

## THE ROMANIAN SOCIAL CLASSES IN *THREE YEARS IN ROMANIA* BY JAMES WILLIAM OZANNE

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**Abstract:** *The paper analyses the image of the social classes existing in Romania in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as it emerges from the work of the English writer James William Ozanne, the first president of the Anglo-American Press Association in Paris, between 1882-1912. The Romanian society is seen through the eyes of a diplomat with a keen sense of observation, yet also subjective sometimes, who manages to create an accurate depiction of the society of a state which he did not consider to be among the first ranking ones. It is interesting to notice that he borrows “valuable information” from other writers, especially Vaillant, Regnault and Obedenare, but, unlike other foreign travellers who wrote about the Romanians and their way of life, he is not ashamed to acknowledge this fact. J.W. Ozanne openly admits the fact that he liked the people among whom he had lived for three years, but his book is not a happy one. He did his duty of respecting the truth as much as possible, without entering into too many details, and the image of the social classes that he managed to create is one that enjoys the “right combination of light and shadows”.*

**Keywords:** image, social, classes, Romania, 19<sup>th</sup> century

### 1. Introduction

1878, the year when William James Ozanne’s book was published, was the year when Europe feared another conflict between the Russian and Turkish powers. The Congress of Berlin had as a main objective the stopping of the Russian expansion. The United Kingdom wanted to protect its interests in the East of the Mediterranean Sea and at the Straits and until that moment it had benefitted from the help of the Ottoman Empire. The United Principalities were intended to hinder Russia’s advance in Europe and to consolidate the stability of the Ottoman Porte. Despite the expectations of the Western states, Romania helped the armies of the Czar against the Turkish ones.

Ozanne was probably prompted to write his book by the interest of the British public for a new and exotic European state. “The balance of appreciations is truly remarkable. His evaluation template is the ideal of democracy and progress of the century. Even though he is truly fond of Romanians after the years he had spent among them, J.W.Ozanne makes a fully conscious effort to describe and to judge them without any exaggeration - as he himself affirms, neither with enthusiasm, like the French authors, nor with cynicism, like the Germans” [1].

### 2. The upper class

The Moldo-Wallachian gentlemen are called *boyardds*. In the past, the title was given only

to men of war, but then it was given only to men of peace. Those who reign in Wallachia or Moldavia retain the title of prince and so do their children. Many of the autochthonous boyards were “swamped” by the Greek parvenus who also introduced the Greek language to the Court, after the Russian occupation this being replaced by French. Ozanne seems to have been contaminated by the profound dislike of the Romanians for the representatives of Phanar, whom he calls “dregs of the population”. The Greek origin of the aristocrats is revealed by their names stolen from the noble families of the Later Empire. Only the names that end in “-escu” and “-anu” are of pure Romanian origin. The origin of the boyards is also a key to their character and to their way of life. In the past the nobles were heroes, but then they became weak, extravagant and lazy. “Until very lately the boyardd could do nothing for himself. He was helped into the carriage like a dummy; when he moved about his house, there was a servant on each side of him to support his trembling footsteps; his glass was filled as he drank, his meat chopped up into the smallest morsels, all ready for consumption. No one could have led a more negative existence”

They leave a very merry life, paying numerous visits, flirting, throwing parties. Many of them are passionate card players and they even mortgage their properties and ruin themselves. The other “hobby” that they enjoy with an equal passion is the intrigue.

Another thing the writer disapproves of and which is very common in the case of this class of is the practice of the Orthodox Church to allow for three divorces. This, he thinks, is the main cause for the decadence of the society. Marriage is a business and its strength depends not on the love of the spouses, but on the dowry of the wife.

The ladies spend most of their time lounging on sofas, embellishing themselves or “driving in the Chaussée”. They are elegant,

intelligent and can speak foreign languages, being a very pleasant company, no longer making use of the exaggerate clothes, jewellery and cosmetics employed under Turkish influence. The foreign traveller marvels at the fact that the women fully enjoy their rights. They have their own apartments, their carriages, their servants and they can even flirt at will and leave their husbands when they get tired of them.

The houses are huge, with 16 to 20 reception rooms, splendidly furnished. The boyards employ 30-40 servants and keep open houses for their countless friends who sometimes appear without being invited. “Here you see the best of everything, a mingling of the Eastern and Western modes that is most piquant.”

Both the ladies and the gentlemen’s manners are exquisite and the author has the impression that, with the exception of the clothes, the situation must have been similar in the French salon, in the time of Louis XIV: “the same *grands airs*, the same stately *étiquette*, the same vanity and frivolity”. It is no wonder that the lack of style of Princess Elizabeth of Wied and the rigid manners of the princely pair are seen as an affront to the connoisseurs, and only hardly do they manage to win the support of the population.

The means of entertainment accessible to the two main social classes are also different. The ones that have money go to the theatre, to *bals masqués* and parade on the *Chaussée* wearing *toilettes* that must be seen in order to be believed. They go to France and to the German baths yearly. The boyards spare no expense for their horses, carriages or sledges as “only a short time ago, no Moldo-Wallachian of any respectability would condescend to walk” due to the mud and the mud and the dirt of the roads. They eat at restaurants, drink champagne on ice and smoke delicious cigarettes.

As one of the boyards confesses, the Romanians, especially the higher classes,

adopted many of the vices of the peoples that had governed them. Nevertheless, there is one vice they do not suffer from: meanness. They do not seem to believe in God, nor do they attend religious services regularly, but they establish and endow hospitals, churches and schools, support the Church, and participate in charity work. The English traveller is amazed that in hospitals the patients can benefit from free consultations as well as from certain free medicines.

The members of the higher class are avid readers. They have realized the importance of a good education and when they do not go abroad, they go to French and German schools, where, besides various subjects, they learn modern foreign languages which they speak almost to perfection. Despite of the knowledge they have managed to accumulate, they are still superstitious and their children wear amulets to protect them from harm.

### **3. The middle class**

The English author informs us that most of those belonging to the middle class are of foreign origin (French, German, Jews, Austrian, Spanish) as most of the Romanians are either “eminently patrician or eminently plebeian”.

Most of the doctors, lawyers, officers and civil servants belong to this class. Neither the doctors, nor the lawyers, many of them educated in France and Germany, are much appreciated and the great majority can barely make a living.

The officers fare a little better. After they finish work, they go to cafés where they have lunch and where they spend their free time. They are not very well paid but they manage to make a living without getting into debt. The officers are not immune to vices and they can often be seen in cafés playing cards or billiards. Superstitious, some of them wear earrings to protect them from harm.

There are several categories of civil servants.

W.J. Ozanne can not help but marvel at their number which is much greater than that of the civil servants in Prussia or France. He chooses to speak only about the post office and the telegraph officials because they are the most numerous and the most representative. Nicknamed *Fivers* due to the fact that their salary is only five napoleons per month, they struggle to make both ends meet and in order to afford a ticket to the theatre they sometimes have to give up their meagre supper.

The Germans and the French own the best shops, the latter being much more liked than the former. Among them one can also find doctors, engineers or bankers. The great commercial class of the country is made almost entirely of Jews. They are mostly bankers, craftsmen, and, until recently, the only vendors of tobacco and alcohol. In spite of the fact that they are the most peaceful segment of the population, they are rather oppressed. The explanation for this situation is the envy the indebted boyards feel against them and the agitation caused by certain priests and extremist politicians. In addition to these, the Jews do not intermarry and remain a separate people. “The Romanians are jealous of forming alliances with other foreigners as well, and of admitting them to free social intercourse with themselves.” In order to support this, in our opinion, exaggerated affirmation, Ozanne gives the example of an isolated incident when some Prussian colonists were attacked and the windows of the hall where they were partying were smashed.

The Armenians and the Greeks present in the country at the time are usually merchants and farmers.

We consider that a significant aspect we have to draw attention upon is the desire of the middle class people to imitate those belonging to the upper class, a situation most evident in the case of the rich tradesmen. Unfortunately, the author warns us,

anticipating Titu Maiorescu's theory of the forms without substance [4], "there is always any amount of show, but not always the substance with the shadow thereof."

#### 4. The lower classes

The lower classes or "the common herd" as the author calls them, are the ones that support the whole community. They are the last to be affected by civilization, by the disappearance of the old way of life. In Romania, the common people could be studied to understand the way life was like in the remote past. They are the class the least affected by foreign influences and they still wear clothes similar to those worn by the Dacians during the wars with Trajan. The Romanian peasant "is the representative of manhood in this country, the inheritor of the glorious traditions of the dim past. He has bowed under successive generations of tyrants and spoilers; but his heart is brave and cheery as ever, and he is ready as ever, to forget and forgive". This is an idealized image formed probably after the writer had the chance to know this social class into more detail and the ideas were probably put on paper several years after his travel to Romania.

The peasant women are also extremely beautiful, hard working, good wives and mothers.

The first encounter with a Romanian peasant takes place at Bazias and the author has the impression that he is faced with a mythical monster. This is "the real Wallachian peasant, in all his rags and squalor, with unkempt locks and long, drooping moustache, the whole surmounted by a black Dacian cap, a spectacle never to be forgotten." The author is extremely disappointed, but his disappointment is soon forgotten when he finds himself in the company of the beautiful Moldo-Wallachian women who were returning from Paris and Germany and who make him exclaim that

"the Romanian women are famed for their beauty, their whole existence is devoted to loving and being loved. Endowed with a ready wit and with a certain turn for humour, they are always amusing companions". We notice, from the very beginning, the sharp contrast between the appearance of the representatives of the two most important Romanian social classes: the peasants, made unsightly by the poverty caused by centuries of foreign domination, living in dingy cottages and hovels exhaling "an unpleasant odour", and the aristocrats, well-fed, elegant, healthy, full of life and living in mansions or being accommodated at luxurious hotels.

A later physical description of the Romanian peasant speaks about "a well-knit, hardy man, with long hair and a drooping moustache, and an aquiline nose, which strongly reminds the stranger of the statues of the best Roman type. He is good-tempered and witty, speaks his language with wonderful purity and correctness and is perfectly satisfied so long as his oxen thrive and his favourite tobacco-box can be replenished. The misery and the wretchedness of the past, instead of brutalising his character, have lent a softness, not unmingled with a certain spice of irony to his glance. He is clever and intelligent, and the only hatred which he still nourishes is directed against the *Mouscal*, as he terms the Muscovite. As for the boyardd, who has so long oppressed him, he simply regards him with mocking contempt." The contact with the foreign oppressors has made them more reserved and less hospitable. However, they have remained honest (the women can safely wear their dowry in necklaces around their necks), have preserved the pleasure of telling impressive stories, and the ability to carry interesting conversations.

The two predominant occupations among those from the lower classes are the farming and the military. They still do not have access to proper education, but one can see a

big improvement of the general situation of the peasants. No longer serfs, they can earn wages, even save money, and when ill or in need, there are institutions that can help them. There are more and more schools where they can go to get an education, the number of men attending these being higher than that of the women. From Ozzane's book we also learn that at the time there were three military schools: one for artillery and engineers, one for cavalry, and one for the sons of officers.

Just like the peasants from other countries, the Romanian ones are very religious, yet with little knowledge of the teachings of the Bible. They observe all the fasting periods in the calendar, almost starving themselves for half a year. This does not stop them from being very superstitious. The peasants believe in icons that perform miracles, in witches, fairies, ghosts, and, a particularity, they are afraid of vampires.

When it comes to the entertainment, the peasants in the country go to special dances, *hore*, and observe millennial traditions. The ones who live in Bucharest and who are not well off go to the Cișmigiu park where there is a stagnant lake the poisons the surroundings, attend church sermons, drink tea, beer or water from Dâmbovița, buy food from dirty markets and eat *mămăligă*. The cafés are for everybody. There the people can listen to gipsy music and watch shows of an equivocal character.

"In Transylvania, however, which has been more or less exempt from the scourge of war, the Romanian peasant appears in his best light". Due to the many years of Austro-Hungarian domination, the writer is of the opinion that the Romanians here have acquired a different style that would make the union with Romania impossible.

## 5. The gypsies

Considered a separate category, the author presents them as very "untidy people,

scarcely observing the proprieties of life; only half-clad in the warm weather, while their children ran about wholly destitute of covering". The only use Ozanne can see for them is in towns as "*laoutari* or minstrels". One can also find gypsies who are cooks, blacksmiths (only gypsies embrace this job as the Romanians are ashamed of it), builders and brick makers and even a few who cultivate the land, but the majority are lazy and prefer to be nomads earning their existence by stealing and begging. They dwell in tents or in hovels and do not save money for a rainy day. Those who humour them get along well with them, but so far, the few attempts made to educate them (the author gives the example of the emperor Joseph II who tried to bring the benefits of civilization upon a tribe in the Carpathians) have proved futile.

The gypsies of Indian origin prove good knowledge of the oriental traditions and the old men can explain all the religions based on astronomical phenomena.

There are three classes or tribes of gypsies: the *Laiesi* (the *laoutari* belong to this group), the *Vatrari* (many of them serving as servants in the houses of the aristocrats) and the *Netotsi*, "the most savage and wild of the gypsy race." Half naked and living only by theft and plunder, the *Netotsi* feed on the flesh of cats and dogs, sleep on the bare ground or in some ruin or barn, and possess absolutely no property of any kind". Their facial features and character have a strong resemblance to those of the negroes. The readers can easily see the influences of the pseudoscience of physiognomy, probably the ideas of Lavater who believed that the looks of a person were influenced by his nature. "<<Lavater idealizes the familiar and praises what he knows,>>" wrote one critic, "<<but finds 'deficiencies' in the faces of Africans, Laplanders, and Calmuck Tartars.>>" [5]

Even though their condition is improving visibly, the Romanians despise them. The

solution proposed by the observer of their way of life is that they should intermarry with the local population.

## 6. Conclusion

After having analyzed the main social classes in Romania, we can see several dominant common characteristics: patriotism, selflessness, physical beauty, intelligence, enjoyment of life, sociability, *bonhomie* and the one that the author seems to value the most, generosity. "Generosity is the noblest of qualities, and there are perhaps very few who, sinning so much against themselves, offend so little against their fellows".

We can affirm that *Three Years in Romania* written by J.W. Ozanne is one of the works that have had a significant contribution to the shaping of the way in which Westerners see us. Ozanne and many other authors have admitted to the fact that once a person gets to

know the Romanians, their way of life, and their country, it is very difficult to leave them, as if a magic force acted upon their will.

The English diplomat can not agree with the "suicidal adventure" prince Charles has engaged in and the siding of Romania with Russia in order to gain its independence, yet he has come up with a positive portrait of the Romanians whom he deeply admired: "With all their shortcomings, they possess many estimable qualities, and, as a resident for three years in their midst, I bear them much goodwill. They are kindly and hospitable, pleasant company, and devoted heart and soul to their country and to the memories of a once glorious past. Nor are the elements of the progress lacking to them. They are, without exception, the most promising of the Christian races of the East."

## References

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