

## Dimitrie Cantemir’s Economic Perspectives

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### Abstract

*Dimitrie Cantemir (1673-1723), one of the most erudite scholars of his times, was a historian, a philosopher, a geographer, a theologian and a musicologist. A world-class encyclopedian scientist, Dimitrie Cantemir was the first great Romanian intellectual to have been acknowledged as a member of the European culture. The purpose of this paper is to point out the economic ideas that emerge from his writings, as well as the patriotic layer of his views on economic issues. The specific historical conditions and his background as a humanist made Cantemir focus on the issue of creating an independent centralized nation by creating a national market imposed by the logic of economic progress.*

**Key words:** mercantilism, boyars, peasants, land property, Orient  
**J.E.L. classification:** B31

### 1. Introduction

Dimitrie Cantemir was born on the 26<sup>th</sup> of October 1673. His father, Constantin Cantemir, ruler of Moldavia, provided his son with a solid education for the first years of his life by bringing the Crete born Greek monk Ieremia Cacavelas from Wallachia as his tutor. With him, young Dimitrie Cantemir studied literature and philosophy and learned Latin and Ancient Greek. At the age of 16 he was sent by his father as a hostage to Constantinople, as a sign of devotion to the Sultan, according to the customs back then.

Raised in Phanar (Fener) for 20 years, Cantemir got acquainted both with the Muslim cultural and artistic world and with the Western cultural and diplomatic world in the capital of the empire. He delved into works of philosophy, theology, history, geography and even musicology (he even wrote a theory book on Turkish music). When he was elected a member of the Royal Academy of Berlin in 1714, he became the “first oriental member of a scientific occidental society” (Djuvara, p. 115). Once he learned to appreciate the values of the Muslim civilization, young Cantemir wrote a paper on the East that would come to be appreciated in the West as well.

Dimitrie Cantemir was the ruler (voivode or prince) of Moldavia for a very brief period of time, for only 35 weeks, the first time in 1693, for 3 weeks, and the second time, between 1710-1711, for 8 months. As ruler of Moldavia, he opposed the Turkish domination and was a fierce enemy of the boyars, whom he considered guilty for the increased oppression of the peasants. Even though he was under the protection of the Sultan, he betrayed him and joined the Russians in the Russian-Turkish War; after the Russian and Moldavian armies were defeated at Stănilăești, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of July 1711, he exiled himself to Russia, together with several boyars and peasants, where he became the secret advisor of the Tsar (1721) and where he wrote most of his works, for example *Istoria ieroglică* (A Hieroglyphic History), a novel and a pamphlet (roman à clef) with philosophical implications (Zub, 1974, p. 61). Dimitrie Cantemir died in Russia of diabetes on the 21<sup>st</sup> of August 1723.

In his writings, Dimitrie Cantemir was inclined towards studying our national past and he painted a detailed and complex picture of the life and customs of the Romanian people and showed how political life (as *l’art de gouverner* – the art of governing – all the issues relating to the administration of the country), the religious life and the private life were back in those times.

A polyglot scholar (he also spoke Latin, Greek, Turkish, Arabic, Persian, Slavic, Italian, and Russian), Cantemir was the author of an extensive philosophical, literary and historical work. Among his most important pieces of writing are: *Divanul sau Gâlceava înțeleptului cu lumea sau Giudețul sufletului cu trupul* (The Trial or the Quarrel between the Wise Man and the World or the the Haggle between Body and Soul) (1698), *Icoana de nezugrăvit a științei sacrosante* (The Unpaintable Picture of Sacrosanct Science) (1700), *Compendiul sistemului de logica* (Compendium of the Logic System) (1701), *Istoria ieroglifică* (A Hieroglyphic History) (1705), *Istoria creșterii și descreșterii Imperiului otoman* (History of the Growth and Decay of the Ottoman Empire) (1714-1716), *Descrierea stării Moldaviei: în vechime și azi* (Description of Moldavia’s Situation: in the Past and Nowadays) (1716), *Viața lui Constantin Cantemir* (The Life of Constantin Cantemir) (1716-1718), *Hronicul vechimei a romano-moldo-vlahilor* (Chronicle of the Antiquity of the Romano-Moldavo-Wallachians) (1723).

## 2. Theoretical background

Dimitrie Cantemir’s life and work were written about in many specialized papers and studies. These are so numerous and they cover so many topics that we can say they represent a new science: *cantemirology*. Some that are worth mentioning are: *Dimitrie Cantemir. Viața și opera* (Dimitrie Cantemir. Life and Work) (1958) written by P. P. Panaitescu, *Filozofia lui Dimitrie Cantemir* (Dimitrie Cantemir’s Philosophy) (1964) written by Dan Bădărău, *Dimitrie Cantemir* (1972) by Constantin Măciucă, as well as Victor Țvircun *Dimitrie Cantemir. Repere biografice* (Dimitrie Cantemir, Biographical Details) (2017) and *File din istoria vieții și activității politice a lui Dimitrie Cantemir* (Pages in the History of the Life and Political Activity of Dimitrie Cantemir) (2009). The Romanian historian who went to live in France Ștefan Lemny published the volume *Cantemireștii. Aventura europeană a unei familii princiare europene în secolul al XVIII-lea* (The Cantemirs. The European Adventure of a European Royal Family in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century) (2013), as well as the biographical study *Dimitrie Cantemir. Un principe roman în zorile Luminilor europene* (Dimitrie Cantemir. A Romanian Prince at the Dawn of European Enlightenment) (2019). A series of highly valuable studies were published in the volumes *300 de ani de la nașterea lui Dimitrie Cantemir* (300 Years Since Dimitrie Cantemir’s Birth) (1974), *Dimitrie Cantemir. Punte a cunoașterii între Orient și Occident* (Dimitrie Cantemir. A Bridge of Knowledge between the East and the West) (2016) and *Cantemiriana. Noi contribuții* (The Cantemirain. New Contributions) (2021).

## 3. Research methodology

Through the process of research into Cantemir’s works, we identified the author’s theoretical contributions to certain economic concepts. We systematically went over his works and gathered information to improve our understanding of the topic we chose. We made a qualitative analysis of the topic by further studying the specialized literature and by revising various articles written throughout the time.

Our article aims at identifying Cantemir’s ideological profile and at placing his ideas within a certain current of economic thought. And our principle method of research was content analysis, which allowed us to look into the concepts and considerations used by Cantemir in his writings and explore them in the context of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

## 4. Findings. *Descrierea Moldovei* (Description of Moldavia) - Economic Considerations

Even though he did not write any purely economics paper, there are economic ideas in everything he wrote. From this very perspective, his greatest work was *Descrierea stării Moldovei: în vechime și azi* (Description of Moldavia’s Situation: in the Past and Nowadays), published in Latin in Russia in 1716, then in German in 1771, and finally in Romanian in 1825.

P. P. Panaitescu considered this paper to have been “the first scientific paper of a Romanian” (Panaitescu, 1958, p. 148). It is a geographical monography which contains historical, sociological and ethnographical elements and which is divided into three parts: the first part is geographical, the second one political, and the third one is about the Orthodox religion, the organization of the

church and the Moldavian language. The author synthetically presented the traditional Romanian type of government (Cantemir, 2017, p. 1239-1241): the organization of the country, the attributes and powers of the prince, the ways to get the power and to pass it on, the swearing into office ceremonies, the relations with the Ottoman Empire, the dignitaries, the assembly / council of the boyars, the social classes. He wanted an authoritarian rule of the prince to exist in Moldavia, a monarchic absolutist type.

Various economic aspects are discussed in chapters 13 through 17 of the second part of the book. His economic concepts and ideas form a well defined, coherent whole, a “mercantilism-like” theoretical corpus (Constantinescu (coord.), 1974, p. 91) on which was based his political activity as a ruler. From an economic perspective, when analyzing the current situation and the history of Moldavia, he issued some considerations regarding the origins of the large-scale boyars’ land property, the economic, social and judicial relations between boyars and peasants, the payment of tribute to the boyars and to the Ottoman Empire (Constantinescu, Postolache, Nicolae-Văleanu, Bulborea, 1982, p. 13-15).

Cantemir went back in time in the history of land property in the Romanian Principalities and noticed the fact that the ruler had the supreme right of property upon the entire land in the country, a right that came with his status as head of the feudal hierarchy and head of the state, Dimitrie Cantemir showed that the Moldavia that Dragoș re-established was the “exclusive patrimony of the prince” and Dragoș provided the people with “villages and lands in order to be able to live up to the rank he had received”; the documents of the old Moldavian families prove the origins of the properties they owned: “the gift and generosity of the prince” (Cantemir, 2017, p. 1459). Moreover, the boyars had the benefit of the ruler’s clemency and were exempt from paying tribute (Cantemir, 2017, p. 1461).

There was no free, capitalist-like property. In the Romanian Principalities there were three main forms of land property: 1. the individual property of the free peasants (known as *moșneni* or *răzeși*) 2. the property for which some annual taxes were paid to the state (in villages and towns), and 3. the uninhabited property of the state. Towards the end of the Middle Ages the social gap between the peasants who were serfs (called *rumâni* or *vecini*) and the privileged classes (boyars, *mazili*, *călărași*, *curteni*) became deeper. Dimitrie Cantemir presented the preferential treatment of the privileged classes before the law and directly condemned the abusive behavior of the boyars towards the peasants. The land property of the boyars expanded as the free peasants (*răzeși*) were forced by poverty into selling their inherited properties (Cantemir, 2017, p. 1505-1507).

The process of the free peasants turning into serfs was favored by the autocratic regime: “there is no measuring of how much they worked; the land owner decides how many days they should work, as he pleases” (Cantemir, 2017, p. 1507); in case an entire village is sold, the prince decides how much tribute is to be paid, and there is no limit to it” (Cantemir, 2017, p. 1509).

The people of Moldavia were either townspeople (they lived in small or large towns), or peasants, who lived in villages. The townspeople were mostly craftsmen. Cantemir considered that the people of Moldavia “were born proud or lazy” and were convinced that “any form of trade was undignified” and for this reason there were so few Romanian citizens that were wealthy (Cantemir, 2017, p. 1503). Most of the profit from trade went to foreign tradesmen (Turks, Jews, Armenians and Greeks). Jews were forced to pay a higher annual tribute, they were allowed to practice only trade and usury, and they could build synagogues anywhere they pleased as long as they were made of wood and not stone. Turks lived on trade, but they were not allowed to buy land or houses or to build places of worship (Cantemir, 2017, p. 1503). Since foreigners had no right to buy land and houses in Moldavia, their money was spent outside the country (except for a small amount, used to pay the tribute to the Ottomans and the local taxes). To limit the “flow” of money abroad (in a pure mercantilist tradition), Dimitrie Cantemir suggested that the only way was to insure the independence of the country based on three fundamental premises: the historical continuity of the Romanian people, its unity as a people and its unity of language, and the common economic interests of its inhabitants.

The Moldavian peasants “were very lazy and did not take to labor”. Even though they possessed crops, beehives, cattle and horses, most of them did not bother to amass supplies, especially since they were often plundered by the Tartars (Cantemir, 2017, p. 1511).

In describing the customs and the behavior patterns of the Moldavians, Dimitrie Cantemir was objective and pointed out that, on the one hand he had to show patriotism and love for his people, but on the other hand he had to emphasize negative aspects as well. Dimitrie Cantemir made a real SWOT analysis of the Moldavian character, and he identified the following:

- a. The orthodox religion and hospitality are their main traits of character;
- b. They are troublesome and haughty;
- c. They are funny and cheerful: “they easily forget enmities, just as they easily forget friendships”;
- d. They do not become “savage” when drunk, but they do not overdo it either, even though they do like long parties from 6 in the evening until 3 in the morning;
- e. They handle the sword well, but they avoid using the rifle, whose handling requires “neither art, nor warrior courage”
- f. They consider fighting against the Turks and the Tartars a Christian duty, and robbing the Turk or the Tartar is simply reclaiming what was theirs and not acquiring things that did not belong to them”;
- g. They oscillate between exaltation when things are good and discouragement when the going gets tough;
- h. They do not like to study (they say that the learned one “got stupid because of all the learning”);
- i. Noble women are good-looking, but less beautiful than ordinary ones, who are “unvirtuous and often behave shamelessly”; if married and widowed women have to cover their heads, virgin women have to walk bear headed “since a bear head is a sign of virginity”;
- j. They believe in destiny, which makes them brave in battle (Cantemir, 2017, p. 1509-1523).

Among the small boyars who serve the Prince there was a special one, called the “Room Master”, who was in charge with guarding the Prince’s personal treasury, “which was separate from the money of the province” (Cantemir, 2017, p. 1391). We notice that this position reminds us of cameralism, given the fact that there had been a differentiating of income taxes: part of the money was for the Prince, and part of it for the state (Cantemir, 2017, p. 1461) and “the Prince could not be compelled to give anything from his treasury to the public one” (Cantemir, 2017, p. 1463-1465). The seven most important boyars, “the councilors” were in charge with the public treasury.

In Cantemir’s opinion, alongside the anachronic and spoliator character of agrarian relations and certain negative aspects of the Moldavian mentality, another essential cause that prevented the economic development of the country was the Ottoman domination. In *Istoria ieroglică* (A Hieroglyphic History), the Ottoman Empire is the “city of greed”, and Constantinople is the “city of enrichment”. Paying the annual tribute and other obligations to the Sultan affected more and more the lower class of the Moldavian population and prevented economic development. Dimitrie Cantemir wrote a vast paper on the history of the Ottoman Empire and pointed out the fact that its decadence was an opportunity for the peoples it controlled to get their independence.

## 5. Conclusions

If we analyze them as a whole, Dimitrie Cantemir’s considerations on the unity and independence of the Romanians, on the need to reinforce the centralized feudal state (by imposing the hereditary principle in electing the Prince, in order to eliminate the grave consequences of the fight for power), on doing away with the Ottoman domination in order to stop the wealth of the country which was so needed by agriculture, crafts and trade from going abroad, come together as an ensemble that can be read as a mercantilist perspective. Putting it into practice was both a purpose and a condition for Romania’s economic progress (Constantinescu, Postolache, Nicolae-Văleanu, Bulborea, 1982, p. 13).

Beside chrematistics, mercantilism also focuses on the establishment and consolidation of the centralized state. A Humanist and an erudite scholar, preoccupied first and foremost by correctly integrating our history into the universal history, Dimitrie Cantemir noticed the link between the Phanariot regime, the Ottoman domination and the decrease of the absolute rights of the Romanian rulers. He showed great political and economic patriotism when analyzing Moldavia’s economic relations and noticed that they could become better only by the country becoming economically independent from the Ottoman Empire. Once this domination was gone, Cantemir the Humanist was confident that Moldavia would recede from economic medievalism and change the philosophy of life of the Moldavians (and subsequently their economic mentality that was not so favorable to the European mercantilist spirit, based on the need for accumulation and profit).

Cantemir was considered “a traveler among worlds” (Neumann, Heinen, 2010, p. 242), who made a scientific and critical contrast between the Ottoman Empire and the West. Dimitrie Cantemir is the perfect example to illustrate the fact that when a Romanian scholar aspired for universality, their background as historians or their interest for history prevailed. From this point of view Mihail Kogălniceanu considered Dimitrie Cantemir “one of the three great old historians” in Romania, alongside Grigore Ureche and Miron Costin (Zub, 1974, p. 245). Mihail Manoilescu mentioned him as a member of the “spiritual family” of the “Moldavian phenomenon” when he exclaimed with satisfaction: “Moldavia has given us so many great men!” (Manoilescu, 1993, p. 110).

## 6. References

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