Junimists.

Gherea carried on Titu Maiorescu’s theory of *forms without roots* which condemned the “import” of western revolutionary ideas which did not fit local realities. But in a very different way: he did not place the totally inappropriate application of concept at the basis of forms (neo-serfdom), as the 1848 revolutionaries had done, but rather the effect of the development laws of the capitalist system. Thus, Romania was drawn to the economic orbit of western European capitalist markets as part of the emergence process of the world capitalist market.

In his 1908 article titled *Post-Scriptum sau Cuvinte uitate* / Post-Scriptum or Forgotten Words, Dobrogeanu-Gherea pointed out the fact that Romania was a “socio-national organism” in close relation with other countries which decisively determined its evolution in the context of a certain

historical capitalist epoch. Moving on the orbit of well developed countries, less developed ones developed due to a fundamental determinism: “Given this choice, they are forced to do in years what the others, which are so far ahead, did in centuries”. (Dobrogeanu-Gherea, 1977, p. 481)

Well developed capitalist countries drew on their orbit less developed countries that would start a slower capitalist development, waiting for the moment when “capitalist countries in the west become socialist and the countries on their orbit move to socialism”. (Stahl, 2001, p. 200). Constantin Titel Petrescu was another author to quote Gherea, who claimed that once the well developed capitalist countries become socialist societies themselves, then the less developed semi-capitalist countries will be influenced by them and will adopt the socialist organization for their societies. (Petrescu, 1945, p. 29)

Gherea proved clairvoyant when he correctly interpreted the course of history. He pleaded for the economic modernization of his adoptive country and expressed that a less developed country such as Romania could shorten its path towards socialism only by getting on the orbit of the developed European capitalism. He did not agree with those who “isolated it from other countries and forgot the fact that, even if our country was a socio-national organism, it was part of a superior social organism, it was closely connected with more developed countries in terms of social life and conditions, and this mostly determined the conditions for national life” (Dobrogeanu-Gherea, 1977, p. 482)

In his analysis of the article titles *Ce vor socialiștii români* / What Romanian Socialists Want, Ilie Bădescu claimed that Gherea was the first Romanian to make the difference between the concepts of stage of evolution (going from one stage to another) and historical stage (going from one historical stage to another as a process). (Bădescu, 1996, p. 104)

#### 4.2. The Agrarian Issue and Neo-Serfdom

In their debates on the agrarian issue, the socialists offered essential landmarks and solutions. Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea must have been aware that it was not the Marxist doctrine that appealed to the peasants but rather a solution to the agrarian issue. Therefore, referring to the socialist current, he wrote that “in its literature, this current showed more understanding of our social and agrarian issues than all the others currents of thought put together.” (Dobrogeanu-Gherea, 1910, p. 6)

According to Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, the development of capitalism in Romania had two particular features: firstly, it had as its cause the developed countries’ evolution towards capitalism; secondly, the order of actions to lead to development was reverse as compared to the west, beginning by introducing the liberal institutions that were therefore meant to consequently create the appropriate material resources. From an economic and sociological perspective, Dobrogeanu-Gherea’s central concern was to analyze the agrarian issue, especially between 1864 and 1920. His absolute conclusion was that once our country started orbiting capitalism, the situation of the peasantry worsened considerably.

In his study titled *Socialismul în România* / Socialism in Romania (the second part of the study *Ce vor socialiștii români. Expunerea socialismului științific și Programul socialist* / What Romanian Socialists Want. Presentation of the Scientific Socialism and the Socialist Agenda) Gherea claimed that our country was a poorly developed capitalist country, a mainly agricultural, with semi-feudal agrarian relations one. Even though it had not gone through all the middle stages of capitalism that Europe had gone through, Romania was a “country with capitalist development, a capitalist society still not developed, with certain medieval remains” in which the large industry (including the mining industry), the middle industry as well as the household industry “of the semi-proletarians who worked for the shops on the market” were dominated by capital. (Dobrogeanu-Gherea, 1976, p. 50-51)

As far as the reasons for this lesser development were concerned, in comes the opposition between Junimists (supporters of the *forms without roots* theory) and socialists. While the former insisted that the lesser development of the country could be explained by the unjustifiable rush to introduce western institutions in our country, the latter, especially their most important representative, Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, considered that the poor development was due to the existent economic organization, especially the nature of the production relations, that generated

negative moral, cultural, juridical and political consequences. (Dobrogeanu-Gherea, 1910, p. 127)

For instance, in agriculture, the existing situation was justified in a disguised manner either by the moral state of the peasant (illustrated by a mentality centered on the saying *It is God's will!*, which can be generalized and brought to the present as an equally fatalist but more atheist saying *That's it!*) or by the struggle for profits among landowners who increased rent and landholders who were greedy and made agreements harsher. (Dobrogeanu-Gherea, 1910, p. 237) Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea believed that it was not the peasant's moral and cultural inferiority that negatively impacted social relation, but quite the opposite: the existing regime generated the peasant's economic and moral impoverishment. (Dobrogeanu-Gherea, 1910, p. 220)

It was possible to reform the agrarian regime in Romania in two ways. Firstly, through freeing the peasants without them being given the right of property. As a factor of production, land would have become capital, and the former corvée peasants would become employees. Lenin called this the “Prussian way”. Secondly, the peasants would become owners and the country would develop as a rural democracy based upon the small and medium peasant property, the “American way” as Lenin called it. Romania adopted a third way, a *sui generis* one, which generated a major contradiction between the country's economic resources and its political and juridical *super-structure*. It meant giving the peasant small pieces of land and condemning most of them to poverty and exploitation, in the Marxist sense of the word.

Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea noticed that the effect of the *Agrarian Reform* of 1864 - a year he said carried the significance of the terrible year of 1907 (Dobrogeanu-Gherea, 1910, p. 57) - mastered mainly by Alexandru Ioan Cuza and Mihail Kogălniceanu, was an intensification in the exploitation of the peasants since they all received small plots of land that were insufficient for a decent survival: “The hidden but quite clear purpose of this first allotment was in fact to make it impossible for the small landowners to live off their lands and one way or another to be forced to be dependent on and work for the large landowners”. (Dobrogeanu-Gherea, 1910, p. 54-55) The reason for the misery of the peasantry was its double exploitation, by the landowners and by the capitalist landholders.

K. Marx analyzed the provisions of the *Regulamentul organic* / Organic Regulations and discovered that the peasant owed the landowner 42 labor days per year plus 14 days of so-called serfdom (services owed to the landowner for extraordinary needs of production). For a total of 140 labor days, Marx calculated a 66.66% value added ratio (number of labor days for the owner divided by necessary labor days) (Marx, 1957, p. 261). In his theoretical considerations on overtime work, Marx showed the similarity between the situation of a slave owner and that of a Wallachian boyar.

The agrarian issue had become the main topic for political and ideological debates and had been extensively written upon both for propaganda and scientific purposes. In this context, Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea published *Neoiobagia. Studiu economic-sociologic al problemei noastre agrare* / Neo-Serfdom. Economic and Sociological Study of our Agrarian Problem in 1910. It was one of the most representative works of the Romanian socialist thinking. It is highly ideological and polemical and focused on analyzing the state of affairs and on coming up with a solution to transform Romania into an economically developed country, with a civilization keyed on western European patterns.

Gherea identified the main problem to be the contradiction (“the profound disagreement, the abyss”) between the real and the formal state of affairs. (Dobrogeanu-Gherea, 1910, p. 131). The result was a situation that was specific to Romania – we might even speak of an **economic endemism** – that Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea called *neoiobagie* / neo-serfdom, meant to indicate a mixture of serfdom and a corpus of capitalist elements (having a definite anti-feudal character) and synthetically determined by four main features: (Dobrogeanu-Gherea, 1910, p. 369-370)

1. The predominance of certain feudal agrarian relations;
2. The existence of a constitutional state that apparently was liberal and bourgeois but that let the peasant be at the mercy of the landowner/landholder;
3. The perpetuity of the peasant's lands;
4. The land shortage for the peasant little owner who attempted to provide for his family.

Neo-serfdom had two dimensions: a socio-economic one (as a hybrid between remnant feudalism and emergent capitalism) and a socio-political one (which minimized the rights of the peasants).

After 1864, as the incipient capitalist relations started to appear, Romania had a “sick” social organism:

1. The state organization was “antagonist and contradictory”, with institutions that had transformed into “make-believe and lie”;
2. The political organization was “full of feudal remains which refused to die and based upon modern capitalism which could not live”;
3. The economic organization was precarious and dependent on the outside and generated a national product that was insufficient and ill-distributed. (Dobrogeanu-Gherea, 1910, p. 475-6)

Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea constantly tried to invalidate the main thesis of *poporanism* (a Romanian version of nationalism and populism), according to which socialism was an *exotic plant* for Romania. Confident in the future shift towards socialism, he tried to prove the falsity of the poporanist assertion and claimed that socialism would eventually develop in our country, but only after an intense and sustained industrialization.

Even though poporanists maintained that Romania (because it had neither a well-developed industry nor a proletarian class) did not have the right “climate” for the development of such a plant as socialism, Gherea showed that the development of industry was a factor for progress: “social-democracy tends toward the industrialization of the country, since an industrial country generates human relations superior to less developed countries, such as ourselves; within the industrial society there are created better living standards for the workers, better material, moral, intellectual conditions and better conditions to fight for work emancipation”. (Dobrogeanu-Gherea, 1977, p. 492) Industrial development is important because it insures the increase of agricultural productivity as well as extension of the possibilities to enhance cultural and social intellectual standards. Refuting the poporanists who believed that the peasantry was the main vector for the development of the country and that Romania was and had to remain a *peasant country*, a solely agricultural country, Gherea stated that: “Nothing could be more wrong. If this is the future of the country, the country has no future. A solely agricultural country is a solely poor country, both economically and culturally behind the times”. (Dobrogeanu-Gherea, 1910, p. 478)

After arguing how necessary the development of industry was for agriculture and for the integration of the national economy, Gherea showed that it was necessary for the great-scale modern industry to develop, not the household industry, as poporanists claimed at that time. The consolidation of the domestic market was looked upon as a decisive factor for economic development, provided that the feudal remains be eliminated and the state apparatus be rid of bureaucracy. We cannot help but notice that his plea for industrialization had a solid ideological basis: even though he claimed that this was the only way to develop the country’s economy, the upsurge of industry would have led to having a well-established proletariat which would have been the prerequisite for the development of socialism in Romania: “Less developed societies which are solely agricultural, with their poor production, with their underdeveloped cities, their small villages, face not only material but also cultural and intellectual misery”. (Dobrogeanu-Gherea, 1910, p. 483)

For Gherea, the development of the industry was a *national ideal*. The closing paragraph of his work *Neoiobagia* / Neo-Serfdom is a sample of his unique literary talents as well as his acute sense of economic foresight: “Where life and fight are alive, where the wail of the siren calls the workers to work, where passions burst in gigantic cities, where ideas clash, where the huge fight between labor and capital boils, only there can our ideal and our country’s ideal be”. (Dobrogeanu-Gherea, 1910, p. 494)

## 5. Conclusions

Given the times, Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea believed that once drawn to the orbit of capitalist well developed countries, less developed countries would go from forms to the roots: they would initially adopt or create the society’s political and juridical forms and the social and

economic roots of those forms would appear later on. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the juridical and political forms existed in Romania ahead of the “roots” (the type of existing agrarian relations). His interpretation of the social phenomena in Romania from a historical perspective played an essential role in establishing the Romanian scientific sociology.

Dobrogeanu-Gherea’s economic thinking had two particular features. Firstly, his ideas had affinities with liberalism. In fact, it so happened that the so-called socialist “generous young men” joined the liberals to help create capitalism in the name of a socialist future, even though their deed had a highly political reason. On this topic Caragiale wrote to Gherea telling him that even though he “made” many socialists in Romania, he could not keep any of them (Caragiale, 1999, p. 471). Secondly, his ideas had affinities with conservatism and revolutionary populism. Gherea accepted going from forms to roots as a natural and necessary process. As a socialist, Gherea believed in the idea of historical process seen as passing from one historical epoch to another through revolution, while conservatives believed in evolution seen as passing from one stage to another.

The West first had technological and economic development and then adapted its social, political and cultural structures, while the East often first imported ideology. In Marxist terms, in highly developed countries material resources determined the *super-structure*, while in less developed countries it is the other way around, social roots came after social forms.

V. Madgearu considered Gherea the brightest representative of the socio-democrat current (Madgearu, 1999, p. 99) who imbibed the ideals of socialism, synthetically described as “everyone’s cooperation for everyone’s profit” (Petrescu, 1945, p. 5).

Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea fought for a fair and more humane cohabitation amongst people through solidarity and human fellowship and thus wrote an essential chapter in the critical thinking in Romania. He looked into the features and the characteristic processes of the Romanian economic, social and political life from a predominantly Marxist perspective and thus proved himself to be one of the greatest personalities of our culture.

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