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BUYING THE AMERICAN DREAM? ON AMERICAN – STYLE CONSUMPTION IN ROMANIA (1919 – 1940)*

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“America is a fashion. Since the war, all Europe has been concerned about America. There is a general Americomania¹ that invaded the European life in all its manifestations”².

Abstract

The article presents aspects regarding the economical and commercial relations between Romania and the United States during the interwar period, by analysing the consumption of American products on the Romanian market and its impact on the Romanian society.

Keywords: consumption, American products, Romania, the interwar period

In the years following the First World War, the Romanian public began to see American civilization and manufactured goods with new eyes. According to Charles Vopicka, the American consul in Romania, it became common to hear on the streets “Hurrah for Wilson!”³. “Wilson” became a widely used name for restaurants, hotels, and other public buildings, “which shows that the Romanians feel they owe a debt to our country because their national aspirations regarding Greater Romania are near realization”⁴. Romanians perceived Woodrow Wilson’s fourteen points, especially the right to self-determination, as the basis for Greater Romania. Furthermore, he assumed a mythical position in Romanian rhetoric during the interwar period. Wilson and his fourteen points were also one of the main reasons for sparking the debates about American civilization in Romania. Romanian newspapers were full of heated debates, which disseminated what the United States might have represented. Sharp distinctions between United States’ economic accomplishments and American culture were at the core of many articles. Nonetheless, the United States and American civilization stood for efficiency, standardization, unmatched technological progress, business spirit, modernity, energy, improvement, liberalism, individualism, and

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¹ In the original text.

² “Viața Românească”, nr. 7-8, 1930, p. 124.

³ *Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Romania, 1910 – 1940*, Reel 7, 871.4016/72, January 28, 1919.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

democracy. Yet, there were voices within Romanian society, which saw the United States, American goods and way of life as incompatible with “Romanian values”, the “Romanian soul and spirit”, and the “national tradition”. For example, Ovid Densușianu (the son), a Romanian writer, compared American civilization to a giant who lived without balance⁵. Americans were inventive and genial, yet they grew too fast, thus lacked tradition and evolution⁶. He rejected “America” because it lacked high culture and it was “primitive”⁷. Furthermore, an article from “L’Indépendance Roumaine” placed Romania and Europe under the American menace, comparable to other threats:

“Relieved of the nightmare of the Kaiser’s militaristic Germany, Europe suffers from debt insomnia. On one hand the civilized European states are subjected to the domination of American trusts, the empire of sovereign capital; on the other hand a country of one hundred million souls plunged into communism which is gradually destroying all traces of European civilization”⁸.

These debates prove the importance of American consumption in Romania. Studying American consumption, this article provides an overview of the economic relations between the United States and Romania, focusing on imports and Romanian branches of different American companies between 1919 and 1940. Then it seeks to identify broader patterns of consumption and the meanings of American consumer goods in Romania. This timeframe is artificial and reflects the researcher’s own interests, but it also takes into account Romanian realities. The interwar period remains significant for the direct contact that took place between Romania and the United States. In 1940, Romania ceased to exist under the same geographical borders as two decades before, losing important territories to Bulgaria, Hungary, and Soviet Union. More important, Romania became Nazi Germany’s ally and soon entered in the war. At the same time, as early as April 1941 Romania introduced rationing. The difficulties in consuming American products became apparent as Romania declared war on the United States in December 1941. Furthermore, this timeframe also takes into consideration that as soon as 1946 – 1947, and especially in 1948, the communist regime further restricted American consumption in Romania.

This study tries to explain how American consumption became significant in interwar Romania and came to be important in the creation of new cultural practices linked to modernization. In striving for modernity and trying to shape new identities, Romanian consumers saw in American products an alternative. Taking into account the prices of the American products, the income of different social categories in Romania, classes and the standard of living, and the advertising of the American goods, this study demonstrates that American consumption reached the urban, upper and middle classes. The economic situation of the peasantry and working class prevented them from purchasing American products. The consumption of American products meant a certain standard of living influenced by social status and modernity.

⁵ O. Densușianu - the son, *Americanisme*, in “Universul”, August 1932, p. 5.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

⁸ “L’Indépendance Roumaine”, October 10, 1925.

Consumption is a cultural practice, yet it is inseparable from social standing and material wealth. Thus, I bring together social and cultural history or, in Geoff Eley and Keith Nield's words, combine poststructuralist and structuralist arguments⁹, which is essential for understanding the appeal of American consumption in interwar Romania.

Focusing on Romania as a case study can be useful for understanding American - style consumption's impact in a different cultural context. Although the historiography of consumption studies is especially rich, consumption in Eastern Europe, especially prior to 1946, remains among the most under-studied issues within the historiography of consumption. Thus, one might ask whether "the irresistible empire"¹⁰ was widely accepted? It seems more appropriate to understand consumers' reactions within a particular context, either cultural or historical. Uneven incomes further limited the diffusions of American products or the transformation by "the irresistible empire." Eastern European historians also ignore the importance of American consumption in interwar Romania. Yet, there were several American goods as well as American popular culture, which undeniably influenced the Romanian imagination. Although the economic situation determined American-style consumption, representations about American culture marked Romania. In this vein, Romania's example conforms to the European experience. However, cultural diffusion might have played a significant role in the way Romanians perceived the United States.

This article also investigates the social meanings assigned to American goods, ideas carried in Romania, and societal myths conveyed through American manufacturing products. This study seeks to shed light on this neglected aspect of consumer culture by focusing on the Romanian case. Several basic assumptions inform this study. First, consumer goods have cultural meanings - these meanings are not static. Second, consumption is a key element in defining identities, especially in relation to class. Third, the urban working class and peasants were at the margins of consumption. Fourth, beside class, ethnicity, race, and gender imposed further restrictions upon consumption¹¹.

⁹Geoff Eley and Keith Nield's book, *The Future of Class in History. What's Left of the Social?* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007), seeks to bring together social and cultural history, envisaging a 'sociocultural' history. Under the line – "We do not have to choose", Eley and Nield argue for combining poststructuralist critique of knowledge and registers of structuralist argument. They stress that class is still present, even though not as a common experience of class inequalities, but as constructed in different ways in different cultures and times.

¹⁰ Victoria De Grazia. *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe*, Cambridge MA & London, Belknap Press, 2006, passim.

¹¹ See Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1984; McCracken, Grant, *Culture and Consumption. New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities*, Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1988; Strasser, Susan, McGovern, Charles, Judd Matthias (editors), *Getting and Spending. European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998; Porter Benson, Susan, *Household Accounts. Working Class Family Economies in the Interwar United States*, Ithaca & London, Cornell University Press, 2007; De Grazia, Victoria, Furlough, Ellen (editors), *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996.

The Nature of American Consumption in Romania

This paper contends that there were two levels of reactions to American goods: the state and the consumer levels. Both shared ambivalent and complex reactions. The state promoted economic nationalism, restrictive tariffs, and heavy taxation on products classified as luxury items while accepting the establishment of multinational companies. American goods captivated consumers, fascinated by their modernity and technological advancement. Yet, the manufactured goods, despite their appeal, most likely reached only the urban upper and middle classes. American entertainment (movies, music and dance, literature) transformed their leisure time. Favorable as well as critical voices also accompanied consumers' choices, influencing the reception.

Under the devastating impact of the First World War, Romania reassessed its economic relations with the United States. Romania was the main importer of American goods in the Balkan Peninsula before the First World War¹². According to American sources, Romania had about the same importance to American commerce as Portugal¹³. Romania and the United States negotiated an economic treaty, validated by the Romanian government in 1906, yet the Romanian state did not submit it for parliamentary approval. However, on April 30, 1912 Romania granted most-favored nation treatment to imports from the United States, with the exception of petroleum and its products. Romania abrogated this clause on April 10, 1922. Prior to 1922, the state already increased import tariffs on some products in 1921 over 20 times compared to 1906¹⁴. Among the goods deemed as luxury products were tanned sheep, silk ribbons, men's silk hats, cloves, cinnamon, dried vegetables, raw and roasted coffee, precious stones, artificial chemical perfumes and perfumery containing alcohol. The reasons behind these decisions were the continuous decline of the Romanian exchange rate as well as the lack of protection for domestic industries. On December 20, 1922 the import duties on a considerable number of commodities increased again, including cotton and silk textiles. Further revisions followed in 1924, 1926, 1935, and 1940. The legislation also defined the state's capacity to restrict consumer choices through imposing higher tariffs and higher prices, which resulted in some consumers' marginalization.

In 1932, new restrictions on imports based on a quota system affected American imports. *What is impeding Romanian-American commercial economic relations?* was a revealing title of an article published in the daily newspaper *Semnalul* on July 17, 1938. The article argued that the United States had superior industrial products from both a quality and price point of view, yet Romania was importing more from Germany than from the United States. Furthermore, this article singled out the United States as the only industrial country that produced quality products at cheap prices. According to the article, there were two main reasons to

¹² *Rumania. An Economic Handbook*, Washington D.C., Government Printing Office, 1924, p. 146.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 146.

¹⁴ In 1906, Romania (Old Kingdom) adopted restrictive tariffs for imports.

explain the situation: the lack of foreign currency and a clearing system¹⁵. At the same time, there was an intense debate in Romania about modernization and the ways to accomplish it. On one hand, I.I.C. Brătianu (1864 – 1927), leader of the National Liberal Party, Vintilă Brătianu (1867 – 1930), the governor of the Romanian National Bank, and the Liberal Party promoted a national industry, rejecting foreign companies under the line “the wealth of Romania for Romanians.” On the other hand, Iuliu Maniu (1873 – 1953), leader of the National Peasants’ Party, promoted an “open door” policy allowing foreign capital and multinational corporations to invest in Romania without restrictions. The American companies found new ways to cope with these changes, mainly by opening local branches. Despite these regulations and restrictions, companies such as General Motors, General Electric, the Ford Motor Company, I.T.T., Standard Oil, Frigidaire, Standard, and Westinghouse became significant on the Romanian market.

Year	Rank in the world based on U.S. investments abroad	Value (U.S. \$)
1920	52	11,033,037
1921	54	5,038,000
1922	66	2,436,000
1924	75	1,192,000
1925	66	2,200,000
1926	60	3,111,000
1927	57	4,925,000
1928	46	9,431,000
1929	48	9,795,000
1930	53	4,920,000
1931	59	2,236,000
1932	64	1,262,000
1933	61	1,696,000
1934	52	3,578,000
1935	57	2,985,000
1936	56	3,358,000
1937	47	6,938,000
1938	48	6,283,000
1939	50	6,233,000
1940	56	4,883,000

Figure 1 American Investment in Romania (1920-1940)

Source: Our World Trade; *Value and Volume of Principal Exports and Imports between United States and Chief Foreign Markets*. (Washington, D.C.: Foreign Commerce Department, Chamber of Commerce of the United States) (1920-1940).

¹⁵ “Semnalul”, July 17, 1938. Clearing system - banking system that required all transactions to be completed, including financial proof for covering the transaction. Romania traded with Great Britain or Germany without final payment, in the account/credit of its cereal exports in these countries.

Figure 1 shows American investments in Romania during the period under study as well as the value of imports from the United States and their percentage. Although, the American imports in Romania seemed to be insignificant, it is important to keep in mind that most of the companies opened local branches under the umbrella of anonymous national societies and the statistics do not record indirect investments. Claiming to be a Romanian company was also an economic decision to avoid import taxes or other type of taxation. To put this into perspective in 1921 “Rumanian imports from the United States were less than those of Guatemala or Switzerland but greater than those of Costa Rica or Salvador. They were about one-sixth of the Greek imports from the United States”¹⁶.

The Census of American American-Owned Assets in Foreign Countries seems to portray a more accurate picture of American involvement in Romania also because was drawn based on companies’ and individuals’ claims. The census also took into account the fact that Romania and the United States were enemies during the war.

Country	Corporations			Other United States Persons			Total	
	Number reporting	Primary allied organizations ¹⁷	Secondary allied organizations ¹⁸	Number reporting	Primary allied organizations	Secondary allied organizations	Number reporting	Foreign enterprises
Romania	22	22	13	68	86	16	90	137

Figure 2 Number of United States corporations and other persons reporting interests in controlled enterprises abroad as May 31, 1943

Source: *Census of American American-Owned Assets in Foreign Countries*. Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1947, 75.

Several key American products dominated the Romanian market: agricultural machines and iron pipes, cars and trucks, movies, telephones and radios, pharmaceutical products, hygienic products (powders, dental products, razors, toilet paper), movies, tires and automobile related products, household appliances (refrigerators, stoves, irons), typewriters and office furniture, meat packing, electrical power, and petroleum products. American consumerism increased because of increasing access to goods. Alexandre Adams, a British representative in Romania, noted:

“During the year [i.e. 1919], American commercial travelers invaded Roumania in fairly considerable numbers, and their efforts were directed to the sale of what may be called distinctively American goods, such as thread and half-silk stockings and socks, American shaped boots and shoes, typewriters, shaving soaps, and

¹⁶ *Rumania. An Economic Handbook*, Washington D.C., Government Printing Office, 1924, p. 146.

¹⁷ Primary Allied Organizations were organizations of whose voting stock of 25 or more was reported as owned by one person or by an affiliated group of persons in the United States, directly controlled in this country.

¹⁸ Secondary Allied Organizations were organizations allied through primary allied organizations.

American toilet articles. [...] Some hundreds of tons of ironware, screws, tin and galvanized sheeting, nails, and wire, came from America, but this appeared to come all in one shipment, and although possibly the precursor of others, it may prove, with the revival of interest in this market taken by British houses to be an isolated instance. Caustic soda, oxide of zinc, and other chemicals, as well as a small quantity of ordinary soap also arrived from the U.S.

Where American competition is likely to be keenest in the future, as the past, is in those ‘standardised’ manufactures which form the basis of her export trade-to-day, such as harvesting, machinery, mowers, and reapers, &c., sewing machines, type-writers, adding machines, cash registers, motor cars and motor tractors”¹⁹.

For American consumption in Romania as well as Eastern Europe in general, the local branch of Standard Oil – Româno-Americana, the first local branch of an American company opened in Romania, in 1904 – contributed significantly in promoting American business and consumption in Romania. Standard Oil - Româno-Americana was the most important oil company and held important investments in other Romanian industries. Moreover, they blocked Romanian competition. The company also operated only through American companies. For example, J. W. Thompson created their advertising in Romania or Româno-Americana produced gas, oil necessary for American cars:

“The Romano-Americana has been a large factor in the support of American industry throughout southeastern Europe. (It operates only through American firms). With its own production, it forms a most valuable support to assist in the sale of American products in countries bordering the Danube. In order to sustain a profitable business in the sale of American products, we are delivering Roumanian products to these countries to meet competition from other Roumanian companies enabling the United States firms to hold the trade to which they are also suppliers of U.S. products”²⁰.

Buying the American Dream?

Cultural consumerism informed economic consumerism. Reading American literature, dime novels and trivial literature, watching American movies, being

¹⁹ Alexandre Adams, *Report on Economic Conditions and Prospects of Roumania at the close of the year 1919*, London, His Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1920, p. 30 - 31.

²⁰ *Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Romania, 1910 – 1940*, Reel 18, 871.631/6, September 13, 1928.

exposed to American advertising through newspapers and journals²¹ fostered new mentalities and new interest in adopting the American way of life. They contributed to the diffusion of American goods as well as the American lifestyle. From the beginning, it was apparent that American goods might have reached and become a part of the standard of living of specific social groups.

During the interwar period, inequalities in wealth and education as well as rural-urban distinctions characterized Romanian society. In 1930, Romania had a population of 18,052,900 people, of which 14,420,700 (79.9%) lived in rural areas, and only 3,632,200 (20.1%) lived in urban areas. Illiteracy was also high, reaching 57 % of the population²². In 1930, 75 % of the urban population was literate, while only 50 % of the rural population was. According to the census of 1930 in Bucharest, there was only 10% illiteracy, yet the farther one went from downtown Bucharest the rate of illiteracy climbed. Nonetheless, Romania was overwhelmingly an agricultural country: 78.2% were farmers, 7.2% worked in industry, and 3.2% worked in commerce and credits, 1.7% in transports and 9.7% other categories²³. In this respect, this study argues that although advertising reached a significant percentage of the population, the income and social status imposed limitations on consumers' choices.

In 1924, the Department of Commerce evaluated Romanian buyers, concluding that there was a developed consumer culture mainly among the upper classes. Peasants and rural consumers remained marginal because of poverty and their limited access to goods. Of course, this does not imply that peasants did not consume, rather that the American goods would not have been accessible to all peasants. Beside agricultural machinery, which was of main importance, both apparel and food consumption increased²⁴. Yet, out of the rural credit extended to peasants²⁵ by popular banks, the main credits received were for buying agricultural machinery and land, for improving productivity, and rarely for consumption²⁶. Alexander Adams noted:

“While the upper classes of Rumania – the city population and the landed proprietors (survivors of the more aristocratic regime) – are as a rule, highly educated, speaking several languages (nearly always French) and priding themselves on their assimilation of Western culture, the average subject of the Old Kingdom is

²¹ Newspapers such as “Universul” sold 130,000 copies daily, “Timpul” 80,000, “Semnalul” 40 – 50,000 copies, “Curierul” 10 – 15,000, “Dreptatea” 4 – 8,000 daily. Most of the newspapers had at least 3-4 pages with advertising.

²² Statistics from *Enciclopedia României* (Encyclopedia of Romania), vol. I and IV.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ Alexander Adams. *Report on Economic Conditions in Roumania*, London, His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1922, p. 40.

²⁵ According to D. Șandru, *Creditul Agricol în România (1918 – 1944)*, București, Editura Academiei R.S.R., 1985, p. 51. In 1930 there was one rural credit institution to 3,441 inhabitants. Moreover, in the same year, they loaned to peasants an amount mounting to 6,562,074,000 lei. Peasants could have received short term credits up to a year, and only rarely a medium term credit for 4 to 5 years. At the same time, the maximum amount that a peasant could have borrowed was set at 20,000 lei.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 171.

uneducated and poor. Today the Rumanian peasant, particularly in the Old Kingdom, lives under very primitive conditions. His wants are comparatively few and simple. The upper classes, on the other hand, are fond of good living, of Western luxuries (particularly French), and it may be said, are “good spenders.” They are a pleasure-loving people and fond of social life. The upper classes in Rumania are only now losing the idea that trading is not honorable”²⁷.

Testifying to the importance of status – consumption within Romanian society, this quotation touches upon the patterns of consumption. Issues such as taste and appearance were crucial for Romanian consumers. The meanings that goods carried and the preoccupation with creating and maintaining status seem to be more important for them. The other side of the story might imply that Romanian consumers were uneducated and easily manipulated by appearance.

“The Rumanian buying public likes merchandise that looks well, and is usually prepared to forego at least some quality for the sake of appearance. It is the appeal to the eye that succeeds. Of course, cheap, flashy goods will not hold the market in Rumania any more than they will in any other country of intelligent people. It may be truthfully said, however that the Rumanians generally prefer to purchase a good looking article even if, for a comparatively small addition in price, they can secure one of more durable quality but of less striking appearance”²⁸.

In a different context – J. N. Dimitrescu, director general of commerce, who tried to justify Romanian commercial policy, especially luxury taxes, also focused on consumers and consumption patterns. Unlike his American counterparts, Dimitrescu pointed out the negative effects of irrational consumption on the state:

“[...] Inflation creates a new power of purchase by the abuse of private credit, or as is chiefly the case, of the state’s credit. [...] The incomes of the profiteers being spent in buying fancy goods from abroad, a fact which leads to increase of the passive side of the payments balance, makes it easy to explain at the same time, the struggle against fancy goods, whose use seemed to defy both the thriftiness of the middle class of employees, of those with small means and pensioners, as well as the working class, and more especially the unemployed. The object of the luxury taxes was, on the one part to check the continual fall of the rate of exchange, and on the other part to put a stop to the thirst after luxury of the social classes

²⁷ *Rumania. An Economic Handbook*, Washington D.C., Government Printing Office, 1924, p. 157.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 160-161.

who despite of the trials through which the country was suffering displayed the most extravagant luxury”²⁹.

Dimitrescu’s evaluation describes consumption, consumers, divisions along class lines, and values associated with consumer culture in interwar Romania. This text might also suggest new patterns of consumption and a new understanding of standard of living in Romania, which faced opposition. At the same time, he implied that “buying foreign goods” was against the “national interest”. It was unpatriotic and immoral. The consumption of foreign goods was associated with luxury. Conspicuous consumption carried negative connotations, a challenge to morality as well as lack of commitment to the country and domestic economy. Consumption meant a search for status and definitely a search for identity in the case of “nouveau riches”. Indulging in “extravagant luxury” was a threat both to national and social well being. Dimitrescu castigated elites, the landed aristocracy and nouveau riches, while praising middle class thriftiness. There were also obvious distinctions within the middle class that Dimitrescu accentuated. In Romania, middle class development followed a distinctive road. This raised discussions about “the absence of a middle class in Romania” from a Western perspective³⁰. Nonetheless, a middle class existed in Romania formed by industrialists, state employees, merchants, clerical functionaries, intellectuals, white-collar and skilled workers, and a small well-to-do peasantry. According to Irina Livezeanu, “the nonagricultural population was much more oriented toward the white-collar than toward the blue-collar industrial sector, a fact that, along with others, suggests an important lower middle class”³¹. Differences between the lower middle class and workers blurred because income issues and consumption was available to emphasize social status.

As elsewhere in Europe, American movies had a great impact in Romania. Going to the movies was one of the most important forms of entertainment because it was relatively cheap and accessible. In 1926, there were 564 theatres in Romania and 26 were in Bucharest. Their capacity varied from 350 to 1700 seats³². The number of showings given daily was in general limited to four, from 3 to 12 in the evening. The average length of a show was 2 – 2.5 hours and the program was usually 6 – 8 drama act, followed by a two-act comedy. Prices in the better theaters of the capital ranged from 20 cents to 25 cents for orchestra seats, 25 to 50 cents for the balcony; soldiers, students, and children received a reduction of about 25%. In the cities, theaters were open daily, while in the small towns only 2-3 times per week. The program was also shorter from 3 or 4 to 7 o’clock. The prices were lower in small cities, varying from

²⁹ J. N. Dimitrescu, *The Commercial Policy of Roumania during the Period after the War, (1919 – 1926)*, in *The Economical Situation and Organization of Roumania in 1926, 1927*, p. 122.

³⁰ Irina Livezeanu, *Between State and Nation: Romania Lower-Middle-Class Intellectuals in the Interwar Period*, in Rudy Koshar, *Splintered Classes. Politics and the Lower Middle Classes in Interwar Europe*, New York & London, Holmes & Meier, 1990, p. 165.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 169.

³² *Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Romania, 1910 – 1940*, Reel 28, 871.4061/3, May 31, 1930.

15 to 20 cents for the balcony seats, 7 to 10 cents for the cheaper seats³³. Comparing these prices to working class wages, which ranged from 800 lei per month for a cook to 12,000 to 58,400 lei for drillers, or some middle class members' wages, which ranged from a high of 17,000 lei for a professor to low of 8,500 lei for a teacher, the popularity of the movies was explainable. Nonetheless, the urban population might have had an easier access due to proximity, the ratio of income to price, and the level of education. To take an example, Anastase Nasta saw one of his first movies in 1927, when he came for the first time in Bucharest from a remote village from Dobrogea:

“In the afternoon, I wandered on Calea Griviței up to the crossroad with Buzești Street: hotels, small buildings, with noisy commercials, and the movie theaters Marna [one of the largest theaters in Bucharest with 1500 seats] and Buzești. There I watched one of the first movies in my entire life, with Ramon Navarro, a well-known star of that period; I clearly remember his smooth swimming style in a sea bluer than Mediterranean Sea. Eh, he resembled a water nymph, and he made a terrible impression”³⁴.

In 1926 up to 50% of the movies played in Bucharest were American, followed by French films with 20 to 30%, and German movies up to 20%. In 1928, Romania occupied the eighth position globally in consuming American movies and 75 % of the movies shown were American³⁵. Major Hollywood studios like Metro-Goldwin Mayer, Paramount, Warner Brothers, and Twentieth Century Fox had branches and representatives in the country. Numerous newspapers (“Cinema”, “Filmul”, “Rampa”, “Universul”, “Revista Metro-Goldwyn” etc.) promoted movies through advertising, presented daily schedules of movie theaters, and dedicated a significant number of articles to movies and Hollywood stars.

The attendance at *Gold Rush* shown at the “Boulevard Palace” with a capacity of 495 seats seems an example of the success of American movies. The receipts from April 23 were 72,800 lei, the 24th 61,000 lei, 25th, 63,000 lei, on the 26th 35,400 lei, and on the 27th 35,600 lei, making a total of 267,800 lei, out of which 15,000 lei were for advertising expenses³⁶. In another example, the movie theater “Corso”, specializing in sensationals, used to make with such a film a total gross per week of lei 80,000³⁷. Furthermore, in less than three years between 1934 and 1937, four new cinemas opened on Bd. Brătianu in Bucharest and they imported more than

³³ *Records ...*, Reel 7, 871.4061/3A, 1926.

³⁴ Cafeaua trebuie să fie fierbinte și cu caimac (Anastase Nasta, 1912-1996), interview by Zoltan Rostas,; available from http://www.memoria.ro/?id=808&location=view_article&page=3; internet; accessed March 18, 2008.

³⁵ Ion Stanciu, *Relații comerciale româno-americane în perioada interbelică*, in “Revista de Istorie”, tome 34 (nr. 1, January 1981), p. 120.

³⁶ *Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Romania, 1910 – 1940*, Reel 7, 871.4061/3A, 1926.

³⁷ *Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Romania, 1910 – 1940*, Reel 28, 871.4016/19, May 18, 1938.

400 American movies. In 1938, an American official remarked “the Rumanian public has shown a decided preference for American films”³⁸. However, the introduction of sound movies was slow, having begun only in 1929/1930. It created a momentum for American business because most sound film equipment was American. J. Rives Childs, American representative in Bucharest, broke down sound film equipment based on the provenance: American 22 (13 Western Electric, 5 Moviephone, 3 Biophone, 1 Pacent), German 6, French 2, Austrian 2, Hungarian 1³⁹.

American movies were part of everyday life of Romanians during the interwar period, appealing to Romanians and presenting dreams and new lifestyles. According to Octav Șuluțiu, a Romanian writer, “starting a while ago I go regularly to the cinema. I spent money in order to live 2-3 hours in a dream world, an ideal world, where I would like to be”⁴⁰. The latest cars, household appliances, but also the latest model of beauty, fashion, and hairstyle reached the Romanian public. American comedies, musicals, and sensationals enjoyed great popularity. According to American sources, not all movies were well received or understood by Romanians:

“Romanian taste in movies is much the same as the French, pictures with an historical background or modern dramas with a European setting, while of an entirely different character, apparently sharing first place in popularity with such major productions in the field of comedy-drama as those featuring Douglas Fairbanks and Charles Chaplin. Modern American dramas giving an exaggerated idea of life in the large cities of the United States today, though appearing in large numbers, are neither well understood nor appreciated by the Romanian public. American comedies are preferred above all, though during the past year, two Swedish actors known on the screen as “Pat” and “Patachon” seem to have attained a fair degree of popularity among the Romanian theatre goers”⁴¹.

The journal of the art critic Petre Comarnescu offers telling insights about American movies and their impact: “Ah! The American movies have too much influence and give ideas and ridiculous if not tragic roles to crazy people such as Gina [i.e. his wife]. The feuilletons/serial novels did not exercise such a harmful influence as the movies, especially Hollywood movies. They always uncover fatal women, vamps, ham actors, which befuddle the people who want to be interesting and eager for compliments”⁴². Furthermore, he considered going to movie a bourgeois activity, taking too much from intellectual activities: “I see too many movies, because I have to accompany Gina who hardly reads, and does not think thoroughly. She doesn’t

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ *Records...*, Reel 28, 871.4061/3, May 31, 1930.

⁴⁰ Octav Șuluțiu, *Jurnal*. Cluj, Editura Dacia, 1975, p. 83.

⁴¹ *Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Romania, 1910 – 1940*, Reel 7, 871.4061/3A, 1926.

⁴² Petre Comarnescu, *Jurnal (1931 – 1937)*, Iași, Institutul European, 1994, p. 120.

pretend anymore to be an intellectual and she would rather watch movies like any bourgeois woman”⁴³. However, Comarnescu exaggerates his marital frustrations. Movies, more than any form of entertainment cut across class, gender, regional, and generational divisions. Numerous other journals of the elites as well as King Charles II’s journal detailed the fascination with American movies. The king wrote about the American movies that he saw every night with his consort, Magda Lupescu and his son, Mihai. Comarnescu himself also had numerous other entries about movies he saw and his opinion about them. For example, he disliked *The Connecticut Yankee* with Will Rogers but he was impressed with *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* ⁴⁴.

Petre Comarnescu was also sensitive to changes in the ideal of beauty, fashion, hairstyle brought by American movies: “Gina⁴⁵ colored her hair blonde. She looks like an American movie star, people turned their heads to look at her”⁴⁶ or “Gina in a black taffeta dress, her blonde hair colored violet, with orchids at corsage - she created a stir like a cinema star”⁴⁷. Numerous commercials using imagery dominated by Hollywood stars or scenes covered newspapers pages. Moreover, “Realitatea Ilustrată” launched a contest to find a Romanian beauty that fit the profile of Mae West.

In her journal, the director Jeni Acterian documents American movies’ reception in interwar Romania. Almost each page of her journal has at least one entry about the movies she saw. On 5 November 1937 she “entered at Aro, where was playing an American comedy. Dance, luxury, and music, as the ad said”⁴⁸. On October 1st, 1938 “we went to Carlton, a very good American movie (humor). Big crowd in the movie theater. I saw Mariana Klein, Nistor who desperately mimicked yawning. Actually, I do not understand why it was boring because the movie was very good. Americans have a technique that never fails”⁴⁹. She also carefully recorded the political changes limiting American movies. Before 1940, all movies she saw were American and very few French ones, but starting then, she saw more German movies as a result of new restrictions. In 1940 Romania became Nazi Germany’s ally. Therefore, Nazi Germany started to play a central political, economic, and cultural role in Romania. On 21 December 1940, Jeni Acterian noted “We went to an American movie that I saw 4-5 years ago. Good movies are very rare now that you rather see an old one”⁵⁰. In 1941, the number of American movies was reduced even more. Moreover, in 1942, Ministry of Propaganda - Section Cinema banned an important number of American actors such as Norma Shearer, The Marx brothers, Robert Taylor, Bette Davis, James Cagney, Paul Muni, and James Stewart because they criticized Nazi Germany. This was an indirect restriction against importing and

⁴³ *Ibidem.*, p. 122.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 30, 50.

⁴⁵ Gina Manolescu Strunga, his wife (also Gina Cocea).

⁴⁶ Petre Comarnescu. *Jurnal ...*, p.125.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 123.

⁴⁸ Jeni Acterian, *Jurnalul unei fințe greu de mulțumit, 1932 – 1949*, București, Editura Humanitas, 1991, p. 183.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 235.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 332.

showing American movies because the banned actors were among the most popular in Romania⁵¹. American literature faced the same types of attacks during the war. For example, an article in “The Bukarest Tageblatt” “attacked the readers of “fashionable novels”:

“This fashion of reading English and American novels, which are not worth even mentioning, has spread among people who have nothing interesting in their lives and are merely attracted by the fact that it is forbidden. English and American is a mixture of superficiality and shallowness, which gives us a sensation of emptiness. It is really a pity to spend precious time reading such nonsense, when German literature offers good and profound works”⁵².

Acterian also read American literature both in English and in French translation: “Muni and Lucica convinced me to take *Gone with the Wind*, Margaret Mitchell. I also read last night 100 pages. [...] In the morning I continued reading the passionate novel...”⁵³. Besides reading American literature, romance novels, and self-help books, numerous conferences that presented different aspects of American life were a daily activity at least in Bucharest and other big cities such as Cluj, Timișoara Iași, and Constanța. They ranged from conferences about the Romanian community in the United States and American culture, feminist activity in the United States, recollections of study or leisure trips in the United States, to M. N. Constantinescu’s set of conferences. M. N. Constantinescu, a mining engineer from Bucharest, after spending several months in the United States, which “made a deep impression upon him”, wanted to talk about his experiences, illustrated with 4,000 feet of film of American industries and scenery⁵⁴. He was definitely not an exception. N. Iorga (1875-1940), a well-known Romanian historian, N. Lupu, member of National Peasants’ Party, Alexandrina Cantacuzino, founder of the feminist movement in Romania, and Petre Comarnescu wrote numerous articles in daily newspapers or literary publications. Vintilă Brătianu spoke with enthusiasm about Henry Ford’s book *My Life and Work*, adding that he already ordered 50 copies in order to share with his subordinates⁵⁵. Thus, Fordism was well known and admired before the opening of Ford’s local branch. It was also common for the Romanian upper class to subscribe to important newspapers such as the *New York Times*. For students or other persons interested in reading the latest news, the American Institute as well as the main libraries in Bucharest and other big cities, would have provided them.

Romanians also adopted the Charleston and jazz, but not without ambivalence. Almost every Romanian memoir of the period mentioned listening to

⁵¹ Bogdan Barbu, *Vin Americanii! Prezența simbolică a Statelor Unite în România războiului rece, 1945-1971*, București, Editura Humanitas, 2006, p. 255.

⁵² “Bukarest Tageblatt”, December 12, 1943, p. 1.

⁵³ Jeni Acterian, *Jurnalul unei ființe...*, p. 305-306.

⁵⁴ *Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Romania, 1910 – 1940*, Reel 7, 871.4016/-, April 5, 1921.

⁵⁵ I.G. Duca, *Cronica unui român în veacul XX*, vol. 1, Munchen, Ion-Dumitru Verlag, 1985, p. 173.

jazz on radio or the gramophone, many of them American appliances. Petru Comarnescu also mentioned jazz's success in Balcic, a fashionable seaside resort for intellectuals, Romanian elites and the royal house: "I listened to jazz - hot, which was very successful last summer in Balcic"⁵⁶. I. G. Duca, the son of liberal minister I. Duca and close friend of Princess Ileana, "learned jazz, the trendy dance..."⁵⁷. On 27 November 1926, he also celebrated his coming of age with "a *Charleston Party* in order to be fashionable. The party was compared with an African village party. I invited 10 girls and 9 boys, I impose on them to wear a suit that we thought to be characteristic of the black people in the United States [...] I think that for a long time people were speaking about the party celebrating my 21 years on the devilish rhythms of the transoceanic jazz"⁵⁸.

Newspapers also published articles about jazz, the Charleston, and fox - trot. Both jazz and the Charleston became widely accepted by young people. There were numerous dance clubs, which specialized in Charleston and fox-trot and magazines such as "Saison - Revistă de modă și artă modern", which was full of ads for that kind of places⁵⁹. In the newspapers, one could have also found articles, which presented jazz and Charleston as the manifestation of an inferior culture, accompanied of racial comments as well as "negrophilia imagery". To take an example, in "Dimineața", on 14 February 1927, an article *Against Charleston*, discussed the Charleston's appeal as well as the reasons to ban it: "The Charleston dance should be banned because it is unaesthetic, eccentric, and against social morals"⁶⁰. Furthermore, the Charleston was compared with a disease that "spread" and "contaminated": "[...] This voluntary epilepsy propagated like an epidemic. The Charleston contaminated all social classes, all ages"⁶¹. In a provincial newspaper, the Charleston was also presented as an "immoral black dance that American law used to ban"⁶². Yet, the Charleston became one of the most popular dances. In 1926, the Club of Nonprofessional Dancers from Bucharest hired the jazz band from Alcazar, a very popular club in interwar Bucharest, thus the Charleston became funnier on a trombone that was similar in size to the well-known clock of San Marco. Most important, one could have danced without an annoying crowding in an elegant room, cheered up with Occidental jazz⁶³. To prove its popularity as well as the ways in which jazz was appropriated, "in the period there were numerous Romanian bands that reproduced transoceanic popular refrains"⁶⁴. Among the plethora of announcements, articles spoke also about the atmosphere: "at

⁵⁶ Petre Comarnescu. *Jurnal* ..., p. 126.

⁵⁷ I.G. Duca. *Cronica unui român în veacul XX*, vol. 1, p. 94.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 198.

⁵⁹ Bogdan Barbu, *Vin Americanii! Prezența simbolică a Statelor Unite în România războiului rece, 1945 – 1971*, p. 282.

⁶⁰ "Dimineața", February 14, 1927, p. 7.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

⁶² Bogdan Barbu. *Vin Americanii!*..., p. 282.

⁶³ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

Melody one listened to jazz, drank whiskey and July and Jack, and danced in a Yankee atmosphere”⁶⁵.

Both the use of radio and gramophones increased also because of the success of jazz and the Charleston. Their appeal helped Columbia’s sales in Romania. In 19 December 1931, Columbia Graphophone Company opened its local branch in Bucharest, later followed by others in Cluj, Cernăuți, and Timișoara. It sold the records of Columbia, His Masters Voice, and Marconiphone. Its branch in Timișoara used to play songs on the streets for advertising⁶⁶.

Radio was probably the most popular household appliance in the interwar period. Radios were one of the most important means of communication as well as entertainment and news dissemination. *Commerce Reports* detailed the Romanians’ use of American radios as well as who would have been the main buyers:

“Rumania is believed to offer a fair market for the sale of radio sets and equipment among the 3 to 4 million people who dwell in the more thickly inhabited districts. Potential users of radio are generally limited to the urban population, among whom the market for luxury articles is well developed. The trade in radio sets and equipment has been confined largely to Bucharest, the capital commercial and financial center of the country, but the establishment of a local broadcasting station and the gradual elimination of high import duties on radio apparatus and equipment, and the modification of restriction imposed by law on obtaining permits for the installation of receiving sets should stimulate sales of radio equipment considerably in all cities”⁶⁷.

Advertising lured the buyers with the quality of radios, but at the same time, they revealed Romanians’ habit of listening to foreign radio stations and American shows.

The press published also numerous articles about radios, about the models available on the market and their prices. “Finanțe și Industrie” compared radio sales before the winter holidays in 1934 and 1936, commenting that the prices rose for both foreign and Romanian brands up to 25-30% from one year to the other. The most popular brands were Turning, Standard, R.C.A., Lumphon, and Orion. Moreover, the method of payment through monthly installments dominate⁶⁸. The sales of American radios in Romania mounted to \$ 60,000 until 1937, while only in 1938 reached to \$ 60,000. In 1929, 40% of radios imported in Romania came from the United States because of their better quality⁶⁹. In 1937, for example, 28,218 radios worth

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 283.

⁶⁶ Arhivele Naționale ale României, fond *Directia Generala a Politiei*, Ds. 65/1938 – 1939, May 31, 1938. f. 1.

⁶⁷ Arhivele Ministerului Afacerilor Externe (AMAE), vol. 140, February 25, 1929, f. 495.

⁶⁸ “Finanțe și Industrie”, January 5, 1936, p. 21.

⁶⁹ AMAE, vol. 140, February 25, 1929, f. 495.

13,860,000 lei were imported from U.S. In 1938 the number decreased to 6,828 valued 2,609,000 lei⁷⁰. Radios as well as other American products reached mainly the urban population, not only because of their prices, but also because of the high cost of taxes and permits that a radio owner had to pay. Each radio had to be stamped and approved by The Direcția Generală a Poștelor, Telefonului și Telegrafului (roughly translated as Romanian Postal Services). The owner had to obtain a special permit as well as to pay an after-tax of 0,625\$ to 1, 75\$ as well as an annual tax⁷¹. In October 1928, the Romanian Postal Services issued 10,074 permits, but the Romanian Police also suggested that unauthorized radios were also a common practice.

Cars remained one of the most, if not the most, important American goods in interwar Romania. Figure 8 demonstrates this domination. It shows the number of cars on the Romanian market as well the number of American cars and their percentage.

	American cars	Percentage	Total number of cars in Romania
1925	3,974	33.89%	11,725
1926	7,825	49.23%	15,895
1927	12,716	58.25%	21,832
1928	19,730	62.71%	31,365
1929	26,836	70.79%	37,901
1930	27,343	70.47%	38,814
1931	26,623	72.12%	36,953
1932	24,274	71.80%	33,904
1933	24,277	72.20%	33,586
1934	25,211	72.90%	34,590
1935	26,620	73.40%	36,286
1936	26,685	72.70%	36,713
1937	28,193	71.45%	39,453
1938	28,850	70.05%	41,180

Figure 3 Cars in Romania (1925-1938)

Source: *Anuarul Statistic al României 1934*. București, Tipografia Curții Regale F. Göbl Fii, 1935; *Anuarul Statistic al României 1939 & 1940*. București, M.O. Imprimeria Națională, 1940.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*.

Country	One automobile for:	Population
United States	5	126.000.000
France	22	42.000.000
England	23	47.000.000
Sweden	41	6.000.000
Switzerland	46	4.000.000
Belgium	51	8.000.000
Holland	57	8.000.000
Germany	68	67.000.000
Italy	109	41.000.000
Czechoslovakia	126	15.000.000
Romania	796 inhabitants	19.000.000

Figure 4 The ratio car to inhabitants during interwar period

Source: *Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Romania, 1910 – 1940*, Reel 34, 871.631/125, June 25, 1936. Other American sources point out that Romania had in 1926 the most cars in South Eastern Europe (16,300), followed by Turkey with 11,222.

Figure 4 sketches the ratio car to inhabitants in Romania compared with several other countries. This chart also confirms the limitations of American consumption in interwar Romania. Despite the cars' undoubted appeal, the desires, and dreams embodied in car advertising or American goods in general, the buying power or the lack of it intervened. Yet car advertising was particularly rich in Romanian newspapers: most of the ads targeted wealthy families, fashionable elite, industrialists, and farmers. They emphasized speed, modernity, progress, and comfort, but also savings in gas consumption and prices, and their look. Ads flaunted superlatives such as "the best ever made", "the safety it brought", "supremacy on the market" of a model or another, or "the value is bigger than the price."

Romanians considered Ford as the most representative car and sales confirmed that. For example, in the first six months of 1935, 1,286 cars were sold in Romania: 449 were manufactured by Ford; in 1937, 562 Ford vehicles were sold compared to Plymouth's 140, Opel's 175, and Mercedes's 99⁷². There was considerable demand for Ford and Chevrolet trucks⁷³. Other brands such as the Buick and Oldsmobile were too expensive compared to their competition. Their selling price was 310.000 lei while other cars had even lower prices that further competed with Ford: "Nash 260.000 lei, Essex 210.000 lei, Dodge 290.000 lei, Pontiac 260.000 lei, Erskine 260,000 lei. These prices are based on a profit of about 20% [...] If we could reduce our prices by 20,000 lei our sales would be materially increased. The rate of

⁷² Statistics from *Motor*, 1935 – 1937.

⁷³ Arhivele Municipiului București (AMB), *Noel S.A.R.*, Ds. 24/1929, April 8, 1929, f. 135.

interest charged to our customers on installment payments is 18%”⁷⁴. In any case, the Romanian market in automobiles increased from 1926 to 1927 by 1076%, 50% more in 1928 than 1927.⁷⁵ Ninety-three percent of agricultural machinery, 90 % of trucks, 85 % of buses, 80 % of tractors, and ambulances were American made. Car related products such as tires, gas, and spare parts were American.

Owning a car came meant acquiring status. However, an American car was not for everybody. It came with other important costs: numerous taxes as well as high maintenance costs. In Romania, owners had to pay 3,000 lei/year (\$18.75) for automotive vehicles weight up to 1,000 kg or 5000 lei (\$31.25) for those weighing from 1,000 to 1,200 Kg, and 10,000 lei (\$62.50) for vehicles weighing more than 1,500 kg (exception, plying for hire, trucks, and tank cars). License and turnover added to the tax burden. Gas prices and spare parts were rather expensive. To take two examples, Cella Delavrancea noted that the reparations for her Lincoln, flat tire and horn cost 3,900 lei, a full tank and high speed liquid another 1,000 lei”⁷⁶. To take another example, I. Vasiliu bought spare parts for his Chevrolet worth 7,500 lei⁷⁷. Therefore, the main buyers were upper and middle class. It seems plausible that the lower middle class, taxi drivers, and wealthy peasants could have access to American cars through the used car market and through monthly installments. Between 1936 and 1940, an investigation in Ploiești and Moreni of 70 families with 2-3 children concluded that there were 3 different income groups – those earning 4,000-5,500 lei, 7,000 to 11,000 lei (semi-skilled workers and clerks), 12,000-15,000 lei (skilled workers and higher grade personnel, highly paid personnel, which were a small minority) – were better off than rural population⁷⁸. In Romanian realities, the third group belongs to the lower middle class along with state employees, clerks, and rural intellectuals (teachers and priests). According to Romanian sales statistics, 75 % of car sales were on credit – out of those only 15% sales were without registration⁷⁹ and only 25 % with payment delivery⁸⁰.

Other products such as telephones, typewriters, pencils, Singer sewing machines, Kodak cameras, toothpaste (Colgate), cosmetics (Elizabeth Arden, Pond’s) were also successful. Occasional entries in journals discuss the ownership of a Kodak camera for Jeni Acterian, and an Underwood typewriter for Virgil Gheorghiu, Flit for Cella Delavrancea, or Elizabeth Arden cosmetics for Magda Lupescu. In 1930, Romania imported 1,359 American typewriters, but only 922 American typewriters in

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, f. 140.

⁷⁵ Ion Stanciu, *Relații comerciale româno-americane în perioada interbelică*, in “Revista de Istorie”, tomul 34, nr. 1, ianuarie 1981, p. 123.

⁷⁶ Cella Delavrancea, *Scrisori către Filip Lahovary*, București, Editura Jurnalul literar, 1998, p. 147.

⁷⁷ AMB, *Noel S.A.R.*, Ds. 16/1928, December 30, 1929, f. 5.

⁷⁸ *Romanian News Survey*, May 5, 1944, 1, in *Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Romania, 1910 – 1940*, Reel 39.

⁷⁹ During the interwar period, the Romanian state required the registration of sales on credit in a special registry book opened with a high court. The registration was mandatory if the individuals would not show enough proof of stable or sufficient income.

⁸⁰ From the Collections of Ford Motor Co. Archives - Ford Museum and Greenfield Village, Dearbon (MI), Acc. 1790, Box 24.

1937. An article in “Finanțe și Industrie” on 19 January 1936 discussed the lack of typewriters on the market and their high prices:

“Most of the companies which supply the Romanian market, such as Ivanovici (Remington), Illes (Underwood), A.E.G. (Olimpia) continued to make efforts in order to satisfy consumers’ demand. It is also quite interesting that the lack of new models provokes also an increase in old models’ demand. These typewriters, which one could find in important quantities, are also missing today. Furthermore, as most of the typewriters are from the United States, importers have to pay additional taxes as well as an ad-valorem tax of 12%, authorizations of import, plus the exchange rate between dollar and lei”⁸¹.

Household appliances had a slower rate of acceptance in interwar Romania than other American products. Some of the recent literature suggests that leisure appliances and goods in general had higher rates of acceptance than household goods not only because of the price, but also because of low preoccupation and value placed on women’s time⁸². In addition, there were no real alternatives to cars or radios; however there were alternatives to household work, hiring servants. For example, in 1926 only 13 refrigerators were sold at a total price of \$ 2,532, while in 1928, 268 refrigerators were sold at a total price of \$ 51,825. The prices were an important concern, especially for American products because of the exchange rate between the dollar and leu and taxes on imports. The most important providers were Leonida & Co, Sarmat, Electrogaz, and Standard. On 12 April 1936, an article in “Finanțe și Industrie” provided an overview of the main suppliers of refrigerators:

“The last winter was unusually warm, thus in the main cities it was impossible to create ice deposits. One can already feel this shortcoming. However, one of the outcomes of this shortcoming is that there is more demand for electrical refrigerators, both for industrial and commercial purposes. The companies Leonida & Co., representative of Frigidaire, Columbia who sells *Norge* refrigerators, Brown Boveri who sells refrigerators with the same name, Dan, and Ottofrigor, brought significant quantities of electrical refrigerators [...]”⁸³.

⁸¹ “Finanțe și Industrie”, January 19, 1936, p. 72.

⁸² Sue Bowden and Avner Offer, *The Technological Revolution that Never Was. Gender, Class, and the Dufussion of Household Appliances in Interwar England*, in Victora de Grazia, Ellen Furlough (editors), *The Sex of Things. Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, Berkley, University of California Press, 1996, p. 244-246.

⁸³ “Finanțe și Industrie”, April 12, 1936, p. 453.

There was a diversity of stoves and other appliances necessary for household. The prices ranged from 3.500 lei to 12.000 lei. They also promised important savings, as a petroleum stove consumed only 4 liters weekly for a family with 6-7 members. The American way of life, or what Romanians perceived as American, influenced not only the kitchen design and mechanization of housework, but also cooking and serving meals. American cookbooks and new restaurants appeared.

In 1931, “Viitorul” launched a series of articles discussing *bufetul automat*, something akin to contemporary fast-food. The article maintained that places such as *bufetul automat* helped young people to identify themselves as American. Moreover, it raised the problem of modernity and catching-up with the Western world. Consuming American products was a way to refashion one’s identity. It seems that consuming American and acting American was an acceptable alternative. Yet, the article questioned the American lifestyle, placing it in opposition to genuine Romanian cookery”, which reflected also the fears of a different civilization. New lifestyles and identities reflected a generational divide in addition to the common urban - rural divide:

“Lately our capital passes a hurried automatization, at least regarding cooking. The tradition of tasteful and copious food, for which you stood at least three hours before you stand up and which you bedabble with red wine, ten years old or more-, tradition which, if we believe the Moldovian writers, is a kind of genuine Romanian cookery heritage, - it seems to agonize, replaced by the hotdog, eaten at an angle of a table, standing, between a fat gentleman who is fighting with a beer and a high school pupil, **whom he believes is American, because he is drinking an ice cream soda**. These places which determined and maintain this agony become numerous day by day [...] It is like a new *way toward the west* [...]”⁸⁴.

The *automat*’s architecture also raised objections: “colorful, it wants to imitate the form with towers and turrets of a medieval castle, in the window of a suburbs’ sweet-shop. Naughty, because this little monstrosity intermingles under an edifice, which, without being an art monument, not even an important architectural building [i.e. Cercul Militar], represents one of the few points of reference in this town. [...]”⁸⁵.

In the end, the existence of American goods on the market did not guarantee access for everybody. Yet, beside regular sales in the department stores, the market for used goods was an alternative. “Used items could offer an indirect entry to consumer culture, stretch a tight budget to supply comforts not otherwise available,

⁸⁴ “Viitorul”, May 17, 1931, p. 1.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*.

provide both investment and use value, and enhance wage-earning possibilities”⁸⁶. Although primary sources are limited, there are several images, classified ads in newspapers, and advertising to suggest the existence of a used goods market and its widespread use. To take an example, in May 1919, an announcement in “Universul” advertised a used Underwood typewriter for 1,300 lei. In November 1929, Tr. Macedon bought a used car – a Chevrolet from Noel S.A.R. for 70,000 lei, which represented less than one third of the price of a new car⁸⁷.

Conclusions

This study has established the increasing presence of American consumer goods in Romania. It has also suggested some contradictions within Romanian realities that might have affected the way Romanians consumed American manufactured goods. As mentioned before, Romania was mainly a rural country. Studying everyday life among the peasantry is rather difficult because of limited sources. A general understanding however suggests that, with the exception of few well-to-do peasants, the majority had a low standard of living. For example, in 1940, Dr. D.G. Georgescu published a survey based on data collected in 59 villages on 265 families (1440 persons), which argued that malnutrition was a problem.⁸⁸ Peasants’ income is also a matter of debate, but because most owned smallholdings, some of them supplemented their earnings. By studying workers’ wages and monthly income, it is immediately apparent that they could have not afforded most of the American products. There are distinctions to be made among workers also as their income varied greatly. Movies, dance, small goods such as soaps and razors blades might have been part of their universe while cars and household appliances were difficult to acquire.

Skilled Laborers	
Industry	Per Day
Textile	33-120
Transportation and Storage	48
Mining	55-149
Timber and Furniture	56-128
Clothing	64-125
Building	72-168
Metallurgical	80-198
Chemical	83-162
Leather, Fur	96-176
Commercial Enterprises	50-110

⁸⁶ Susan Porter Benson, *What Goes ‘Round Comes ‘Round. Secondhand Clothing, Furniture, and Tools in Working-Class Lives in the Interwar United States*, in “Journal of Women’s History”, vol. 19 (no. 1, Spring 2007), p. 17.

⁸⁷ AMB, *Noel S.A.R.*, Ds. 16/1928, November 12, 1929, f. 10.

⁸⁸ D.G. Georgescu, *L’alimentation de la population rurale en Roumanie*, București, Editura Fundației Regale Carol II, 1940, p. 12.

Industry	Skilled Laborers		Unskilled Laborers	
	Per Day	Per Week	Per Month	Per Day
Textile	26-44			
Clothing	32			
Mining	35-113			31-77
Food	38	300-650		20
Lumber and Furniture	40-104			30-40
Metallurgical	72-138			56-72
Chemical	73-104			42-66
Commercial Enterprises	40-50		400-800	

Industry	Apprentices		Messengers
	Per Day	Per Week	Per Day
Textile	15-35		
Mining	22-40		47-64
Commercial Enterprises		25-50	

Figure 5, 6, 7 Workers' Wages (1933-1935)

Source: *Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Romania, 1910 – 1940, Reel 29.*

Looking at these statistics, income and buying power, access to American goods, literacy and access to information, and changes in the perceptions of living standards, informed and imposed further limitations on American – style consumption. In 1938, there were 716 millionaires, 70,259 persons with an annual income over 100,000 lei, and 304,400 with an income between 20,000 and 40,000 lei yearly. The urban, upper and middle class were thus the target and main consumers of American products. In their attempt to maintain status and to create distinctions between them and the workers as well as to emulate new values, the middle class fueled consumption. Most of the advertising targeted the upper and middle classes, thus ads reflected their own system of beliefs. In the end, taste, simple desire and appeal, concerns with modernity and a new type of household, could also explain consumption.

In many ways, the American goods discussed above demonstrated the complexities of American - style consumption in interwar Romania. Although transnational advertising reached a significant number of the consumers, a significant part of the population remained marginal for American consumption. Nonetheless, the cultural influence went in two different directions. American goods reflected acceptance, adaptation, negotiation, and fascination, but also resistance on cultural grounds. American consumption also embodied “cultural anxieties”. Romanians

shopped for American products in their pursuit of modernity, novelty, status, and identity. They used American products to reinforce their social position. Moreover, status concerns and social control fueled American consumption. At the same time, mundane issues such as taste, desires, and the perceived quality of the products increased consumption. It is also clear that the state policy played a crucial role in regulating imports of foreign goods and the consumption of American goods. The state's interest in promoting national industry emphasized buying "Romanian". Preoccupied with the balance of trade and the exchange rate, the Romanian state discouraged foreign imports, yet it allowed multinational corporations to open local branches under "national" labels. In the end, this study has demonstrated that even though the values and the images associated with the United States were transnational, the Romanian context; that is, class barriers and the national interest as defined by the state limited the spread of American-style consumption.