

Socio-Economic Issues in George Barițiu’s Writings

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Abstract

George Barițiu (May 24, 1812 - May 2, 1893) was a Romanian politician, journalist and historian who had significant contributions in the field of economic thinking. As a promoter of the idea to assert the Romanian identity, and an activist for the Romanians to enter economic life, Barițiu advanced a series of economic claims and aspirations. At the core of his analytical pursuit there were fundamental economic issues: competition, ownership, the peasants’ problem, the development of industry and of trade.

Key words: socialism, individualism, guild, agriculture, serfdom

J.E.L. classification: B31

1. Introduction

George Barițiu was born near Cluj. He attended the Hungarian elementary school in Trascău (nowadays Rimetea) and then went to the secondary school in Blaj. Between 1827 and 1831 he attended *Colegiul Piaristilor* (Piarists’ College) in Cluj. In 1831 he went back to Blaj and graduated from the Faculty of Theology. In 1835 he was appointed Physics teacher at the high school (here he met Simion Bărnuțiu), but after only a year he left for Brașov to pursue his teaching career (he taught Romanian and German grammar, arithmetic, history and geography) which was a successful one, over nine years long, until 1845 when he had to stop teaching. (Netea, 1966, p. 67)

One of the defining elements of his entire activity was his journalistic activity, as he was the founder of the first Romanian papers in Transylvania. The two journals that appeared in 1838 and had him as chief editor (*Gazeta de Transilvania* (The Transylvania Gazette) and its literary supplement *Foaie pentru minte, inimă și literatură* (Sheet for the Mind, the Heart and for Literature) had a crucial importance to the development of the Romanian national movement. Later on, Barițiu issued two more journals, *Transilvania* (Transylvania) and *Observatorul* (The Observatory).

His work mainly includes more than 700 articles and studies published in the journals he edited, all of them in the socio-political, economic, historic, pedagogical, literary, philosophical, and linguistic fields. (Murgescu, 1994, p. 205).

Other important titles are *Disertație despre școli, pentru toți credincioșii de legea grecească din Brașov* (Dissertation on Schools, for all the Greek Religion Followers in Brașov) (1835); *Cuvântare scolastică la examenul de vară în școala românească din Brașov-Cetate. Despre datoriile părinților și ale învățătorilor asupra creșterii tinerimii* (Scholastic Speech for the Summer Exam in the Romanian School in the City of Brașov. On the Duties of the Parents and of the Teachers in Raising the Youth) (1837); *Călindariu pentru poporul românesc* (Calendar for the Romanian People) (1852-1856); *Părți alese din istoria Transilvaniei* (Chosen Excerpts from the History of Transylvania) (1889-1891).

Along his activity as a journalist, George Barițiu had practical preoccupations in this field: he established and ran the first Romanian printing house in Brașov, as well as a paper factory in Zărnești.

As an active participant in the 1848 Revolution, as vice-president of the Great National Assembly in Blaj, George Barițiu was closely connected to the economic, social and political

realities of those times and he considered politics to be an instrument to “clearly know the needs of the times, to wisely calculate all the means to reach this goal, to rightfully apply them, to continue on the known path once it has proven to be the right one”. (Bariț, 1962, p. 133)

A polyvalent intellectual personality, George Barițiu was the principal of the first Romanian high school in Brașov, the founder of a Romanian theater, a member of the Romanian Casina in Brașov (association of the tradesmen in Brașov, which later on turned into a true cultural institution), first the secretary, then the president of ASTRA (*Asociația Transilvană pentru Literatura Română*) (Transylvanian Association for Romanian Literature) și *Cultura Poporului Român* (Culture of the Romanian People), which was initially run by Andrei Șaguna, and last but not least, he was a founding member of the Romanian Academy. He was a member of the Academy for half a century and was elected its president maybe too late, in 1893, the year of his death.

2. Theoretical background

There is a series of studies on George Barițiu’s ideas and activity. The most well-known are: *Contribuții la cunoașterea operei economice a lui George Barițiu* (Contributions to Knowing George Barițiu’s Economic Works) (G. Mladenatz, 1957), *Concepțiile social-economice ale lui G. Bariț* (G. Bariț’s Socio-Economic Views) (T. Bugnariu, 1962), *Ideii economice în opera lui George Bariț privind promovarea industriei la români* (Economic Ideas in George Bariț’s Works on Promoting Industry in Romania) (D. Ghișe, I. Kecskes and P. Teodor, 1963), *Probleme social-economice în opera lui Gheorghe Barițiu* (Socio-Economic Issues in Gheorghe Barițiu’s Works) (Al. Bărbat, 1966), *Ideile social-politice ale lui G. Bariț* (G. Bariț’s Socio-Economic Ideas) and *Viața și ideile lui George Barițiu* (George Barițiu’s Life and Ideas) (Radu Pantazi, 1957 and 1964), *Viața și activitatea lui George Bariț* (George Bariț’s Life and Ideas) (Victor Chereșteșiu, Camil Mureșan and George Em. Marica, 1962). Among the works in the field of economic thinking history which refer to George Barițiu a special one is that written by Virgil I. Ionescu *Eurofiliiile și americanofilia ideilor economice la români 1801-1850* (The Europhily and Americanophily of the Romanian Economic Ideas 1801-1850) (in which articles such as *Ideii din economia politică* (Ideas of Political Economy), *Unele idei despre stat* (Some Ideas on the State), *Ideea unui bun econom* (The Idea of a Good Economist), and so on, are commented on). In volume VII of *Studiilor de istorie economică și istoria gândirii economice* (Studies of Economic History and the History of Economic Thought) (2005) Iulian Văcărel signed the study *George Bariț despre servituțile populației rurale și povara fiscalității în Transilvania* (George Bariț on the Servitudes of the Rural Population and the Burden of Taxation in Transylvania).

3. Research methodology

In our research methodology we have mainly focused on interpreting George Barițiu’s views. The article is based upon quality research. In it we have explored in a backward looking approach how his ideas have influenced the subsequent development of the Romanian socio-economic realities. At the same time, we have carried out descriptive research, by closely observing the particularities that set Barițiu’s thinking apart from his contemporaries.

4. Findings

4.1. Reforming the economy

George Barițiu’s reforming economic ideas, which are both wide and deep, show good knowledge of the European economic thinking (F. Quesnay, A. Smith, F. List, J.B. Say) as well as knowledge of the Romanian economic views of those times (D.P. Marțian, P.S. Aurelian, A.D. Xenopol) (Malinschi, 1990, p. 54).

His main objectives in reforming the economy were the exclusion of domestic custom taxes (since a flourishing trade would intensify both the industry and the agriculture, from the perspective of the raw materials and of the markets), the dissolution of the guilds and the

establishment of a free competition among manufacturers, as well as the abolition of serfdom and of the medieval-bureaucratic centralism of the Habsburg absolutist regime.

The economic ideas of the Romanian intellectuals of those times proved their direct contact with European liberalism and an understanding of the specific conditions in Romania, among which the necessity of a national rebirth, especially by stimulating the establishment and the consolidation of a prosperous middle class.

Having the European bourgeoisie - which was the engine of the capitalist economic development - as a model, Barițiu asked for the guild system to disappear. He considered them to be anachronistic both because they were unable to insure the productive needs of a modern economy, and because they represented an instrument through which the Germans and the Hungarians held the monopoly in trade and crafts and excluded Romanians. George Barițiu quoted Adam Smith and Friedrich List when he claimed that the factory system is superior to the manufacture system because it generated more diverse, more numerous and more affordable goods. Barițiu illustriously anticipated the idea of scale economies when he wrote that factories “help the great society [...] and the parsimonious producers of raw materials”) (Bariț, 1962, p.94)

George Barițiu’s view on freedom and competition is expressed in the article *Lupta principiilor în Franța* (The Clash of Principles in France) (Bariț, 1962, p.94) published in issue 48 of *Foaie pentru minte, inimă și literatură* (Sheet for the Mind, the Heart and for Literature) in 1851. To sum it up, he identified two fundamental main approaches to this issue: the individualist one, and the socialist one.

He noticed that the first approach, which favored “free and limitless” competition first appeared in England under the influence of Adam Smith’s writings and then extended to countries such as France, Belgium, the Netherlands and so on, and it unfolded as a horse race, as a race between “the capitalist and the pauper, between the manufacturer and the worker, between the foreman and his son, between the owner of 10,000 hectares and the owner of 10 hectares of land”. (Bariț, 1962, p.142-147) But unless it is “somehow organized”, free competition will polarize society, will deepen the gap between the rich and the poor, will cause small workshops and craftsmen to disappear and will increase the number of the laborers, he pointed out.

The second approach, based upon the concepts of equality and solidarity, is presented by Barițiu from the Ricardian perspective of division. Thus, Barițiu’s view on economy was far wider than that of his contemporaries, as it integrated production, division, circulation and consumption. (Nicolae-Văleanu, Ionescu, Pinczes, 1981, p. 119).

He considered that each individual should get the amount of work they could do (with their hands or with their mind), but the results of their work should be divided according to everyone’s needs, not according to the amount of work they have done”. The emphasis is on redistributive fairness: „what one cannot consume out of what they earn should be given to the one with a healthier stomach who was not able to earn enough”.

The finesse of Barițiu’s analysis is given by the nuances of his language: not all the results of the work should be redistributed, but only what exceeds consumption, “what cannot be consumed” and this should go not to anyone whatsoever, but to “the one with a healthier stomach”.

As far as equality among people is concerned, socialists start from the idea that although people are not equal in physical force, power of the mind and tastes, “the equal development of the human abilities” is to be insured for the benefit of the entire society, as a form of human solidarity: “everybody is to be able to use their natural abilities for the benefit of all, and to use what their natural needs ask for”. Once again Barițiu chooses his words in a certain way to express the idea that equality is to be insured in such a way that each individual should pursue not only his own interest but the interest of everybody; also, the “innate” and not the *acquired* abilities are to be satisfied. Socialists compare the life of a family to that of the society as a whole and consider that society is some sort of extended family: just as in an ordinary family the parents satisfy their own needs and provide for their children, in a society what exceeds natural needs of some should go to those who cannot produce what they need to consume in order to exist.

For Barițiu it was obvious that the developed countries in Europe considered that the Romanian provinces were inhabited by “barbaric and stupid peoples” who had to depend on the “foreign factories, interests and wishes”. The trade deficit (“we get from foreigners far less than we spend”) is the result of the idea that *luxury stimulates the industry*, but Barițiu noticed that this principle

applies “only where factories are within the country and the raw produces are manufactured right there on the spot”. (Bariț, 1962, p.148) The Gordian knot of this situation consists in the reforming of ownership, seen not in its restricted meaning, but from a social point of view, with two aspects:

- a. in a corrupt society, the landowners had increasing debts as they refused to live “in parsimony” and preferred “lavish meals and a lazy life”, so that they borrowed money “twice or three times” more than what they earned; Barițiu criticized the excessive consumption of coffee, tea and chocolate, as he was a supporter of “patriotic” traditional foods; (G. Zane, 1980, p. 351)
- b. these expenses were financed by the income from positions obtained through nepotism by “a limited number of two or three hundred families” (Bariț, 1962, p. 128)

The solution was for the elites to change their behavior and mentality. On the one hand they showed a “nauseating Epicureanism” by spending all their income “only to be able to wear a tail coat”, on the other hand they ignored the national interest: “the filthy habits” acquired from the East (the Ottomans) worked as they strived to copy the French aristocracy when they were faced with “the dirty trade interest of the English and with the German manipulations”. (op.cit., p. 148-149)

Without neglecting the importance of the agriculture (“Our country saves land” he wrote as a true Physiocrat), Barițiu followed the Mercantilist commercialist system when he noticed that agricultural activities could only develop “where trade was able to move produces from one place to another [...] in such a way as to have an active and not a passive state of our savings and speculations” (op.cit., p. 81)

As far as trade is concerned, Barițiu considered that it is favored by the geographical position of the country: “Nature had pointed towards the Danube and the Black Sea and from there to the east”. (op.cit., p. 51) In his opinion, Transylvania’s economic development depended on its free access to the south, towards the two major communication means, the Danube and the Black sea. He was fully aware of the importance of infrastructure for the development of trade, so George Barițiu supported the idea of building a railway to connect the cities of Oradea, Cluj and Brașov (***, 1964, p.199). On the same line, considering Transylvania’s economic interests, as secretary of the association of the tradesmen of Brașov (1850-1851), he wrote an explanatory report in favor of intensifying the economic ties between Transylvania and Wallachia. (op. cit. p. 419)

In his opinion, the positive role of trade is determined by the tradesman’s fair practical and moral conduct. In the article *Neguțatoriul* (The Tradesman) (1844), Barițiu presented a model of good commercial practices, in which is prominent the idea that the tradesman must not cause an artificial rise in prices through speculative practices. (Ionescu, 1999, p. 101-102)

4.2. The agrarian issue

Prior to the 1848 Revolution, there were three distinct directions in terms of interests in Transylvania. The first one was nationalistic; it was promoted by the Romanian bourgeoisie and aimed at creating an independent Romanian state. The second, the Hungarian one, wanted to make Transylvania part of Hungary. The third, the German one, served the interests of the Austrian Empire.

Barițiu identified the fight against feudalism as the fight against the Habsburg absolutism and considered that the contradiction between nobility and serfs was an ethnic one, between the Hungarians and the Romanians. He was against the view of the conservatory who claimed that “the Romanian nation had not yet reached the required maturity to deserve political independence”. (Bariț, 1962, p. 131)

In Transylvania agricultural lands were owned by the dominant classes while only a small percentage of the population owned small plots of land. The economy of the principality was mainly agrarian and George Barițiu analyzed it from the point of view of the peasantry, which was a numerous but poor social category. The main issue was serfdom, and abolishing it was a national cause for him.

The anti-feudal ideas came both from Romanians and from Hungarians. Even though the majority of the serfs were Romanians, there were also Hungarian and German serfs as well. The Romanian population in Transylvania was of 1.2 million and represented the majority in relation to

the other nationalities (Hungarians, Germans, etc) which only amounted to 900,000. Barițiu drew the difference between the social and the national issues by admitting that there were renegade Romanian or German noblemen “just as tyrannical as the pure bred Hungarians” and “Hungarian aristocrats of higher humanity”. (op.cit., p.301) He stated that “it was necessary to speak about aristocracy and general and serfs in general”. (op.cit., p. 84)

His analysis and his ideas on the agrarian issue are remarkably impartial from the ethnic point of view and his description of the tough situation of the peasantry did not take nationality into account. (Malinschi, 1990, p. 53)

As the household industry declined and as taxation increased, capitalism infiltrated agriculture and had evil consequences: the small peasant ownership disappeared, the peasants ruined themselves because of usury and therefore the peasant household went to ruin, the labor force became exceeding especially in the countryside, people started to migrate abroad.

Barițiu put forward a program for the development of the Romanian agricultural economy which included educating the peasants to have a sense of ownership and to avoid losing it, taking measures to support the best use of the land, and establishing a system to give agricultural education.

Even though capitalism was on the verge of defeating feudalism, there were still old feudal relationships. The new ownership relationships were not clear cut and agriculture was done in a primitive and traditional way. So, we can say that Barițiu foreshadowed C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea when he spoke of “the new serfdom”. (***, vol. IV, p. 724)

The fight between landowners and trading bourgeoisie was mirrored in economic thinking and created a dichotomy of economic ideas, which went between theoretically substantiating the idea of maintaining the agrarian state and developing a national industry by promoting the free trade policy. Just as G. Zane observed, all the leaders of the Revolutions in the Romanian Principalities were supporters of the free trade (Zane, 1980, p. 138).

George Barițiu’s stand on free trade clearly shows his patriotism. In his article *Chestiunea tarifelor și a convențiilor comerciale* [The Issue of Tariffs and Commercial Conventions], Barițiu agreed with P.S. Aurelian: “This theory can be beautiful as an ideal; in reality, in the practical life of most peoples and states, it would mean atrocious slavery and sure national death by depletion for that particular people”. (***, 2010, p. 143)

Even though there is such a clash of opinions, there is a common interest to achieve the fundamental objective: the creation of an independent unitary state by means having a revolution. But for Barițiu, this revolution was not to be violent and anarchic. It was to be „a total change of those laws and governments which could no longer be put up with, which made the people groan in pain without being able to escape just like that”. (Bariț, 1962, p. 126)

4.3. The population issue

The relationship between population and economic development was at the core of George Barițiu’s analysis, especially given the fact that in his times the Romanians in Transylvania wished to assert their national identity. In his article *Despre împoporare* (On Populating) (1846), George Barițiu, as a liberal and as an illuminist, proved his art in explaining the population issue. First of all, he noticed the ability of the population for self-regulation: statistically speaking, the fact that more men are born than women is counteracted by the fact that a lot of men die because of wars and revolutions. Also, when there is no “moral education to keep righteous morals”, “the demon of indulgence” comes and the population deceases.

Barițiu’s liberalism arises from his conviction that governments should let nature take its course and be only concerned with making people happy by insuring their “full security”. And the most important instrument to do so is to guarantee that each individual has the right “to have ownership of their land”. This should be doubled by measures such as the fair division of wealth (“labor” is to be divided according to everyone’s strength), the exclusion of things such as monopolies, nepotism, favors and bribe, the freedom to exert “spiritual powers”.

As a true patriot, Barițiu was constantly concerned with the faith of the Romanian people and clearly opposed all philosophical ideas that, in his opinion, were harmful for Romanians. Thus, he wrote: “pessimism would be a deadly poison for the state of Romania and for the Romanian nation

in general” as he referred to Arthur Schopenhauer’s philosophy (Pantazi, 1964, p. 268). This Buddhist inspired philosophy “has thrown until now millions of human beings into the abyss of unhappiness” because it promotes “a terrifying maze of ideas, concepts, fantasies, mixed with preconceived opinions” which induce the idea that “life has no price as the total pain is greater than the total pleasure”, and the only solution is the “run away from life”. The danger of such ideas getting spread out (which had led to an increase in the number of abortions in countries such as Germany or Austria) is twofold: on the one hand, it exhorts to resignation just as the need to intensify the fight for national freedom was greater than ever, and on the other hand, it led to the decrease in number of the population as they claimed that “it was good to cut down population growth”.

Given the way he tackled these issues, from a mainly moral perspective, we can say that George Barițiu was very close to the Mercantilist view, according to which the power of a country is given by the size of its population: through “monogamy, supported by religion, science, agriculture, a healthy industry, our number will constantly grow[...]”, he said just before finishing his plea during his public speech at the Romanian Academy in April 1880 with a double urging message which is truly visionary: *Make children and fight luxury!*

5. Conclusions

George Barițiu was an intellectual dedicated to promoting the national cause of his fellow citizens. He brilliantly combined political, journalistic and literary means to achieve his purpose. Beyond his remarkable revolutionary activity, through his works, George Barițiu was a prominent figure among the founders of the Romanian modern culture.

George Barițiu was a representative scholar in Transylvania and played an essential role in the ideological life of the Romanians in Transylvania. Since he had no economical training and education, his place in the history of the Romanian economic thinking is given by his progressive attitude and mentality he showed as part of the struggle for social and national freedom, by his liberal economic direction of thinking and by the ageless validity of the ideas he put forward. For instance, when discussing poverty, he identified its cause as being the lack of certain skills and certain knowledge in manufacturing and selling domestic products, as a direct consequence of not having “a real technical and commercial” school. (Bariț, 1961, p. 50-51)

The economic issues that were at the core of his analytical research (analyzing the material status of the Romanian people, eradicating poverty by removing its causes, surpassing economic backwardness by creating a unified and independent national economy) and the way he handled and solved them place George Barițiu among the most prestigious representatives of the Transylvanian school of economics.

Taking his economic and political views into considerations, we can place George Barițiu next to Mihail Kogălniceanu, as a liberal-democrat who promoted the interests of the industrialist bourgeoisie. (***, 1964, p. 689) Alongside 1492 other people, he was one of the signatories of the *Pronouncement of Blaj* in May 1868. And as an expression of his progressive attitude, after 1878, Barițiu became an important advocate of moderate liberalism.

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