

## Economic Beliefs in the Works of Simion Mehedinți

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### Abstract

*Simion Mehedinți (1869-1962) is considered to be the founder of the Romanian modern geography, but he had remarkable contributions in other fields of activity as well: ethnography, history, science philosophy, pedagogy, and literature. The economic meanings of his thinking, though not explicit, are quite deep. The purpose of this paper is to analyze certain concepts that Mehedinți used from an economic perspective. He studied the biunique interaction between human and environment and granted man (population) a first rate role within geography. In a narrow sense, civilization means not only what and how much is produced, but also how it is produced. Culture, as the sum of all spiritual accomplishments, is the specific view of a people on the moral universe and it emerges as the result of the same cause: labor, the decisive element that sets man and animal apart.*

**Key words:** labor, ethnopedagogy, civilization, culture, racism, anti-Semitism

**J.E.L. classification:** B31

### 1. Introduction

Simion Mehedinți was born on the 18<sup>th</sup> of October 1896 in Soveja, Vrancea County, in a family of 11 children. He went to primary school in his native town and in Vidra, and then he attended high school in Roman and Bucharest. After passing his Baccalaureate, he was admitted to the University of Bucharest, where he studied at the Faculty of Letters and had Titu Maiorescu as his professor. In 1892 he presented his bachelor thesis titled *Ideile lui Jean-Jacques Rousseau asupra educației (Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Ideas on Education)*, which he would publish later on. A year later he received a scholarship and went to Paris to study geography, then to Berlin, where he completed his formation as an ethnographer. In 1899 he got a PhD in geography at the University of Leipzig and in 1900 he was appointed professor of geography at the Faculty of Letters within the University of Bucharest. He became the director of the magazine *Convorbiri literare* (Literary Discussions) and a member of the Romanian Academy in 1915. Because of the war he delivered his reception speech five years later. Its title was *Caracterizarea etnografică a unui popor prin munca și uneltele sale (The Ethnographic Description of a People through its Work and Tools)*.

Apart from his scientific contributions, he was also a leader and promoter of the geography movement in Romania. He got involved in the Romanian Royal Geography Society, he took part in numerous congresses organized by geography teachers, he established an organization titled *Soveja* (in 1927) meant to organize trips around the country, and he became a member of *Societatea turiștilor români (The Organization of the Romanian Tourists)*, which was established on the 24th of January 1903 under the patronage of King Ferdinand (\*\* 1943, p. 195).

As ministry of education, Mehedinți initiated a policy to reform the Romanian education system. He issued two essential laws: *Legea eforturilor școlare* and *Legea școlilor pregătitoare și a seminariilor normale (The Law of Preparatory Schools and Ordinary Seminaries)*. For four decades he published a number of textbooks for the elementary school, the secondary school and the high school students. He provided details on how the Romanian education should be organized in a series of papers such as *Îndărăt spre școală (Back to School)* (1907), *Către noua generație (Towards the New Generation)* (1912), *Altă creștere-Școala muncii (A Different Growth-The School of Labor)* (1919), *Școala poporului (The School of the People)* (1923), *Școala română și*

*capitalul biologic al poporului român (The Romanian School and the Biological Capital of the Romanian People)* (1927), *Profesorul, temelia tuturor reformelor școlare (The Teacher, the Base of All Education Reforms)* (1929) and *Trilogii (Știința, Școala. Viața) (Trilogies (Science. School. Life))* (1940). He died at the age of 93, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of December 1962.

## 2. Theoretical background

Ever since they were published, the works of Simion Mehedinți have raised great interest. His writings in the fields of geography and pedagogy were the topic of many studies and scientific papers. Constantin Brătescu's research titled *Geograful Simion Mehedinți (Simion Mehedinți the Geographer)* was published in *Revista geografică română (The Romanian Geography Magazine)* in 1939. In 1967, Vintilă Mihăilescu edited the volume titled *Simion Mehedinți-Opere alese Simion Mehedinți-Selected Works* which includes five extensive pieces of research dedicated to the scholar's life and geography works. Marginalized during the communist regime as being a supporter of legionary nationalism, his works came back to attention after 1990, when they were published again alongside research by different authors such as Gheorghiță Geană (*Un sistem operațional de filozofie a culturii (An Operational System of the Philosophy of Culture)* (1999) or Dumitru Muster: *Educația creștină în gândirea lui Simion Mehedinți (The Christian Education in Simion Mehedinți's Thought)* (1995), *Vocația pedagogică a savantului encicloped Simion Mehedinți (The Educational Vocation of the Encyclopedian Scholar Simion Mehedinți)* (1968) and *Simion Mehedinți- pedagog (Simion Mehedinți-Educator)* (1992). There are other papers that are worth mentioning, signed by Emil Băldescu (*Simion Mehedinți, gânditor social-politic și pedagog (Simion Mehedinți, Socio-Political Thinker and Educator)* (1969), Victor Tufescu (*Simion Mehedinți. Viața și opera (Simion Mehedinți. Life and Work)* (1994), Luminița Drăghicescu (*Simion Mehedinți-teoretician al educației (Simion Mehedinți-Theoretician in Education)* (2009) and Costică Neagu (*Simion Mehedinți-pedagog de vocație (Simion Mehedinți-Educator by Calling)* (2004). A landmark among the papers dedicated to Simion Mehedinți is the one published on the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the scholar's birth, written by Marius Ciprian Neacșu (*Simion Mehedinți și geopolitica românească (Simion Mehedinți and the Romanian Geopolitics)*).

## 3. Research methodology

In our research we used the method of primary analysis and we interpreted Simion Mehedinți's original writings from the perspective of the economic theory. We also used the method of indirect research by looking into the specialized literature (monographies, studies, dictionaires, encyclopedias). The research we did is descriptive and observational as it analyzes the implications of individual mentality regarding work. The research method we used is of a qualitative nature, useful in exploring and clasifying the author's statements about the economic psycho-ethnopedagogy of labor.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. The Apology and psychopedagogy of labor

Considered by Marx "a physical necessity of human life" in his *Capital*, labor is an important concept that a scholar such as Simion Mehedinți could not have overlooked. Even though he did not train to become an economist, Simion Mehedinți always focused on man and his interaction with his environment. Man has transformed the environment with his tools, which, alongside nature, are the "true distinctive sign for homo as a species" (Mehedinți, 1999, p. 85)

He noticed the essential role of the labor division between men and women as a factor of economic and social progress ("when the division of labor started, man took over the cursed part") (Mehedinți, 2009, p. 96). He is also familiar with the scientific and practical modern concepts such as Taylorism and Fordism.

He saw *Taylorism* as the ideal method to transform the manual laborer into an accomplished craftsman (Mehedinți, 2009, p. 272). Also, Mehedinți considered it as a factor able to potentiate civilization as it leads to an accelerated growth in labor productivity through perfecting the tools and the labor based on a more and more scientific technique.

Simion Mehedinți considered that the principles of *Fordism* had to be applied in the field of agriculture as well by using certain improved tools (Mehedinți, 2010a, p. 205). Fordism was an innovative system to organize work based on dividing it into simple operations (no less than 7882 simple operations in a Ford plant) and the effect was the possibility to introduce mechanization and automation on a large scale, as well as to use less qualified workers. (Mehedinți, 1999, p. 97)

In the inter-war period there was an interest in the pedagogy of labor by analyzing the Romanian people's capacity and manner to work. As far as the education of the young was concerned, Mehedinți considered labor as the supreme moral value, without which the civilization of a people was not possible. The developed countries are those that understood the educational value of labor; the Swedish, the Norwegian, the Danes, the English made physical education a serious concern of the government (Mehedinți, 2009, p. 263).

Simion Mehedinți developed some ideas about the importance of labor more than a century ago, but they are still quite valid nowadays: "The suffering during the war and the exceptional hardships that Romania is undergoing have awakened, I think, in many hearts, the belief that our people will only be able to fulfill its destiny by deliberately entering the School of labor. For a country completely surrounded by unfriendly neighbors and so full of foreign elements, there is no other open way but the speedy mobilization of all energies, beginning with the rural one" (Mehedinți, 2009, p. 13).

Therefore, statesmen and educators must not hesitate, not even for a moment, and must look for other solutions where there is only one that is sure, proven once and again by all that has happened to man since Paleolithic. Instead of many laws, he believed many schools of direct labor were needed to train the young. And for grown-ups, instead of officially preaching to them, which in most cases is in vain, it was way better to teach them how to work wisely. (Mehedinți, 2009, p. 4). In the foreword to the seventh edition of *Altă creștere-Școala muncii (A Different Growth-The School of Labor)*, Mehedinți stated that it is not the book that teaches man, but labor. However, he did not underestimate the role of pedagogy or education in the progress of the nation. The true factor of progress is the acquisition of some solid practical skills, coupled with a correct moral attitude. Intense labor, based on education, science and morals has deep and wide consequences towards raising the level of culture and civilization. The Romanian people will not be able to overcome hardships unless they work more and better (more efficiently) than those who are their enemies "and in this way they will morally outrank them" (Mehedinți, 2009, p. 37). The educational importance of labor resides in the fact that it attracts the child towards lucrative and practical activities "in such a way that for the rest of his life he will not be lazy anymore" (Mehedinți, 2009, p. 269).

Simion Mehedinți considered that each and every child has different features according to the ethnic environment he lives in, that he acquires from his mother a certain "spiritual wealth" that fits a certain "pattern of thinking" based upon the acquisitions of several generations; the child is a being that is "imbued with ethnic tradition". Therefore, the ethnopedagogical method is to be used in education since it is not enough to adopt an imported educational model (English, German or American) in order to solve the problems of the educational system. Moreover, Mehedinți believed that the hardest task for a government is to train the trainers, that is those who teach the young generations.

Simion Mehedinți considered that the purpose of the university as an institution was to offer scientific training to those young people who wanted to have a superior culture, because culture is "the highest manifestation of life within all the peoples in all ages" (Mehedinți, 2011, p. 326); the result is new national values in science and the emergence of a new generation that would insure "the autonomy of our thought" (Mehedinți, 2011, p. 340).

Education has got a twofold ethnographic dimension. Firstly, through the methods it uses (the national nature of the Romanian pedagogy, which must be based rather on intuition than on erudition, by adapting the teaching methods to the ethnographic material). Secondly, through its purpose: the individual is to become a typical representative of the ethnic group they belong to.

In Simion Mehedinți's view, national pedagogy must start from three fundamental principles:

1. The government's fundamental problem is population;
2. The growth of the population has to be based upon the "health of the soul";
3. The educational technique is the main instrument for the government to insure that the individual can adapt to the environment and can integrate himself into social life.

In the foreword of the fifth edition to his writing *Altă creștere-Școala muncii (A Different Growth.-The School of Labor)*, Simion Mehedinți identified and integrated six fundamental ideas (Mehedinți, 2009, p.23-27):

1. Labor is the only factor that insures the healthy development of a people; however, some statements deriving from his analysis may seem empirical and debatable, though they contain a large amount of Romanian Christian folk wisdom: the children of the poor are a "better sort" than the children of the rich; he who gathers a larger wealth and shows refinement "goes to hell without a doubt"; the poor is healthier than the rich;
2. The value of the children within a family is generally proportional to their number;
3. The value of the parents is proportional to the number of children they have (bachelors die sooner than the married ones, and those without children cannot be accomplished educators); the author believed that "the most powerful educator will be the one who has in their soul a richer source of love, that is the woman" because she best combines the two fundamental educational factors, labor and love; consequently, a moral matriarchy must be established and the woman must conduct education (Mehedinți, 2009, p. 120);
4. The value of a people is proportional to its number of "normal" families (that is families with lots of children);
5. The value of a school is proportional to the number of talents it discovers and issues to society;
6. The value of a country is proportional to the degree of scientific education of the masses.

Known as "Maiorescu's man" (Ornea, 1967, p. 182), selected by him to carry on his ideas, Simion Mehedinți was a supporter of traditionalism and he constantly praised the writers who searched for inspiration in the Romanian rural universe (Ornea, 1967, p. 220) and a supporter of cultural regionalism that he considered to be "the proof of a more and more vivid Romanian consciousness", as opposed to political regionalism which was "a menace to the life of the country". (Ornea, 1980, p. 112-113)

#### 4.2. Civilization and culture

Simion Mehedinți is one of the most representative Romanian scholars of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He is considered to have been the founder of the Romanian modern geography. He was a disciple of the German geopolitician Friedrich Ratzel who was his doctoral advisor, but Mehedinți added elements of human geography to it as a science, thus turning it into anthropogeography. Referring to Ratzel, Simion Mehedinți claimed that the value of a scientist is not to be found in the written works he leaves behind for posterity, but rather in the thoughts and discussions his scientific discourse generates in time (Mehedinți, 1967, p. 189).

He added to the phenomenology of geography by using certain concepts such as civilization, or *hilotechnics* in his words, as the assembly of all technical discoveries that insure material adaptation to a certain space, or culture or *psychotechnics*, as he called it, as the assembly of all intellectual, ethical and esthetical creations that insure a spiritual adaptation of the individual to a certain social environment. (Mehedinți, 1999, p. 85 and p. 119)

There are two essential works in which Simion Mehedinți expressed his view as a theoretician of culture: *Caracterizarea etnografică a unui popor prin munca și uneltele sale (The Ethnographic Description of a People through its Work and Tools)* (1920) and *Coordonate etnografice: civilizația și cultura (Ethnographical Coordinates: Civilization and Culture)* (1928). Civilization and culture are two main categories of a science that studies the life and progress of peoples perceived as ethnic mosaics, and that is ethnography. Analyzing the ethnical composition, the influence of the environment on the economic and social organization and on cultural behavior, there can be discovered some practical and pedagogical solutions to the problems a nation faces at a given point in history. Mehedinți's dichotomy *hilotechnics-psychotechnics* can be traced to the

double aspect of labor: physical labor and intellectual labor. In his opinion, civilization has three components: food, clothing, and shelter. So has culture: science, art, and religion/morals. Civilization can be assessed by the number and complexity of the tools that social groups have at hand in the process of adaptation to the geographic environment, by the "density of the population and the biological quality of individuals" (Mehedinți, 1999, p. 281)

As far as the evolution of a people is concerned, Simion Mehedinți grants the major role to culture, and not to civilization. Civilization is universal, but culture is national. (Mehedinți, 2011, p. 400). Civilization can be absorbed by anyone, but culture builds up over generations, and is only based on certain innate abilities, so that there are individuals or whole nations that can be left outside the sphere of culture. In this context, Mehedinți used a discriminating and therefore questionable phrase—"race fatality" (Mehedinți, 2011, 379-380). Moreover, Mehedinți believed that "hygiene of the race" was necessary, but his arguments in this respect give way to a lot of controversy, especially ideological controversy. The school of labor as he called it is not only a pedagogical issue, but it becomes a state issue given the fact that in a society such as the Romanian society (as it was back then, but also as it is nowadays) labor is "cursed" by the "injustice" that comes along. And since the final goal of education is to shape character by superimposing genetically inherited abilities with abilities acquired through education and experience, Mehedinți made a hierarchy in terms of how valuable Romanian characters are, and divided them into three distinct categories (Mehedinți, 2009, p. 213-215):

- a. the feeble-minded ("the feeble, crippled, degenerated, and generally speaking the unbalanced ones [...]; the imbecile, the half-witted and all the souls lacking the harmony of health", that Mehedinți called "infra-men";
- b. normal people who work with their hands or their mind;
- c. personalities ("super-men").

The condition to improve the situation is "preemptive work" for the infra-men and a "scrupulous" work schedule for the rest of the population. The main role in this belongs to the statesman but, as political genius occurs far more rarely than scientific or artistic genius, there must be an institution to compensate the lack of political genius of the government and to illustrate the "assembly of intellectual and moral values of the nation": THE ACADEMY.

Actual work is the only way to acquire a solid education and a safe character. This is how Mehedinți explained the origins of the legionary movement in Romania ("a national, religious and pedagogical movement") which, through applying the school of actual work, proved that they understood the educational role of work by that the "new man" assumed it as "physical suffering" after the healthy tiredness generated by lucrative activities (Mehedinți, 1995, p. 103-104). One of the undisputed merits of the Romanian legionary movement was their effort to rebuild the life of the Romanian people upon the sacred fundament of the Christian Orthodox religious belief (Mehedinți, 1995, p. 201).

Alongside this "different growth" based upon work, there is also the need for a "racial hygiene" policy to eliminate "several ethnic toxins": the gypsies and the Jews. Mehedinți expressed a series of theoretical considerations on this topic, which places him in the reprehensible world of racism and antisemitism, together with other Romanian intellectuals of those times. One of the explanations might be that he had studied in Germany in the period when fascist ideas were on the rise.

As far as the gypsies are concerned, Mehedinți believed that the gypsy population was parasitic in Europe (*paria*) and was a threat because they resisted vaccination and other hygiene measures and they were therefore a constant source of infectious diseases (Mehedinți, 1995, p. 201-202). He noticed that the representatives of this population ignored social morals and he gave as an example the fact that, linguistically speaking, they were responsible for spreading curse words in our country, since they were the descendants of the bondmen that had been humiliated and beaten by their masters... (Mehedinți, 2009, p. 52). Mehedinți quoted Miguel de Unamuno, who analyzed the role of the gypsies (*gitanos*) in shaping the Spanish character and considered the lack of religious tolerance and the horrors of the Spanish civil war as influences of the gypsies (Mehedinți, 1995, p. 52).

As far as the Jews are concerned, their claim to be "the chosen people" becomes an insult to mankind. Mehedinți believed that their infiltration to Romania during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was "the most serious incident in the life of the Romanian people" because then was formed "the largest allogene mass" that has ever settled on Romanian soil. Together with the action of the Mongolic elements (Hungarians, Bulgarians, and Russians) and the gypsy elements, the Jewish influence threatened the very stability in Romania.

In the chapter *Orientare către viitor (Heading for the Future)* of the book *Creștinismul românesc (Romanian Christianity)*, Mehedinți developed upon the bad influence of the triad *machinism-racism-communism*. The industrial revolution was the starting point of an economic progress that under the conditions of the growth of population increased the need for raw materials and new markets (colonies), which led to the European population migration to all the continents. The would-be inferiority of the colored races as opposed to the white race, enacted by Joseph Arthur de Gobineau's racist theory, helped justify establishing slavery and slave trade, conquering new territories and massacring and pillaging the local populations.

The exacerbation of the role of money led to an international offensive of Judaism based on economic instruments (anonymous companies, international trusts and concerns, unfair trade practices such as dumping) (Mehedinți, 1995, p. 193), but also on paralyzing the moral instinct of the nations by corrupting the superimposed walk of life (Mehedinți, 1995, p. 102).

Furthermore, communism, as an antithesis of capitalism, is seen by Mehedinți as an "abscess" of the history of mankind (Mehedinți, 1995, p. 194) that generates anarchy and wars (he made an analogy between Spain and Romania, where the agitators were communist Jews and Russian nihilists).

## 5. Conclusions

Simion Mehedinți perfectly understood the historic meaning of mankind's economic progress and he noticed that the peoples which remain at the pastoral and agricultural stage and do not move on to the industrial stage, which do not perceive the world as a global market with a unique price set by "the one who produces the cheapest and transports the fastest", which do not anticipate the economic domination replacing the military one will become the victim of "historic fatality, rising from the physical laws of the planet and from the struggle of mankind to achieve progress". (Mehedinți, 2010a, p. 205-206)

The disappearing of a nation can be caused either by a deficit or an excess of culture, or by an improper social organization that would prevent the growth of the population, which in turn would generate an "economic void" speculated by those outside the country "who come in with the capital, the labor and then the arms" (Mehedinți, 2010b, p. 165). The current international situation certifies that Mehedinți's views are both far-sighted and perennial.

A true patriot, Simion Mehedinți proved to have been a nationalist economic visionary when he stated that the country was at a turning point of its historic destiny and that there was a need to build a generation with a "highly economic and cultural offensive" that was to use "all the national sources of energy" to solve "the issue of the population, which was the fundamental issue for Romania". Even though it possessed rich resources (grain, oil, methane, coal, metals, salt, forests, vineyards, fishing ponds) that would guarantee its economic autonomy, Romania was unable to have a modern life without a "dense population". This challenge could not be completed "without the help of intense ploughing and the help of industry", economic activities that could not unfold "without a deep scientific training and without a serious growth of the entire young generation" (Mehedinți, 2010a, p. 206-208)

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