

AN ASSESSMENT OF ROMANIAN AGRICULTURE BETWEEN 1918 AND 1940 AS REFLECTED IN THE ECONOMIC THINKING OF THE TIME: STUDY OF THE ANALYSIS UNDERTAKEN BY G. N. LEON

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is represented by the assessment of Romanian agricultural outlook between 1918 and 1940, in the manner in which it was reflected in the economic thinking of the time. Our purpose is to investigate the economic literature – concentrating primarily on the research undertaken by the professor Gheorghe N. Leon – in order to emphasize the strengths and the shortcomings of the Romanian agricultural environment in the interwar period. The results revealed certain mutations suffered by the Romanian agricultural structure, offering both favourable and unfavourable perspectives with regard to Romania's situation and potential, compared with other European economies.

Key words: *Romanian agriculture, interwar economy, agrarian reform, farm structure, agricultural performance.*

JEL classification: *B20, B22, B31.*

1. Introduction

The general analysis of Romania's economic structure was made by Romanian economists starting from the identification of three major time

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periods that characterized the existence of Romanian territory: *Prior to 1918* – a period in which it did not exist a complete unity of the Romanian national territory; *After 1918* – when the Great Union was fulfilled – *and until 1940*; *In 1940* – moment in which the national territory was dented again through the Vienna Dictate – *and during the Second World War*. While conducting the analysis, we will also keep in mind that, during the first half of the twentieth century, Romania attempted to undergo a transition from a predominantly agrarian economy to an economy in which the role of industry would attain a higher importance.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section two presents an analysis of the internal and international political and economic outlook, in order to contour as precisely as possible the image of Romania's economy in the timeframe considered by our analysis. Section three is dedicated to analyze the structure of Romanian agriculture between 1918 and 1940, where based on literature investigation and empirical assessment, we aim at offering a documented and pertinent image of Romania's agricultural context in that time. The interpretations are based also on a comparative approach between Romania and a western economy with lesser agricultural tradition, Denmark. Section four finalizes the paper offering some conclusions as a result of the investigation.

2. An Analysis of the Internal and International Outlook for the Analyzed Timeframe

In order to contour as precisely as possible the image of Romania's economy in the timeframe considered by our analysis, we cannot neglect the way in which Romanian population was spread on certain urban or rural living areas over that period of time. The Romanian population distribution on urban and rural residential areas between 1899 and 1930, confirms the idea that, by the early twentieth century, Romania was indeed a country with a population spread in an overwhelming proportion in rural areas. Furthermore this situation has not changed fundamentally during the first half of the twentieth century, despite efforts designed to lead to industrialization and urbanization. Statistical studies conducted over the interval 1899-1930, summarized in Table 1, help to confirm the hypothesis that Romanian economy and population belonged mainly to rural environment.

Table 1. Romania's population distribution over different areas of habitation between 1899 and 1930

Year	Population in urban communes – county capitals		Population in urban communes that were not county capitals		Population in rural communes		Total Population	
	Absolute Value	Relative Value	Absolute Value	Relative Value	Absolute Value	Relative Value	Absolute Value	Relative Value
1899	951.928	15,9 8%	167.858	2,82 %	4.836.904	81,2 %	5.956.690	100 %
1910	1.005.389	14,4 3%	189.846	2,73 %	5.770.767	82,8 %	6.966.002	100 %
1914	1.518.738	14,9 1%	240.905	3,10 %	6.371.598	81,9 9%	7.771.341	100 %
1915	1.165.653	14,7 6%	243.623	3,08 %	6.488.053	82,1 6%	7.897.311	100 %
1930	2.890.668	16,0 %	760.361	4,2%	14.405.989	79,8 %	18.057.028	100 %

Source: Authors' elaboration based on data retrieved from several Romanian Statistical Yearbooks.

Note: For the year 1899, the data were obtained from the Romanian Statistical Yearbook 1909, vol. 1,2.

2.1. The period until 1918

Before the First World War, Romania did not have a clear political and economic unity. "It did not represent a political unit because it included within its territorial boundaries only half of the Romanian population, the other half being under foreign dominion, and it did not represent an economic unit because the Carpathians, the backbone of Romanism, were dividing the natural land in two parts." (Leon, 1943, p.160).

Nevertheless, we have to emphasize that through these kinds of expressions it was not denied the functionality of the Romanian economy before the First World War. In fact, we consider that the purpose of this kind of expressions was exactly to highlight the abnormal situation that characterized the Romanians' existence over time. The abnormality resulted from the arbitrary division of the Romanian territory, division dictated by the wills of that time's rulers. And as a body to which some parts have been "amputated" and cannot work in the fullness of its capabilities, in a similar manner, an economic system deprived of its components – components we consider legitimate – cannot operate at its maximum performance level.

Moreover, the cited author did not even insisted on considering this period until 1918, remaining content only to recall its existence. This fact can be explained starting from his views: we consider that G.N. Leon did not consider appropriate to analyze the economic structure of the country that he could not address as a complete territorial Romania.

The above state of affairs, however, was corrected with the end of World War I, with the political and territorial unity, through the reunification of national Romanian territories with the population that was under foreign authorities. With political and territorial unity – due to the accomplishment of the Great Union in 1918 – Romania sought to create an appropriate economic unit.

2.2. The Period between 1918 and 1940

The period between 1918 and 1940 witnessed the attempt of Romanian governments to increase the share of industrial activities in the entire national economy. This effort was extremely high, especially since the economic structure of Romania was mainly of agrarian nature. For this reason the first objective pursued by the Romanian economic policy within the mentioned timeframe was represented by the fulfillment of the agrarian reform.

Referring to the period after 1918 and until 1940, G.N. Leon appreciated that, by fulfilling the national unity, Romania has become much stronger economically and politically. G.N. Leon conducted the study of the mentioned period by addressing two major problems: the development of Romanian agriculture; and the development of national industry.

The analysis of both sectors of the national economy was done starting from the attempt to highlight the need for modernization of economic activities within the national economy, regardless of their nature. We emphasize that it is important to consider that the Romanian economy in the interwar period had to develop in a new framework, both internally and externally. Inside the unified Romania, the natural conditions, the resources, the pressure of rural demography, a preponderantly agrarian structure of the national economy and the increase of the internal market, all have generated undoubtedly a new framework for theoretical discussion and practical economic approach.

Externally, international economic relations were held in a new context compared to that prior to World War I; new states appeared on the

map of Europe that were involved as active participants in international trade. In a first phase, mainly in war-affected economies, a monetary instability occurred, doubled by a lack of monetary security that determined the decrease of international migration of capital.

The mentioned monetary phenomena were explained by the renouncing at the use of gold standard species in international trade by the end of World War I. The gold standard species was replaced for a short time after the end of the war by the gold bullion standard, and from 1922 – after the Genoa Conference – the gold exchange standard was adopted, all these measures eventually resulting in some significant inflationary effects (Kirițescu, 1978, p. 22-24).

We consider that, by limiting the convertibility of banknotes into gold, international investment risk increased, which resulted in a reduction of monetary and financial capital migration between states.

“The export capital has lost its importance as a factor of industrialization of least developed countries, aspects that are observed also in Romania. In the next phase, from the global economic crisis of 1929 and especially after the suspension of the gold standard in the United Kingdom in 1931, followed by an overwhelming number of countries, the global economic stage made way to economic nationalism, characterized by the victory of autarkic tendencies.” (Madgearu, 1995, p.22)

This was the context in which Romania had to develop, and perhaps for the reasons given above, the liberalism – that promoted a reorientation of national socio-economic policies centered on the enhancement of the national productive forces – was accepted as a real possibility for creating a functional national economic territory.

3. The structure of Romanian agriculture between 1918 and 1940

The agriculture represented one of the sensitive sectors of the national economy, from a social perspective. For this reason G.N. Leon began the analysis of Romania's economic structure starting from the agricultural sector of the national economy. “Immediately after the conclusion of peace, Romania sought to solve the fundamental problem of its economy, namely the problem of its agricultural sector, which had become a threat to the country's political order.” (Leon, 1943, p.159). Moreover, Leon's opinion was not singular. Since 1913, Ion I.C. Brătianu announced in his governmental program his intention to expropriate large agricultural properties in order accomplish the allocation of land to peasants. We do not believe that this idea was born from purely

electoral purposes, but rather resulted from the fact that the distribution of property in agriculture ignored the social interests of the country. The peasants were deprived of land which could lead to serious social dysfunction, and the political spheres were fearing reactions similar to the Revolt of 1907.

Before the fulfilment of the agrarian reform, in some opinions, small and medium land ownership accounted for 57.6% of total agricultural area, while large agricultural properties over 100 hectares had a share of 42.4% of the total (Simionescu, 1937, p.307-308).

In such a situation it was clear that land reform had become imperative in order to avoid possible new social convulsions. The fulfilment of the agrarian reform was delayed by the outbreak of World War I, so that concrete first attempts in this direction have materialized towards the end of the war.

As a method of fulfilling the agrarian reform was preferred the expropriation of large agricultural properties, followed by the attribution of land to peasants without properties. We stress on the point that in practice, the agrarian reform was started before the Great Union and it was completed after it. By the Decree-Law no. 3.697/1918, 2,382,005 hectares were expropriated; the numbers are referring only to the Old Kingdom, since at that time, the union of the Romanian provinces was not yet officially recognized. Only in 1921 a law was adopted for the whole country: Agrarian reform from Oltenia, Muntenia, Moldova and Dobrogea. The agrarian law was passed in the event that took into account the specific conditions of each province and the needs of appropriation of peasants.

The Romanian Statistical Yearbook from 1923 highlights areas expropriated under Decree-Law Nr.3697/1918 and the Agrarian Reform Law of 1921, until March 1, 1924 (Table 2).

Leon's opinion in relation to the Agrarian Reform from 1921, was that "the reform has fundamentally changed our agricultural structure." (Leon, 1943, p.159). The comment that the author made about the change of country's agricultural structure refers to a change in share of different sizes ownerships. The agrarian reform fulfilled the appropriation of large numbers of peasants, small and medium-sized properties becoming the dominant form of ownership in an overwhelming proportion.

Taking into question the period 1921-1943, Leon noticed that: "In fact, from what earlier constituted the cultivable area throughout the country, the vast property over 100 ha represented 42.4% and it decreased to 11.2%.

Instead, the percentage of properties up to 100 ha increased to 88.8%.” (Leon, 1943, p.159).

Table 2. The areas expropriated by the 1921 Agrarian Reform Law

Provinces	Number of Estates	Surface (hectares)
The Old Kingdom		
<i>From privates</i>	3719	1.663.803
<i>From The Crown Areas</i>	664	413.724
<i>From foreigners</i>	62	102.430
<i>From absentees</i>	25	41.601
<i>From the state</i>	281	160.446
<i>Areas expropriated on A.L. from the estates at the paragraphs 1, 2 and 5</i>	-	226.683
Total	4751	2.608.689
<i>Basarabia</i>	-	1.491.930
<i>Bucovina</i>	-	61.461
<i>Transylvania</i>	-	2.215.587
Romania	4751	6.377.668

Source: Authors' elaboration based on data retrieved from the Romanian Statistical Yearbook from 1923

Although agricultural properties up to 100 ha cannot be considered small or medium, G.N. Leon yet adopted this formula for determining the dimensions of property. Leon emphasized that land reform has solved primarily a social problem, not an economic one. It seems that the author was tempted to ascribe to the agrarian reform the emergence of some new economic issues in Romanian agriculture.

The agrarian reform has led to the changing of farms structures in Romania. We consider that may be relevant in this case the statistics regarding the surface of farms in 1930 illustrated in table 3.

Analyzing the data in Table 3, we can see that from the total agricultural land area, 2.46 million holdings were between 0-5 hectares, with a share - in total – of 74.9%; from these, 1,700,000 were farms of just 0-3 hectares, representing 52.1% of the total. We note that in Romania of 1930s, the predominant form of agricultural property was the medium and small farm.

Table 3. Dimension of farms in Romania (1930)

Dimension of farms	Farms		Total surface		The seeded area	
	Number	%	Hectare	%	Hectare	%
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
0–5 ha from which	2.460.000	74,9	5.535.000	28,0	4.600.000	35,8
0 – 1 ha	610.000	18,6	320.000	1,6	275.000	2,1
1 – 3 ha	1.100.000	33,5	2.200.000	11,1	1.850.000	14,4
3 – 5 ha	750.000	22,8	3.015.000	15,3	2.475.000	19,3
5 – 10 ha	560.000	17,1	3.955.000	20,0	3.110.000	24,2
10 – 20 ha	180.000	5,5	2.360.000	12,0	1.715.000	13,3
20 – 50 ha	55.000	1,7	1.535.000	7,8	1.015.000	7,9
50 – 100 ha	12.800	0,4	895.000	4,5	540.000	4,2
100 – 500 ha	9.500	0,3	2.095.000	10,6	920.000	7,2
Over 500 ha	2.700	0,1	3.375.000	17,1	950.000	7,4
Total	3.280.000	100	19.750.000	100	12.850.000	100

Source: Madgearu, 1995, p.26.

We notice that large properties between 100 and 500 hectares in 1930 had a share of 27.7% of the total, clearly declining comparing to 1921 when they represented – as stated by Leon – 42.4% of the total. This decrease in the share of large properties – 14.5% – of the total agricultural land confirms Leon’s views about land reform in Oltenia, Muntenia, Moldova and Dobrogea in 1921 that led to decrease in the size of agricultural property.

The situation regarding the property size in the Romanian agriculture not only characterizes a specific region, but can be found throughout the country. The average dimension of farms in different regions of the country, in the interwar period was as follows (table 4).

The country’s average dimension of farms was only 3.90 hectares, reality that entitles us to believe that in the analyzed timeframe, the years 1920 to 1930, Romania’s agriculture was characterized by small-scale farms from the viewpoint of land dimension.

In the interwar period, aiming at the development of peasant properties after the Agrarian Reform, a fragmentation of land can be identified, the effect of which was the decreasing of the average plot of land.

The fragmentation was attributed to the increase in rural population and also to succession. “The Agrarian Reform in Romania has solved only a social problem and not an economic one, and even the social issues only temporarily; it did not solve an economic problem because it dealt exclusively with the distribution of land without taking the necessary measures relating to the process of production.” (Leon, 1943, p.159).

Table 4. Average dimension of farms in different regions of the country during the interwar period

Region	Average dimension of farms (ha)
Dobrogea	8,70
Southern Basarabia	8,25
The Plain of Danube	5,90
The Plain of Moldova	4,75
The Plain of Tisa	3,40
Northern Basarabia	3,25
Transylvanian Plateau	2,45
Northern Transylvania	2,40
Carpathian Muntenia	2,25
Carpathian Moldova	2,20
Bucovina	2,05
România	3,90

Source: Madgearu, 1995, p.27.

In our view, this fact has both an economic and statistical significance. The economic importance lies in the fact that the transition from the agriculture practiced on large areas with an important contribution of farming stock, to an agriculture whose functional unit was the small parcel without agricultural inventory, determined a lack of performance in the agricultural economic environment.

We do not consider that the decreased performance of Romanian agriculture, fact noticed by Leon, has as a main cause the reducing the size of agricultural farms. In our opinion, the determining factor for this unfavourable situation was the lack of farming stock, which caused the exploitation of land in an extensive manner.

In the period 1906-1915, when the large property had a share of 42.2%, the average yield of wheat per hectare was 11.3 quintals, while between 1918 and 1927, after the completion of agrarian reform, it dropped to

an average of 8.3 quintals per hectare. The same situation exists also in the case of maize production that, between 1906 and 1913, reached an average of 12.3 quintals per hectare, while for the years 1918 to 1926 to reach an average of only 10.9 quintals per hectare (Leon, 1943, p.159).

The facts presented above were also confirmed by some Romanian authors (Leon, 1943; Arcadian, 1936; Madgearu, 1995; Simionescu, 1937; etc.), who also noted that the expropriated lands were distributed to peasants who lacked the funds and agricultural machinery necessary for a rational cultivation. "This naturally brought with it a low production of lower quality than that produced by the large farms". "Much of the agricultural inventory of landowning properties became dead material, instead of being used for agricultural intensification. For this reason, our grain exports after the war were not results possible to achieve if the large property farming had continued to exist, or if the appropriation would have been made together with the organization of production." (Leon, 1943, p.159).

In accordance with this opinion, the image that is induced is that before the First World War in the Old Kingdom were produced more grains than after the war. Leon's study undertaken in this matter confirmed that the average yield of grain per hectare in the case of large properties exceeded the average yield obtained in the case of small properties.

But the decline in grain production per hectare was only one of the causes of export decrease of Romanian grains. Another question that should be the basis for reducing Romanian grain exports has been identified by the author in domestic cereal consumption growth. After the Great Union, Transylvania lost its function of external trading partner, the quantities of grains destined for consumption in this province not being exported anymore.

We do not consider that we can justify the decrease in export performance of Romanian agriculture to the rise in domestic consumption of cereals; we believe instead that the determining factor for the decline in production has been the practicing of a predominantly extensive type of agriculture, caused by the lack of farming stock.

On this background of decline in performance from agriculture, there have been reported many deficiencies relating to the state of Romanian agriculture in the interwar period. We believe that perhaps the most serious aspect consists in highly overcoming of the interwar Romanian agriculture performance by Western countries that did not have an agrarian vocation as important as Romania. It is also found that superior performance in agriculture

was obtained in the West, on radically inferior land from the quality perspective. Romania was positioned even after some Nordic countries; a study comparing the results obtained in agriculture, conducted between Denmark and Romania in 1931, highlights the precarious state of Romanian agriculture and its lack of performance.

Table 5. Agricultural production for different crops in Romania and Denmark in 1931

Country	Romania	Denmark
Total arable land (hectares)	13.5000.000	3.330.000
Wheat (quintals/hectare)	10,0	26,1
Barley (quintals/hectare)	10,3	26,6
Oat (quintals/hectare)	9,7	24,7
Rye (quintals/hectare)	10,3	15,9
Potatoes (quintals/hectare)	80,8	138,0
Beet (quintals/hectare)	174,9	286,0

Source: Arcadian, 1936, p.184.

Even though at that time the Romanian agricultural performance was low, Arcadian (1936) expressed favourable opinions regarding its future developments. “Due to the law of disproportionate yield in agriculture, while the grower from Western Europe is unable to increase even very slowly the production no matter how much efforts should submit, the Romanian grower is able, with a small effort, to improve production, to double and almost to triple the current yield of the soil.” (Arcadian, 1936, p.184). The opinion expressed by the fore mentioned author cannot be credited with a value of absolute truth. We consider as being correct the assessment of the earth, as a limited factor of production; therefore there is indeed a possibility that the productive agricultural land use, in the context of the technical and technological conditions existing in the West at that moment, might have reached its maximum level. The study does not account for the feasible alternative of overcoming the frontier of existing production possibilities in the West by the contribution of new productive techniques and technologies. In such a case, the beneficiaries would have been the Westerners, and the gap between the performance of Romanian and the Western agriculture would have increased again.

Referring to the de facto situation and not to future possibilities, we find that a possible explanation of poor economic performance of Romanian agriculture, after the agrarian reforms of 1918-1921, is due to the decreasing number of animals required for field work: “Large animals (cattle and horses) ... were 5,920,786 in 1921 and 4,630,531 in 1930, thus decreased by 1,290,255 heads (due to the reduction in the number of cattle with 1,419,735).” (Popescu, 1994, p.88).

Since the interwar Romanian agriculture was not mechanized, the field work being carried out using animals, we believe that the cattle had for the peasant household significance as large as that of the earth, representing both a labour instrument and a supplier of food. “Cattle are a source of income both directly and indirectly by the fact that they intensify the peasant labour. They exploit the raw products of the soil and increase farm income.” (Madgearu, 1995, p.49). And even if by increasing the number of agricultural holdings, it was logical to note an increase in the number of cattle, in reality this did not happen.

The decrease in the number of animals used in farm work could be due to the transformation of pastures – obtained from reform – in arable land. By decreasing the area dedicated to pastures, the forage base also decreased, which resulted in the decrease of the number of animals. The biggest loss was recorded for cattle, which gradually began to be replaced by horses. In areas where a significant decrease in the number of cattle is seen, we find a rapid growth in the number of horses, the two categories of large animals thus compensating each other. Increasing the number of horses was a decision supported on economic considerations, since the horses imply lower maintenance costs.

A statistical illustration of livestock situation, conducted between 1929 and 1933, confirms the downward trend in the number of usable cattle in the fields, and their replacement with horses (table 6).

The analysis of Table 6 shows that the total number of livestock increased by 2,425,000 animals. The biggest increase was registered on animals that could not be used for field work. However, we believe that this increase in livestock was undoubtedly beneficial for both the household and

the entire national economy. And even if livestock have increased, Romanian agriculture situation was far from being on a positive trend, because compared to other countries, these results were also lower.

Table 6. The Dynamics of some categories of livestock within 1929 and 1933

Livestock	Number (thousands)		Increase (+), Decrease () or stagnation (cst)
	1929	1932	
Horse	1.958	2.034	+
Cattle	4.334	4.189	-
Buffalos	187	193	+
Sheep	12.406	12.294	-
Goats	373	421	+
Pigs	2.412	2.964	+
Mules and donkeys	13	13	Cst
Poultry	48.000	50.000	+
Total livestock	69.683	72.108	+

Source: Arcadian, 1936, p.185.

As for revealing the state of Romanian agriculture was not enough just to compare the domestic values, Arcadian (1936) appreciated that in relation to the total agricultural area of the country, the number of livestock was very small. The comparison, shown in Table 7, was performed again between Romania and Denmark, with reference to 1931:

Table 7. The number of livestock and their area of distribution in Romania and Denmark in 1931

Country	Romania	Denmark
<i>The distribution area</i>	13.500.000 hectares	3.300.000 hectares
<i>Livestock</i>	Thousands heads	Thousands heads
Cattle	1.500	1.700
Pigs	3.290	3.500
Poultry	50.000	22.000

Source: Arcadian, 1936, p.184.

In relation to Denmark, Romania does not hold a comparative advantage not even in regard with poultry, for all other livestock Denmark

holding advantage. This aspect explained the poor performance of Romanian agriculture, in which there is a lack of living farming stock required for the field labor.

2. Conclusions

After analyzing all these points of view, we believe that the views expressed by Gheorghe N. Leon were as relevant as possible, his concern about the decline in agricultural production being perfectly justified. Although the agrarian reform of 1921 has solved some of the social problems of the Romanian peasantry, it did not have the same success in the realm of concrete economic results.

The decrease in economic efficiency in agriculture, doubled by the crisis of 1929-1933 has determined the Romanian authorities to change their perception on the realities of economic life. Much of the disorders that followed the Reform of 1918-1921 were corrected by reviewing the agrarian law in 1921. In 1937, March 19, The Law for organization and encouragement of agriculture was promulgated.

The law of 1937 completed the content of the existing agrarian law, in terms of emphasizing the need to conduct agricultural activities only in terms of economic efficiency. For this purpose, the idea of formulating an overall agricultural economic plan was conveying, supported by active agricultural economic policies.

The planned measures aimed at increasing the performance of national agriculture, but at the same time they were meant to determine an alignment of the agriculture to the requirements of the national economy. The general long-term program and the annual agricultural plan were neoliberal economic policy measures which did not intend the suppression of economic freedom in agriculture. The state's role in this context was to guide agricultural production and not to manage it directly.

We conclude by saying that in the interwar period there were certain mutations in Romanian agriculture structure, of which the most important in our opinion were: the decrease in size of the agricultural holdings with the increase in the number of properties, and the decrease of agricultural production due to a lack agricultural inventory.

These mutations were generated by the agrarian reform, but also by a poor use of available factors of production in agriculture. We believe that these changes can be viewed from two perspectives: one positive and one less

favourable. The favourable perspective is given by the changes in Romania's agricultural economic environment, that was solving – in part – some social problems given by the lack of ownership of agricultural land, for a large number of rural population. The unfavourable perspective is offered by the poor performance of agriculture, the practice of an extensive agriculture due to the lack of livestock and agricultural inventory for specific farming activities. Amid poor endowment of Romanian agriculture, inputs involved were exploited to a potential well below their real capacity.

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