

Ion Ionescu de la Brad’s Economic and Social Thinking

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Abstract

Ion Ionescu de la Brad (Roman, June 24 / July 6, 1818 – Brad, December 16/28, 1891) was an agronomist, the founder of the Romanian agronomic education, an 1848 revolutionary, the most important Romanian agricultural economist of the 19th century. Our paper aims at emphasizing the national and original character of his economic thinking, as well as the theoretical and ideological basis of the solutions he suggested for solving the agrarian problem.

Key words: agriculture, property, theory of value, labour, economic liberalism

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1. Introduction

Ion Ionescu, who later took the name Ion Ionescu de la Brad, went to high school in Iași and then he studied at *Academia Mihăileană*, where he had Ion Ghica as his professor of political economy. He went to France to study agricultural science. When he got back in the country, he began teaching the first courses of agriscience (agricultural science) at *Academia Mihăileană* in Iași in 1842. Alongside Bălcescu he was actively involved in the 1848 Revolution and led the committee of deputies appointed to make the peasants owners of the land, committee which was made up of representatives of the peasants and of the boyars. When the Revolution was repressed, he left the country and lived in Turkey until 1856. Upon returning to Moldavia, he held different public positions, and, in 1859, ruler A. I. Cuza put him in charge of organizing the statistics system of the country. Gheorghe Ionescu-Sisești rightfully called him “Romania’s first statistician”. (Ionescu-Sisești, 1966, p. 553)

Even though he came to disagree with A. I. Cuza (he even went to prison!), together with Mihail Kogălniceanu, he appointed him general inspector for agriculture, in charge of putting the 1864 agrarian reform into practice. He was displeased with the measures taken by the government and the abuse generated by enforcing them, and he focused his activity especially on practical agriculture. He organized agricultural exhibitions and contests of agricultural vehicles, he established institutions meant to aid the progress of agriculture (nursery gardens in Giurgiu, Brăila, Iași), national breeding centres and animal farms.

In 1869 he settled in Brad, where he opened *Școala particulară de agricultură* (The Private School of Agriculture) on a model farm (“agricultural orphanage” as he called it), which initially enrolled orphan children. They were raised and educated in “families” with rural households, and that makes us consider Ion Ionescu de la Brad a predecessor of social welfare in Romania. (Stahl, 2001, p. 168)

The Romanian agronomist introduced new plants and varieties of plants and cultivated them on a surface of 140 hectares. He made experiments and rehabilitation calculations and drew lessons for the scientific progress of the agribusiness. At the same time, as a deputy, he was concerned with organizing the agricultural credit for peasants by establishing rural banks (credit cooperatives).

In 1871 he was elected as a corresponding member of the *Societatea Academică Română* (Romanian Academic Society which later became *Academia Română* (the Romanian Academy) “for the beautiful writing activity and for his merits in directing the Romanian agriculture” (Malinschi, 1990, p. 67)

He had excellent knowledge of economics (in Paris he had attended courses taught by Jerome-Adolphe Blanqui, Louis Wolowski and Pellegrino Rossi) and was familiar with the European

economic literature, and he tried to apply the economic theories to the Romanian reality in order to base the 1848 revolutionary economic program on them.

His scientific work, which included 42 books and more than 200 articles (Vasiliu, 1967, p. 215), is a significant contribution to the history of economic thought and social and political thinking in Romania: *Excursion Agricole dans la plaine de Dobroudja* (Agricultural Trip to the Plain of Dobruja) (1850); *De la Thessalie Agricole* (On Agricultural Thessalie) (1851); *Calendar pentru bunul cultivator* (Calendar for the Good Cultivator) (1861); *Agricultura română din județul Dorohoi* (The Romanian Agriculture of Dorohoi County) (1866); *Agricultura română din județul Mehedinți* (The Romanian Agriculture of Mehedinți County) (1868); *Agricultura română din județul Putna* (The Romanian Agriculture of Putna County) (1869); *Creditul ruralu* (Rural Credit) (1876); *Creditul* (Credit) (1880); *Agricultura română de la Bradu* (The Romanian Agriculture of Bradu) (1886).

2. Theoretical background

Ion Ionescu de la Brad's tumultuous life and extensive work have interested many authors (economists, agronomists, historians, sociologists, ethnographers, statisticians, etc.) who wrote many papers on them. The most representative biography is the one written by Gh. Bogdan-Duică, *Viața și opera întâiului țărănist român Ion Ionescu de la Brad* (1818-1891) (The Life and Work of the First Romanian Peasantist Ion Ionescu de la Brad) (1818-1891) (1922), but the one written by Amilcar Vasiliu (*Ion Ionescu de la Brad*, 1967) is also remarkable.

Among the most notable studies, we mention those written by Gh. Ionescu-Sisești (*Viața și opera lui Ion Ionescu de la Brad* (The Life and Work of Ion Ionescu de la Brad (1942) and *Agronomul Ion Ionescu de la Brad* (Ion Ionescu de la Brad, the agronomist) (1955), V. Slăvescu (*Ion Ionescu de la Brad. Profesor de economie politică* (Ion Ionescu de la Brad. Professor of Political Economy) (1859) (Slăvescu also wrote a remarkable foreword for the book he published under the title *Correspondența între Ion Ionescu de la Brad și Ion Ghica* (Correspondence Between Ion Ionescu de la Brad and Ion Ghica (1846-1874), G. Mladenatz (*Ion Ionescu de la Brad și cooperarea* (Ion Ionescu de la Brad and Cooperation) (1941), I. Răducanu (*Ion Ionescu de la Brad – economistul* (Ion Ionescu de la Brad – The Economist) (1941) and Gh. Zane. Academy member V. Malinschi dedicated a special chapter to Ionescu de la Brad in his volume *Economistii la Academia Română. Evocări și restituiri*, vol. I (The Economists at the Romanian Academy. Evocations and Restitutions, Volume I) (1990)

To honour the memory of the great economist and agronomist, two ample volumes of studies were published. The first one, *Ion Ionescu de la Brad. Aniversarea a 150 de ani de la naștere* (Ion Ionescu de la Brad. The 150th Anniversary of His Birth) (1968), includes 32 studies, and the second, *In memoriam Ion Ionescu de la Brad* (1818-1891) (1971) includes 21 studies. Some of their authors are brilliant interpreters of the history of economic thought, such as V. Nechita, M. Todosia or V. Malinschi. Among the most prominent studies are those written by Simion I. Pop *Concepția social-economică și politică a lui Ion Ionescu de la Brad* (Ion Ionescu de la Brad's Social, Economic and Political Views), in the volume titled *Din gândirea economică progresistă românească* (From the Romanian Progressist Economic Thought), published in 1968 and coordinated by N. Ivanciu) and by Academy member Iulian Văcărel *Ion Ionescu de la Brad – Viața și opera* (Ion Ionescu de la Brad – His Life and Work), in the volume titled *Studii de istoria gândirii și practicii economico-financiare* (Studies of the History of Economic and Financial Thought and Practice), published under the aegis of the Romanian Academy in 2008.

3. Research methodology

The research methodology consisted of extensive research of the specialized bibliography. The starting point were the studies written by Ion Ionescu de la Brad from which we have extracted the essential aspects of his economic ideology. This paper is a descriptive study of the solutions proposed by Ion Ionescu de la Brad for the development of the country. Our investigation looked into primary and secondary sources and used analysis, synthesis and the comparative method.

4. Findings

Ion Ionescu de la Brad tackled numerous theoretical economic issues that also had practical meaning: the theory of value, the issue of distribution, the problem of the land property and of the agrarian reform, the issue of economic development.

In his view, the greatest and the most important source of prosperity and of wellbeing is labour, physical and intellectual: “Through labour man has always earned his wealth” (** 1960, p. 151)

As a theoretical economist, he was the first to include in his writings the objective theory of value according to which the originary price of things is in human labour (only labour creates value and makes property legitim). He used this theory to support the right of the peasantry to own land (doubled by the right to receive indemnification for those whose land was taken away). From this perspective, as a fighter for the rights of the peasants, Ion Ionescu de la Brad was a “radical liberal”, unlike Ion Ghica who was a “moderate liberal”, who fought for creating the necessary conditions for the development of the bourgeoisie. (Zane, 1980, p. 111-112). The issue of indemnification, the key point of the agrarian reform, was tricky and delicate at the same time: indemnification had to be given either for the land given to feudal peasants who had to do corvee on the landlord’s estate, or for the loss of certain income for the landlords (or for both reasons). Ion Ionescu de la Brad firmly rejected replacing the corvee (in Romanian claca / boieresc) with free bargaining: “No matter how compulsory and unfair a law might be, it is still better than anarchy, confusion and unrestricted and absolutely free use of bargaining”. (** 1960, p. 162)

Implementing social justice essentially meant buying back corvee and not replacing it with a bargain between the landlord and the peasant since it meant starting from an unjust inequity between the two social classes. Ion Ionescu de la Brad analysed the current situation in Moldavia’s agriculture and noticed the shortcomings of the agrarian reform, which exposed the peasants without means to poverty by making them pay extremely high “bargained” interests. “Escaping the slavery of the land they ended up slaves to money” – “the villagers escaped the devil only to come across his father”, as he put it. (op. cit., p. 187) In the spirit of social equity, given his theoretical training and his liberal economic ideology, he came up with a solution: “Just as the peasant had become owners against slavery through land, an institution of rural credit had to be created against slavery through money!” (op. cit., p. 190)

Ion Ionescu de la Brad emphasised the indissoluble connection between the economic, the social and the national issues. He proved beyond doubt, with unbeatable arguments, that the economic development of the country can only take place through the intensive and comprehensive progress of agriculture, as the peasants became emancipated by becoming owners of the land (indemnifying the boyars by all means!) and as the non-agricultural branches developed, especially industry (the word that Ion Ionescu de la Brad used for industry was manufacture).

Ion Ionescu de la Brad presented his view on the solution for the agrarian problem in his study *Sistemul de despăgubire a împrărietării țăranilor ieșit în 1848* (The System of Indemnification for the Peasants Becoming Owners of the Land Issued in 1848) (1859). The exceptional importance of the agrarian program of the revolution results from its requests. In a synthetical manner we mention the most important ones: (op.cit., p. 155-159):

- Freedom of labour: the feudal peasant was to emancipate themselves and to have the right to work; “ownership of the peasant’s labour is just as sacred as land ownership is”, Ion Ionescu de la Brad wrote (Cornea, Zamfir, 1968, p. 143);
- Guaranteeing ownership of the land – the motto “respect for the property, respect for the family” suggestively encompasses the economic and social basis of the revolution (op. cit., , p. 141);
- Abolishing the “imposed connection between labour and land”, between peasants and land owners and enforcing “the principle of bargaining”;
- Making the peasant the owner of a minimum piece of land that would ensure their subsistence;
- Indemnifying the owners who would lose land for missing out on the corvee (the labour the peasant had to do for the landlord’s benefit);

- Maintaining the “large estates”, making the peasants work other lands in order to get more than their subsistence (“the large English estate for the boyars, the small French or Flemish estate for the peasants”);
- Limited number of inhabitants to settle on each estate (in accordance with its surface), and only two thirds of the estate to be given to the peasants;
- Settling the uninhabited estates in the plain area;
- Setting the price of the land by experts in accordance with its quality and establishing a common property;
- Setting up a ministry of agriculture to represent the interests of the boyar landlords and of the peasants that was to organize the agricultural activity (agricultural societies, inspectors, agricultural engineers, model farms, primary education);
- Moving from an agricultural activity based on regulations to an agricultural activity based on constitutional provisions.

5. Conclusions

Given his constant preoccupation for comprehending the economic and social reality of his times, Ion Ionescu de la Brad’s writings are a valuable source of data for economists, historians, and sociologists, some of them considering him the “founder of the Romanian monographic research” (Constantinescu, Bădina, Gall, 1974, p. 33).

The central issue of his entire scientific work, as well as his practical activity, was his preoccupation for the emancipation of the peasants, and the economic solution that he put forward was the creation of the small peasant property and the organization of a scientific agriculture. Ion Ionescu de la Brad has a prominent place in the Romanian economic thought, especially for his contribution to solving the agrarian problem and for promoting cooperatist ideas. (***) 1943, p. 4)

As a consequence, most of the references to his economic and political views were made by strictly placing them within the “agrarian” current of economic thought promoted by the representatives of the landlords and commercial bourgeoisie: Alexandru Moruzzi, Petre Carp, Ion Brătianu, Lascăr Catargiu and many others.

By his education and his views, alongside Nicolae Șuțu, Ion Ghica, Alexandru D. Moruzzi and Ioan Strat, Ion Ionescu de la Brad was a representative of the French and English economic liberalism (the classical economic liberalism). He did not borrow the entire theoretical liberal corpus and did not generalize it. He had a rather nuanced position regarding the opportunity of a free trade policy for Romania; there are certain views (unjustified in our opinion) according to which he did not notice the necessity for Romania to develop its industry (Gh. Zane) (***) 1960, p. 150)

Even though he formally is not part of the “industrialist” current of Romanian economic thought (like Dionisie Pop Marțian, A. D. Xenopol, Bogdan Petriceicu Hașdeu, Gheorghe Barițiu), Ion Ionescu de la Brad surely understood the essential role of technical progress in the economic development in general and in the development of agriculture in special. In his opinion, the general use of perfected tools in agriculture is a necessity and he precisely identified its effect on labour productivity: “a single man could weed out in one day as much as twenty” (***) 1954 p. 276)

Ion Ionescu de la Brad adopted fundamental values of the classical economic liberalism (the freedom of the individual, the respect for property) of individualistic orientation, but in his way of thinking there was also another nuanced difference in relation to it: he believed that public, national interest had to be above the individual interest. For example, when expressing some pertinent observations regarding the situation of the flax manufacturing in Romania, he knew that our country, given its geographical position, met the necessary conditions “to produce more, better and cheaper”. The interest of the large European countries for the industry associated with this plant made Romania the meeting point of the German monopoly and the British interests. Under these circumstances, Ion Ionescu de la Brad was a visionary patriot when he said that the Romanian cultivators’ individual interests had to be in accordance with the public and national interests of the country. (Cornea, Zamfir, 1968, p. 137-138)

Ion Ionescu de la Brad’s love for the peasants and for agriculture made him solemnly ask: “I ask you to free the peasants from the slavery of money and arrogance, just as Cuza Vodă freed them from the slavery of land [...]”. (***) 1960, p. 193) But things were such that Ion Ionescu de la Brad did not see his dream come true...

6. References

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