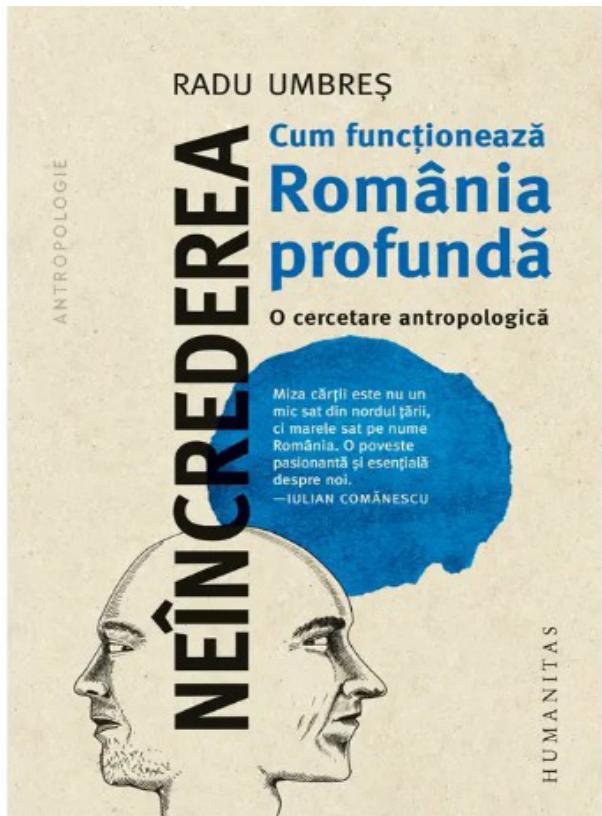


THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF DISTRUST AND CHANGE IN ROMANIA: A REVIEW



Radu Umbreş, Living with Distrust: Morality and Cooperation in a Romanian Village, Oxford University Press 2022 – original edition, (Neîncrederea. Cum funcționează România profundă – o cercetare antropologică, 2024, Humanitas).

Distrust represents a significant issue in Romania. According to the latest instalment of *World Values Survey*, 87.3% of respondents expressed a general state of lack of trust, with 75% reporting skepticism towards the government and 84% towards the parliament (Haerpfer 2022). Meanwhile, trust remains high within familial relationships, with 96% of individuals expressing confidence in their families, and approximately 54% maintain caution

toward their neighbors (Haerpfer 2022). Distrust can be interpreted as a form of security vulnerability, the implications of which may have become evident over the past year and a half.

How does this phenomenon manifest in everyday life and is there a path forward? *Living with Distrust* by Radu Umbreş aims to address exactly these issues. The book presents the findings of an anthropological research, endeavored for Oxford University, and the present review refers to the Romanian translation (Umbreş 2024). The research focuses on a small village in Eastern Moldova in recent years and offers valuable insights for those interested in subjects such as local social interactions, development, politics, but also in national security concerns.

Living with Distrust is narratively structured, unfolding as a story. It begins with an exploration of political life, then delves into deeper social structures and cultural practices of housing, family life and funeral rites, culminating in a discussion of potential resolutions to the challenges presented. The beginning and the ending are antithetical: the former shows the consequences of this lack of trust, while the latter emphasizes pathways toward cooperation. The overall context also plays a crucial role in shaping the analysis.

The village under study is situated in one of the economically disadvantaged regions of Romania. Public services and the effects of state's policies are faulty at best, often harmful and the local population is frequently marginalized. Radu Umbreş points out that there is a notable absence of local solidarity or a shared sense of community among inhabitants, which challenges conventional sociological explanations that attribute trust and cooperation to localist bonds. From the beginning, the book's title – *Living with Distrust* – carries an air of enigma, inviting the reader to explore the roots and manifestations of pervasive mistrust.

The opening sequence shows a fight in a tavern. This way, the reader is introduced to the major factions of *Săteni*, the fictionalized name used for the village. Local leaders have monopolized public positions and strategically deploy resources to reward their followers and to marginalize opponents. *Living with Distrust* shows the tavern functioning as a symbolic and literal stage for the performance of power and prestige. However, the story is not simply about theatricals.

Beyond the broader context of distrust, *Living with Distrust* turns its focus to the family, portrayed as a fundamental social unit. This sphere is characterized by a pragmatic maxim: one should trust one's relatives, but only to a limited extent. The domestic domain was once self-sufficient and although the ideal of familial autonomy persists, the pressure of historical change have significantly eroded many of its foundational conditions. In Umbreş' ethnography, the family is understood less in terms of lineage, and more in terms of behavioral expectations and reciprocal obligations.

Social alliances are often made between familial units. They became kin (*neamuri*) by the once complicated ceremonies of marriage, which were once the product of agreements between families, often centered around the transfer of property. As it happened in many places, these rites have undergone processes of modernization and the tendency of individualization grew in strength, a trend clearly documented in *Living with Distrust*. Even with all these changes, the family remains the main form of trust-creating institution and it still creates rights and obligations, described with humor by Radu Umbreş.

Funerary practices occupy a central place in the social life of *Săteni*. The author shows to the reader the way these rites and practices function like reflections of deep held beliefs and social institutions. The funeral is a moment when private sphere

of the family becomes temporarily open to the broader community, and the rules must be followed with utmost precision, or otherwise, the community takes notice. According to *Living with Distrust*, funerals are also influenced by the relationship of cooperation and conflict developed between the families.

The distribution of trust explains the economy and the politics of the village. This relational pattern aligns with what social scientists have long recognized as “amoral familism”, a concept famously articulated by Edward Bancroft in a famous research dedicated to the South of Italy (Banfield 1958). In this framework, the distrust between the units and the relative trust inside them leads to a pattern of relationships somehow similar to the one from world politics. The author describes in *Living with Distrust* how alliances are made and unmade, the local spirit of community is weak, and the public services and integrity are faulty.

The village appears caught in a self-reinforcing cycle, reminiscent of a *Catch 22*: the pervasive lack of trust hinders cooperation, and limited cooperation further deepens distrust. But there are ways of this vicious circle. The setting can partially be explained by a complex historical legacy of ineffective public policy and social detachment exhibited by Romanian elites, and the trend may change its direction, argues Radu Umbreş. *Living with Distrust* offers the example of a local entrepreneur, Mihai, who manages to transcend prevailing social constraints by useful and predictive work and private initiative.

The analysis presented in *Living with Distrust* is not without ambiguities. It is difficult to write about a group of distrustful people from outside and the Romanian reception of the book reflects this complexity, resembling a system of mirrors and reflections. Radu Umbreş used Thomas Hobbes and Émile Durkheim - figures whose views on authority, order, and social cohesion serve both points of inspiration and critique, and intellectual references (and opposites), but John Locke is closer to his vision and he plays a relatively minor role in the book. The translator of *Living with Distrust*, Iulian Comănescu argues that the book’s ideas can be generalized, but Romania’s social landscape is marked by considerable regional and cultural variation. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of widespread mistrust appears to be a common thread, cutting across these diverse contexts and reinforcing the book’s relevance to broader national debates.

Overall, the research represents a very useful contribution to the study of contemporary Romanian society. The topic is both highly relevant and frequently overlooked in scholarly discourse. Notably, some suggestions can lead to further studies, especially the connection between local social interactions and patterns of emigration. The study is based on a rigorous research activity, corresponding to the best practices available worldwide in the discipline of social anthropology. The arguments presented by the author, who employs a writing style and language both accessible and engaging.

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