

Development and Economic Progress in Mihail Kogălniceanu’s Writings

Sorinel Cosma

“Ovidius” University of Constanta, Faculty of Economic Sciences, Romania
sorinelcosma@yahoo.fr

Abstract

Mihail Kogălniceanu (1817-1891) was an erudite historian, a lawyer, a liberal economic thinker, and an extraordinary rhetorician. He was a complex and prominent personality of the Romanian political life for more than half a century who emphasized the need for Romania to develop as a national, unified, democratic and independent state. He understood all too well the concept of progress as necessary evolution, as development in the positive way. In this paper, we identify the main coordinates of Mihail Kogălniceanu’s thinking about the importance of studying history as a factor of progress and analyzing the economic and social structures of those times as a premise for reforming society. Ferment of the revolutionary climate in Moldavia, Mihail Kogălniceanu considered that knowing the historic past was a prerequisite for asserting the national consciousness of the Romanian people. His writings followed two major coordinates: the criticism of feudalism and the national emancipation.

Key words: history, reform, unification, progress, economic development, slavery, serfdom

J.E.L. classification: B31

1. Introduction

Mihail Kogălniceanu was born in a family of freeholders (*răzeși*) in Iași on the 6th of September 1817. He first studied at home with the Greek Catholic monk Gherman Vida, who was a follower of the emancipation movement of the Romanians in Transylvania, known as the Transylvanian School (*Școala ardeleană*). He later studied at Victor Cuenim’s boarding school in Iași, together with Vasile Alecsandri and Matei Millo, and then at Miroslava, near Bucharest. In 1834 he left to study in France, at Luneville, where he studied foreign languages and humanities for one year. After being a student at the Humboldt University in Berlin, he returned home and dedicated himself to publishing. He was the editor of several newspapers and magazines (such as *Dacia literară*, *Propășirea* and later on *Steaua Dunării*). As a politician, he was one of the leaders of the *National Liberal Party* and he actively supported the rule of A. I. Cuza during which he initiated and took part in the progress of the Romanian society by putting into effect an ample program of modernization reforms. Between 1887 and 1890 he was the president of the Romanian Academy, as a sign of appreciation for his scientific and cultural merits and contributions. He was a journalist, a lawyer, a landowner and a leaseholder, a trader and a manufacturer. Therefore, Mihail Kogălniceanu had a wide experience as a practician that was an excellent starting point for his scientific writings.

2. Theoretical background

The vast scientific creation and the numerous political activities he got involved in were the basis for the large number of specialized writings that Mihail Kogălniceanu published. His rich biography was analyzed in the past by famous historians such as A.D. Xenopol (*Mihail Kogălniceanu*, 1895) or N. Iorga (*Mihail Kogălniceanu scriitorul, omul politic și românul*, 1921, [Mihail Kogălniceanu the Writer, The Politician, and the Romanian]), but also more recently by Alexandru Zub (*Mihail Kogălniceanu istoric*, 1974 [Mihail Kogălniceanu as a Historian] and *Mihail Kogălniceanu, un arhitect al României moderne*, 1978 [Mihail Kogălniceanu, an Architect

of Modern Romania], published in Romanian in 2005). Literary critic Radu Dragnea published a complex paper (*Mihail Kogălniceanu*) in 1921, in which he emphasized the historic context in which the writer wrote and published his main works. Among the reference books written on the economic issues in Kogălniceanu’s writings is the one published by Virgil Ionescu and titled *Mihail Kogălniceanu. Contribuții la cunoașterea vieții, activității și concepțiilor sale*, 1963 [Mihail Kogălniceanu. Contributions to Knowing his Life, Activity and Views], which was republished in 1979 as *Opera lui Kogălniceanu sub raportul faptei și gândirii social-economice* [Kogălniceanu’s Work as to Action and Socio-Economic Thinking], and which is, in fact, the author’s PhD thesis. Its abstract was published as *Activitatea și concepțiile social-economice ale lui Mihail Kogălniceanu* [Mihail Kogălniceanu’s Activity and Socio-Economic Views] in the volume titled *Din gândirea economică progresistă românească*, 1968 [From the Romanian Progressist Economic Thinking].

3. Research methodology

Using the qualitative research methodology, we aimed at collecting and analyzing textual data to help us synthesize Mihail Kogălniceanu’s perceptions on the economic, social and political realities of his times. Our research is exploratory in nature. Our objective was to find out and present not only “what” Mihail Kogălniceanu thought about certain topics but also “why” he thought so. This research methodology allowed us to get an in-depth understanding of his writings and of how his brilliant ideas were put into practice.

4. History, civilization and progress

His rich historiography activity places Mihail Kogălniceanu among Romania’s greatest historians. Out of the many publications he edited that we would like to mention is the first history magazine that was published in our country in 1840, titled *Arhiva românească* [The Romanian Archive], as well as the 1844 *Propășirea* [Prosperity] magazine in which he promoted many episodes of national history and many liberal economics writings. The peak of his journalistic activity was after the 1855 launching of the political, commercial, and literary journal *Steaua Dunării* [The Star of the Danube], in which many great personalities of those times, such as Ion Ghica, Ion Ionescu de la Brad, George Barițiu wrote their articles.

Mihail Kogălniceanu considered that ever since ancient times “thinkers had had a predilection towards history” and that, according to the Bible, history had to be, and had always been the most important book for every people and for every individual” because “from it every profession learns conduct rules, advice for their doubts, lessons for their ignorance, encouragement for praise and good deeds” (Kogălniceanu, 2018, p. 463).

In his view, history unfolds by divine will and follows the immutable path of progress. Nations, just like individuals, have a well-established purpose on earth, and, just as individuals pay for their deeds, so do nations as they are responsible for the glory they gain and for the defense they offer in keeping their ancestral territories. (Kogălniceanu, 2018 (2), p. 740). He believed that through their spiritual inheritance from the past and through free will, Romanians had to win the fight for the reformation of their society by abolishing the social privileges that generated inequity and dependency.

Kogălniceanu looked upon the development of society from a double perspective. First, as a sum of the effects of scientific actions (“the success of art, science, and industry”) and of political actions (the individual – society mutual relationship). Second, as the result of the man – nature confrontation and of the confrontation of man with himself. By defeating nature, man insures his welfare and he progresses on the path of civilization. Even though Kogălniceanu noticed the importance of war as a civilization factor (he mentioned the history of Greece and Rome and talked about a double emancipation: of the conquered by the conqueror but also the other way around), he claimed that civilization is incomplete without the political emancipation of all individuals and all peoples. (Kogălniceanu, 2018 (2), p. 305-309). Beyond its progressist role, „civilization by no means banishes national ideas and vices, but merely multiplies them for the benefit of the nation in particular and of mankind in special”. (Kogălniceanu, 2018 (3), p. 247).

In Kogălniceanu’s opinion, the country’s economic and social backwardness was because the patriarchal turned into the feudal by borrowing and using the flows of Western Europe (luxury, corruption). Kogălniceanu considered that the only way to reach true welfare and civilization is to develop national forces and he quoted Ion Ghica who had stated that “our political importance can only increase by the number of kilos of grain we shall export” (Kogălniceanu, 2018 (3), p. 251). Even though he subscribed to liberal views, Kogălniceanu surprisingly praised association as “the only godly thing that can work miracles today” (Kogălniceanu, 2018 (3), p. 253).

Kogălniceanu never stopped defending the liberal principles that were the basis for progress. The most important of them all is the sacrosanct principle of freedom, both for the individual and for society. And as freedom a priori excludes slavery, it is only natural that Mihail Kogălniceanu critically analyzed this institution that he considered to be a “black stain” in the history of peoples. From the very beginning of his 1853 study titled *Ochire istorică asupra sclaviei* [Historic View on Slavery], he showed its true origin through an explicative approach that can be easily interpreted as materialistic: once man came to the point of producing more than he needed to satisfy his own needs, the surplus was taken by “spoliation and theft” by some to the detriment of others. In time, not only the right of ownership over the results of one’s work, but also the right of ownership over one’s own person were treasured upon. Kogălniceanu identified four sources of slavery: prisoners of war, law verdicts (such as the ones for insolvent debtors), birth (the children of slaves were implicitly slaves themselves) and purchase (those who were forced to sell their family or themselves) (Kogălniceanu, 2018 (2), p. 875 and the following). Kogălniceanu added a fifth source that he considered to be a “shame on modern civilization”: the alleged superiority of the white race over the black race.

Slavery first appeared in the southern parts of Asia and Europe because there the climate favored a faster economic development (there was more fertile land) and the surplus over one’s own needs was faster obtained. Kogălniceanu continued by making two more observations: in northern areas the expenses of keeping slaves were higher because of the climate and the northern peoples were more robust (“generally more vigorous”) and “harder to subdue and less prone to accepting slavery”. In his analysis on the status of the slave in ancient times, Kogălniceanu explained slavery both from a theoretical point of view (he quoted Aristotle’s *Politics*, that said that „the wisdom of the master is to know how to use his slave”, which was perceived as the family’s property, and from Xenophon’s *On Ways to Increase the Income of Aticca* in which he recommended the centralized exploitation of the slaves), and a practical point of view (in Sparta the masters of the Helots got them drunk to show their children the degradation brought about by drinking).

Mihail Kogălniceanu identified economic causes for the genesis of slavery. He also identified economic causes for its demise. The work of slaves was worth half the work of the free laborers and this competition led to the emergence of large estates and large workshops and the disappearing of the small ones. Slave owners noticed that by being motivated, slaves increased their work productivity: the possibility for them to regain their freedom was much more efficient than the whip. Because of the barbarians’ raids, the economic climate deteriorated as the number of the slaves’ riots increased and as the market for the produce of large estates and establishments decreased.

5. Economy, economic development, and progress

In *Dorințele partidei naționale în Moldova* (1848) [The Wishes of the National Party in Moldavia], Mihail Kogălniceanu drew a set of 34 institutional demands (law and economics-related) considered to be essential for the development and the modernization of the country. Among them there are several that we consider to be relevant for the author’s economic point of view:

- Issuing a law to eradicate corruption;
- Eliminating the taxes on grain, cattle and national products exports; also, item 7 in the *Moldavian Unionists’ Program* in March 1857 stated “the right of the Principalities to establish commercial relations according to their interests” (Constantinescu-Iași, Berindei (coord.), 1966, p. 103)

- Enabling free trade and free labor through the following: a law of the credit that could insure the payment of debts „without exception to persons”; the establishment of a national discount bank; setting up professional schools; building channels and communication ways; price („tariffs”) regulation; payment for public labor (Kogălniceanu, 2018 (2), p. 1115-1116).

Kogălniceanu wished for the personal and birth privileges to be abolished and replaced by the principles of universality and income proportionality.

In an 1845 article titled *Despre pauperism* [On Pauperism], Mihail Kogălniceanu expressed his concern for the faith of the poor, the sick, the less fortunate and advanced measures of social protection that are still valid today: setting up a hospital for the incurable patients; setting up orphanages; setting up retreat homes for the elderly; paying for the labor of the inmates; measures to stop the spread of venereal diseases and alcoholism; insuring the work of those who had seasonal jobs; establishing a savings bank. (Kogălniceanu, 2018, p. 354-355)

Mihail Kogălniceanu noticed the determining role of the ownership within the economic and social architecture of the country and fought to change it by abolishing the corvée (the boyar-like) and implicitly the serfdom, and by making all “village householders” landowners, by “giving a rightful compensation to the former owners” (Kogălniceanu, 2018 (2), p. 899). His ideas on changing the system of ownership on land place Kogălniceanu among the visionary liberal economic thinkers. He gave arguments from a double perspective. On the one hand, ownership is the “most powerful element for civilization”, and private ownership on land is an indestructible base for patriotism (“Only a country that has many landowners is strong”). On the other hand, the abolishment of the corvée would lead to the increase in the price of land and especially to the increase in the efficiency of its exploitation: “a given surface would bring more profit than the double surface brings today” because “free labor is more efficient than forced labor”. There would be both an increase in production (this mercantilist idea makes the author believe that a numerous population gives more strength to the national state) and a positive evolution in the character and mentality of the workers who have become owners. (Kogălniceanu, 2018 (2), p. 1122-1123)

Kogălniceanu’s supreme creed was the fact that imposing these reforms meant uniting the Principalities: “it is the only way to consolidate the Romanians’ nationality, to give them dignity, power and the means to fulfill their mission on the land that God has given them to inherit” (Constantinescu-Iași, Berindei (coord.), 1966, p. 69). The unification was necessary because „without it, it was not possible to solve the social issues [...]” (Constantinescu-Iași, Berindei (coord.) 1966, p. 269-270).

In his speech after the Elective Meeting of Moldavia on the 5th of January 1657 that had elected Alexandru Ioan Cuza as the ruler of Moldavia, Kogălniceanu expressed his hope and his confidence in the destiny of the Romanian nation and its return to the glorious times of Alexandru the Good who had claimed that “Romania has no one to defend it but God Himself and His sword!” (Constantinescu-Iași, Berindei (coord.) 1966, p. 230)

6. Conclusions

Shortly before his death, the great 1848 thinker summarized his thoughts: the abolishment of church privileges (by impropriating the properties of monasteries), the emancipation of the peasants (by making them landowners) and the manumission of the Gypsies (Zub, 2005, p. 97)

Despite all their flaws, the Treaty of Adrianople and the Organic Regulation had significant positive consequences for Romania: „they introduced the commercial freedom system as the first highly efficient means for the idea of economic freedom” (Demetrescu, 2005, p. 27). Once the Constitution was issued in 1866, Kogălniceanu’s demands were institutionalized and put into practice in the newly-unified Romania.

In his biographical book published in 1921, Radu Dragnea pointed out Mihail Kogălniceanu’s place in the history of the Romanian civilization: “in the history of the Romanian modern civilization, Kogălniceanu has an equal place to that of the state itself in civilizing the country and in establishing the political, social, cultural and economic institutions”. (Dragnea, 2005, p. 182)

7. References

- Constantinescu-Iași, P., Berindei, D., (coord.), 1966. *Gândirea social-politică despre Unire (1859)* [The Social and Political Thinking on the Unification (1859)], Bucharest: Politică Publishing House
- Demetrescu, E., 2005, *Influența școlii economice liberale în România în veacul al XIX-lea* [The Influence of the Economic Liberal School on the 19th Century Romania] Bucharest: Do-MinoR Publishing House
- Dragnea, R., 2005, Mihail Kogălniceanu, București: Do-MinoR Publishing House
- Kogălniceanu, M., 2018, *Opere*, Vol. II [Works], vol. II, Bucharest: Academia Română. Fundația Națională pentru Știință și Artă Publishing House
- Kogălniceanu, M., 2018 (2), *Opere*, Vol. III [Works], vol. III, Bucharest: Academia Română. Fundația Națională pentru Știință și Artă Publishing House
- Kogălniceanu, M., 2018 (3), *Opere*, Vol. I [Works], vol. I, Bucharest: Academia Română. Fundația Națională pentru Știință și Artă Publishing House
- Zub, Al., 2005, *Mihail Kogălniceanu, un arhitect al României moderne* [Mihail Kogălniceanu, an Architect of Modern Romania], Iași: Institutul European Publishing House