

Nicolae Bălcescu and the History-Economics-Sociology Triad

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Abstract

Nicolae Bălcescu (1819-1852) was a politician, a historian, and a patriot who was in favor of economic and political emancipation for the Romanian people. Even though historical issues were of the utmost interest for him, he paid attention to sociology and economics as well. While analyzing the specific social structures in the Romania, he emphasized their causes, as well as the need for change towards the revolution seen as a historic necessity on the way towards progress. In this paper we present Bălcescu’s analytical approach of the economic issues, starting from two assumptions. The first one: economic backwardness by comparison to other countries. Bălcescu looked into the causes and issued political economy recommendations to insure economic development. The second one: at the core of the Romanian economic problem was the agrarian situation. Bălcescu studied the origins and the evolution of agricultural land ownership, as well as the status of peasantry.

Key words: patriotism, revolution, agrarian reform, national unity, freedom, corvée, land ownership

J.E.L. classification: B31

1. Introduction

Nicolae Bălcescu was born in a family of small boyars in Bucharest on the 29th of June 1819. He attended Sf. Sava College and was characterized as a child who was “endowed by nature with a broad intelligence, a rich imagination and a rare memory” (Nestorescu-Bălcești, 1988, p. 75). At the age of 19 he joined the military as a cadet and succeeded in establishing a school for the military in 1839. In 1840 he took part in a conspiracy against the governance and he got himself arrested. In 1834, alongside Ion Ghica and Christian Tell, he set up *Frăția* secret society, which was to become the heart of the 1848 revolutionary movement. After taking part in the French Revolution in February 1848, he came back to Bucharest and got involved in the revolution in Wallachia in June 1848 and afterwards was appointed Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Once the Revolution was repressed, he was arrested but he eventually ran away and exiled himself in Paris. After many other revolutionary deeds, he died of tuberculosis in Palermo on the 29th of November 1852.

Nicolae Bălcescu lived in times of economic, social and political changes that took place both in the Romanian Principalities and in Europe. Both his ideas and his activities show his constant powerful patriotic feeling. The revolutionary waves in the Romanian Principalities in 1821 and 1848 were a preamble of the end of feudalism and the beginning of capitalism, even though the main powers, Tsarist Russia, the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg Empire, were against it. Bălcescu was the proponent of a brilliant idea: to merge the arguments for a radical economic and social reform with the arguments for an act of setting the nation free from foreign dependence.

Nicolae Bălcescu’s work was an instrument to unite the Romanian Principalities, a realistic depiction of the evolution stage of the Romanian society in those times, and last but not least, a prophetic enunciation of the path to follow in the future. Considered to have been the “most prolific and most substantial participant in the 1848 Romanian revolution” (Murgescu, 1994, p. 71). Nicolae Bălcescu left us a precious scientific and literary legacy that conveys his historic, economic and sociologic ideas.

2. Theoretical background

The importance of Nicolae Bălcescu's writings has been proven by the numerous scientific papers that have focused both on the biographic aspects and on the analytical research into his scientific work. Among the biographies that have been written we point out those by J. Voinescu (1853), Gr. Tocilescu (1876) and P.P. Panaitescu (1920). Also worth mentioning are the works of Horia Nestorescu-Bălcești *Nicolae Bălcescu. Urme în bronzul istoriei* (1988) [Nicolae Bălcescu. Traces in the Bronze of History] and Antonie Chelcea, Sorin Damean and Nicolae Mihai *Nicolae Bălcescu și epoca sa. Perspective istoriografice și politici memorial*, 2018 [Nicolae Bălcescu and His Times. Historiography Perspectives and Memorial Policies]. Other significant studies on him are *Studii și referate despre N. Bălcescu*, 1953 [Studies and Papers on N. Bălcescu], *Studii despre N. Bălcescu*, 1969 [Studies on N. Bălcescu] and especially the series of 20 studies signed by G. Zane and included in the volume *N. Bălcescu. Opera. Omul. Epoca*, 1977 [N. Bălcescu. The Work. The Man. The Age]. Bălcescu's social thinking was presented by C.I. Gulian from an obvious Marxist-Leninist perspective in his paper *Gândirea social-politică a lui Nicolae Bălcescu*, 1954 [Nicolae Bălcescu's Socio-Political Thinking]. Nicolae Bălcescu has his rightful place in the history of economic thought in Romania. And this is proven by the academic lectures written by Sultana Sută-Selejan (*Istoria doctrinelor economice*, 1964 [The History of Economic Doctrines]) and Nicolae Ivanciu-Văleanu (*Tratat de doctrine economice*, 1996 [Treatise on Economic Doctrines]). Sultana Sută-Selejan's *Gândirea economică a lui Nicolae Bălcescu*, 1967 [Nicolae Bălcescu's Economic Thinking] is a representative work on Bălcescu, and, if separated from its ideological Marxist-Leninist content, offers a good and wide perspective on Bălcescu's ideas.

3. Research methodology

The methodology of our synthetic paper is based upon bibliographical research and documenting activity on specialized literature that includes monographies, biographies, studies, and articles. We looked into Bălcescu's concepts, opinions and solutions on Romania's economic development upon reading the Romanian editions of his works.

4. The history component of the triad

Nicolae Bălcescu viewed history as the history of the Romanian people, whose ideas and feelings had been expressed by the great personalities of our people. Their role in history was promoted by publishing several biographies (Ioan Tăutu, Miron Costin, Ioan Cantacuzino, Constantin Cantacuzino, Răzvan Vodă and Mihai Viteazul), in which he showed great portraying skills.

Bălcescu studied the writings of chroniclers such as Grigore Ureche, Miron Costin, Dimitrie Cantemir, Ion Neculce and examined historic documents from the past, especially legislative ones. To better grasp the realities of his times, he paid special attention to the works of his contemporaries, both Romanians, such as Dionisie Fotino, Mihail Kogălniceanu, and foreigners, such as Jules Michelet, Edward Gibbon etc.

He considered that history was meant to prove „the progressive movement of mankind, the development of the human sentiment and mind, in all interior and exterior forms, in time and in space” (Bălcescu, 2017, p. 4). By mentioning and analyzing certain essential historic events, Bălcescu tried and succeeded in discovering explanations, causal links, particularities and solutions that were appropriate for reaching his major goals: national unity and freedom for the Romanian people. As a researcher of the past, he considered that it was not “a series of random acts”, but a streak of logical and objective transformations that unfolded according to the “laws” of evolution. He pointed out the connection between different historic ages and claimed that historic development went from inferior to superior. According to his ideas, the antagonism between old and new caused social inequity but also generated a constant struggle for progress. As a reaction to the conviction of the classical school of political economy on labor division, but also to the Physiocrats' Natural Order, Bălcescu wrote: “When dividing functions, the peoples of the world, as

well as the individuals in society, generate, through their mere diversity, the harmony of the whole, the unity of it.” (Bălcescu, 2017, p. 5)

Being aware of the tight relation between all aspects of historic phenomena, of their interconnection, Bălcescu believed that the main object for historic research must be the people. He thus places himself within the tradition of the romantic historiography in France (represented by authors such as Michelet and Thierry), even though his historic thinking can be placed in a certain direction.

5. The sociology component of the triad

The most prominent personality of the revolutionary year 1848, Nicolae Bălcescu was interested in analyzing the structure and the evolution of the Romanian society. In his paper *Despre starea socială a muncitorilor plugari în Principatele române în deosebire timpuri (1846)* [On the Social Status of Ploughmen in the Romanian Principalities in Various Times], he made a complex and thorough social X-ray of the Romanian rural world. Bălcescu noticed the determinant role of the economic conditions in explaining historic phenomena and processes and understood the importance of land ownership in the development of society. In his opinion, there are two main forms of social organization. The first one, specific to areas that have been previously colonized (by Romans, Greeks, Phoenicians, Carthaginians) and common among most of the European peoples, is based upon the private ownership of the land and upon agriculture since the colonizers had practiced it and then had left the territories in search of material wealth. They had not enslaved the local people, they had respected their customs, and they had integrated and accepted them as citizens as long as they respected the rules. The second one, specific to areas previously occupied by force and conquest (Asia, South America, Africa), is based upon the state ownership on land and upon taking the local farmers' produces by force. (Bălcescu, 2017 (2), p. 187)

When the Romans colonized Dacia they divided the land among the colonists, according to their custom, and these, in turn, leased the land to the locals, and thus both parties involved had their share of benefits. Once the Romans withdrew from Dacia, the people from the mountain areas came back to the plain areas. Nicolae Bălcescu strongly rejected the idea that rulers such as Radu Negru (a.k.a. Negru Vodă) in Wallachia or Bogdan I in Moldavia divided agricultural land as they pleased and therefore laid the foundations of feudalism. The primary reason that „ended the ancient equality of rights and status in our countries and gave way to that social monstrosity when an entire country slaved for a few owners” was completely different in Bălcescu's opinion. According to him, it was the corvée: “and the owner of the land divided his estate into three parts, and he divided two thirds into small parts and gave them to farmers and he had them work the third part for him as corvée, meaning a given number of labor days”. (Bălcescu, 2017 (2), p. 190) In time, the number of small pieces of land or estates owned by farmers significantly decreased while large pieces of land came under the ownership of a small number of rich landowners.

In his works, Nicolae Bălcescu made a detailed analysis of how feudal ownership emerged and evolved in Romania. The historic periods of time between the rules of Matei Basarab and Vasile Lupu and those of Constantin Brâncoveanu and Dimitrie Cantemir experienced a significant decrease in the number of small estates and an intense vassalage of the farmers through the corvée system just as the country was being spoliated by the Turks, the Austrians and the Hungarians.

In his work *Despre împroprietărea țăranilor (1848)* [On Making Peasants Landowners], the author stated three essential conditions that a social measure needed to meet in order to be „truly good”: 1. To be in accordance with the national interest; 2. To be moral and „fair”; 3. To be for the benefit of everyone, meaning not to favor just one social category, but to contribute to general progress.

In his work *Mersul revoluției în istoria românilor (1850)* [The Way Revolution Has Worked in the History of Romanians], the author considered the 1848 Revolution a „natural” stage of that „providential movement that placed the Romanian nation alongside the entire humanity on the limitless path towards a progressive, regular development, towards the lofty target where God hides Himself and waits for us”. These lines prove the Universalist and fundamentally Christian dimension of Nicolae Bălcescu's thinking. (Bălcescu, 2017 (2), p. 472). The constant progress at a historic scale brought about consecutive transformations to the government in Romania: first it was

absolutist, then aristocratic (boyar like), and then Phanariot (city like), then bureaucratic, and later democratic (Romanian nationalism).

The Revolution in the Romanian Principalities was determined by the internal historic conditions of the country's economic and social development and was influenced by the revolutionary current that was sweeping across the continent. It had a profound national character, aiming at throwing aside the foreign domination. Bălcescu blamed the boyars who had seized the lands and had become a privileged class; “but the interests of the many can never be in the hands of the few (Bălcescu, 2017 (2), p. 467-468). From a sociological point of view, Bălcescu's remarks are innovative: he noticed that in time the boyars were being replaced by a bureaucratic class made up in the context of the Phanariot system (*ciocoimea*), with outside support from Russia which constantly “aimed at getting the Romanian territories” (the threat of Pan-Slavism) .

Showing erudition and a deep analytical spirit, Nicolae Bălcescu proved to know well the history of our nation and presented it in a dynamic manner, emphasizing the social aspects. His interest in the field of history is under the influence of a constant juxtaposition of the national and the social causes of the Romanian people. History was his main passion and he considered it one of the powerful national forces to help solve the problems of the Romanian nation. The basic condition for the science of history to insure this role is to study the people, both as a nation, all the inhabitants of the country, and as masses. Bălcescu was among the first to point out the role of the masses as an agent that can transform society on its revolutionary path. The nation, as the final stage in mankind's evolution, is the result of a people's becoming aware of itself and of its feeling of nationality. From here Bălcescu derived the principle of nationalities: the right of a people to establish a national state, to be free from other peoples and to be equal with them.

The national issue has two components: unity and independence. His views place Bălcescu among the founders of the Romanian national ideology and among the first to have considered the Romanian people's national and political unity. In its turn, national unity has two elements: moral unity (the people's sense of self, in competition with spiritual elements that constitute the nation, such as language, religion, customs, the past) and political unity (the development of the national state).

The social ideal, which is democracy, can be reached by means of the revolution. Bălcescu conferred it the progressive role of transforming society. Revolution can take the form of a popular insurrection, an action of the people which establishes a new order, or a revolutionary war to free the people from foreign domination. Any revolutionary phenomenon has an “inevitable” character (the revolution in 1848 resulted from the one in 1821) and a “necessary” character. “The next revolution will not be limited to wanting the Romanians to be free, equal, to own the land and the capital and to be brothers towards common progress. It will not be only about asking for internal liberty which is not possible without external liberty, but about national liberty and unity”. (Bălcescu, 2017 (2), p. 106-107)

6. The economics component of the triad

In Bălcescu's writings, the analysis of economic issues came naturally as a continuation of his views on history as a science, but also as an analytical approach complementary to his political activity. As far as his method of research and analysis is concerned, given the fact that he studied the economic issues as they evolved, Nicolae Bălcescu can be considered a forerunner of the historic school of economic thinking. From another perspective, that of the solutions he submitted in order to solve fundamental economic issues, Nicolae Bălcescu proved to be a democratic reformer focused on nationalism and closely influenced by the doctrine of the French socialists. Judging by the importance he gave to agriculture within the nation's economy and within the social architecture of the country, we can say that Nicolae Bălcescu embraced the views of the Physiocrat school.

Bălcescu's major economic convictions emerge both from his economic writings, (*Despre starea socială a muncitorilor plugari în Principatele române în deosebire timpuri* (1846) [On the Social Status of Ploughmen in the Romanian Principalities in Various Times], *Despre împrăștierea țărănilor* (1848) [On Making Peasants Landowners], and especially *Reforma socială la români* (1850) [Social Reform in Romania], published in Paris as *Question économique*

des Principautes Danubiennes [The Economic Issue in the Romanian Prinipalities], and from his history, political or literary writings, the most prominent being *Românii supt Mihai Voievod Viteazul* [Romanians under the Rule of Michael the Brave], published between 1861 and 1863.

G. Zane identified three major economic directions in Bălcescu’s works that had to do with “the peasants becoming emancipated and landowners, the taxation system and the organization of the credit” (Zane, 1977, p. 230).

The fundamental internal socio-economic issue in those times was about land ownership and agrarian relations. According to Bălcescu’s economic ideology, solving this agrarian issue implied the emancipation of the peasantry through social revolution. He understood the fundamental idea that the nature of the ownership determines the character of society. By analyzing the historic process of how the big land ownership came into being in our country, Bălcescu concluded that the corvée was at the basis and that is was both sociologically and economically determined. Once the common land ownership and the private one were fraudulently taken over, the corvée system (which was at first paid as rent in labor) and later on serfdom emerged.

Nicolae Bălcescu identified three main causes why the peasants lost their lands: “interest”, “need”, and “force”.

The first one, named somehow inappropriately “interest” had to do with the free peasants’ decision to give away their lands (and implicitly to give up on their individual liberty) because the boyars had the privilege to have dependent peasants on their lands that had to pay taxes only to the them, and not to the feudal ruler. As the abuses of the ruler’s officials were increasing, many peasants chose to become dependent, hoping to get by on the little money they got when selling their lands.

The second one, the “need”, derived from the fact that the free peasants were forced to join the army and therefore could no longer work the land to pay back the money they had borrowed from the boyars in order to be able to live and pay their taxes to the feudal ruler. As a consequence, they had no other option but to sell their lands.

The third cause, the “force”, meant that the small land owners were forcefully and violently taken the land, often because of abuses by the law they could not fight against.

In these ways, in time, big land ownership became dominant. Bălcescu was the one to shine the light on why the situation of peasants worsened both from an economic point of view, as the number of labor days worked as corvée increased and other additional obligations (produce, labor, money) came into being, and from a legal point of view, as personal liberty diminished and even disappeared.

The solution that Nicolae Bălcescu put forth was to give land to the peasants and make them rightful owners. It meant that the peasants had to have the necessary means to buy their lands back. There was need for a system of state credit institutions to finance the small peasant households. The existence of this public credit system meant that the state had to obtain supplementary financial resources and Bălcescu believed that there was only one way to do so: by abolishing the boyars’ tax privileges as they did not pay any taxes. A new fiscal organization was needed and it had to rest on the principles of general contribution and equity.

Inspired by the French socialist economic thinkers, Nicolae Bălcescu militated for the establishment of a national credit institution to finance not only the agrarian reform but the entire national economy. This highly avant-garde and utopian view is quite valuable as it showed that the state could finance credit issuing both bonds and banknotes.

7. Conclusions

Nicolae Bălcescu is one of the greatest Romanian thinkers. He is the author of a theoretical corpus of everlasting contemporaneousness. His economic ideas are still valid today. “For our country requires numerous improvements, as everything needs to be done. The agriculture needs to be improved, the mines that are untouched need to be mined, centuries-old forests that rot away need to be exploited, waters need to be channeled, communication ways that only exist in projects need to be built, such as railways, trade and factories need to be developed for mass consumption[...]” (***, 1960, p. 121).

Nicolae Bălcescu is an exceptional personality in the Romanian national history who greatly supported changing the faith of Romanians. “A patriot that built up” as Dan Berindei called him, a “rhetorical writer” as Tudor Vianu described him, Nicolae Bălcescu surpassed his predecessors and wrote a modern history of mentalities, institutions, traditions and customs; alongside Mihail Kogălniceanu, he is considered the founder of the modern national historiography.

He had an astute sense of social justice and his original view on how to make peasants landowners was highly appreciated by Kogălniceanu, who took the Biblical advice and “rendered onto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s”.

8. References

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