

Simion Bărnuțiu and His Socio-Political Ideas

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Abstract

Simion Bărnuțiu (July 21, 1808 - May 24, 1864) was a Romanian politician and scholar who followed the tradition of the Transylvanian School (Școala ardeleană) and the German Rationalism. He is considered to be the ideologist and the political leader of the Romanian Revolution of 1848 in Transylvania. He was mainly preoccupied with philosophy and legal science and had a significant contribution to establishing the principles of political and legal organization for the new Romanian unified state, but also to proposing solutions for the Romanian economic problems.

Key words: nationalism, nation, agriculture, serfdom, land ownership

J.E.L. classification: B31

1. Introduction

Simion Bărnuțiu was born in Bocșa (Sălaj). He attended elementary school in Șimleu (1817-1820) and then secondary school in Carei. Between 1826 and 1829 he studied philosophy and theology in Blaj. Between 1829 and 1842 he taught history and philosophy in Romanian at high school in Blaj and was also a theological seminary educator and secretary of the consortium. Because he strongly protested against the decision of the Diet of Cluj to introduce the Hungarian language in the schools and the administration of Transylvania, he was dismissed as a teacher and he decided to study law in Sibiu (1847).

He was an active participant in the 1848 Revolution and the author of the *March Proclamation* and of the *May Speech*, in which he set the major directions of the revolution. Together with August Treboniu Laurian, Timotei Cipariu, George Barițiu and other revolutionaries, he fought for the abolition of serfdom, for the freedom and the sovereignty of the Romanian nation.

Given the circumstances of those times, he found refuge in Vienna, then in Pavia, where he continued his law studies and obtained a PhD (1854). In 1855 he became a teacher at the academic secondary school in Iași and in 1860 a university professor. After settling in the capital of Moldavia, he got involved in achieving the national goals of the Moldavian revolutionaries and of those in Wallachia and fought for the unification of the Principalities under one ruler. He died of pneumonia and rheumatism at only 56 years of age.

Simion Bărnuțiu's work includes a series of published papers as well as some manuscripts. His most important piece of writing is considered to be *Discursul de la Blaj* [The Speech at Blaj] (May 2/14, 1848). He published in *Foaie pentru minte, inimă și literatură* [Sheet for the Mind, the Heart and for Literature] a series of cultural, political, historical and economical articles. Among his published papers are: *Argomenti di giurisprudenza e di scienze politiche* [Legal and Political Arguments] (1854), his PhD thesis; *Dreptul public al românilor* [The Public Law in Romania] (1867), his most important law paper; *Dreptul natural privat* [Private Natural Right] (1868); *Dreptul natural public* [Public Natural Right] (1870); *Pedagogia* [Pedagogy] (1870); *Psihologia empirică și Logica* [Empirical Psychology and Logic] (1871). Among his manuscripts the following are worth mentioning: *Enciclopedia filozofiei teoretice* [The Encyclopedia of Theoretical Philosophy], *Istoria filozofiei* [The History of Philosophy], *Politica* [Politics], *Etica* [Ethics], *Logica* [Logic], *Metafizica* [Metaphysics].

2. Theoretical background

Both his biography and his nationalistic, legal and socio-political ideas were the topics for many research papers. Among the most distinguished ones we can mention the following: *Viața și ideile lui Simion Bărnuțiu* [The Life and Ideas of Simion Bărnuțiu] (G. Bogdan Duică, 1924); *Simion Bărnuțiu. Omul și gândirea* [Simion Bărnuțiu. The Man and His Thinking] (Radu Pantazi, 1967); *Filozofia politico-juridică a lui Simion Bărnuțiu* [Simion Bărnuțiu's Political and Legal Philosophy] (Petre Pandrea, 1935); *Europeanul Bărnuțiu* [Bărnuțiu the European] (D. D. Roșca, 1944); *Simion Bărnuțiu. Suveranitate națională și integrare europeană* [Simion Bărnuțiu. National Sovereignty and European Integration] (Ioan Chindriș, 1998).

A synthetic image on Bărnuțiu's work is given by studies dedicated to him, such as: *O enciclopedie a gândirii politice românești, vol. I: 1821-1918* [An Encyclopedia of the Romanian Political Thinking, vol. I: 1821-1918] (2018), *Istoria filozofiei românești, vol. I* [The History of the Romanian Philosophy, vol. I] (1985), *Din istoria pedagogiei românești, vol. III* [From the History of the Romanian Pedagogy, vol. III] (1957) and *Idees avansees dans l'oeuvre de Simon Bărnuțiu* [Ideas Presented in Simion Bărnuțiu's Work], signed by Miron Constantinescu (1964).

3. Research methodology

In order to identify the specificity of Simion Bărnuțiu's ideas in the context of his times, we have used the descriptive method. After having synthetically analyzed the contents of Simion Bărnuțiu's writings, we have tried to place his legal, political, social and economic views within the contemporary national and European currents of thinking. Using the descriptive research method, we had the possibility to approach his intellectual background and political activity from a quality point of view. The result of our research was the fact that we have managed to emphasize one-to-one causative relations with his socio-political principles. To write our article, we have employed several different scientific research methods, such as induction, deduction, analysis, synthesis, and comparison.

4. Findings

4.1. The national issue

Simion Bărnuțiu was a representative figure of the revolutionary intellectuality in Transylvania. He was „led by the metaphysics of the Enlightenment (*Aufklarungsphilosophie*), which was dominant in those times and by the principles stated in the Declaration of Human Rights” (Pandrea, 1935, p. 52).

A representative of the Romanian bourgeoisie in Transylvania that through revolution fought to obtain the role of the dominant class, Simion Bărnuțiu asked for the abolition of serfdom, equality of rights, but also for acknowledging the Romanian nation as a self-standing nation, that was to take part in governing proportionally to its numeric weight.

A valuable illuminist, Simion Bărnuțiu can be considered the first great Romanian liberal thinker, given the fact that he considered freedom to be a right above all privileges. For him, the path towards a free and just society started with freedom, which was insured by the social contract, and the factor to grant its force was equality. Freedom was the main topic of Bărnuțiu's thinking.

The distinctive element in the Romanian liberal landscape of those times, which sets Bărnuțiu aside from many of his fellow thinkers, was the fact that he considered the Habsburg monarchy to be a possible ally in the fight against the dominance of the Hungarian nobility over the Romanians of Transylvania (the same opinion was shared by Bishop Andrei Șaguna who tried hard not to offend the interests of the imperial court in Vienna).

Just as P. Maior, Gh. Șincai and Gh. Lazăr, Simion Bărnuțiu was what history takes down as “intelligence” (professors, lawyers, doctors, teachers, priests, civil servants in administration and justice), a social category which had a significant role in the revolutionary movement and in promoting the capitalist economic relations in the Principalities.

Simion Bărnuțiu stated a fundamental principle of the Romanian socio-political thinking as early as 1848. It is the principle of equal rights: “the Romanian nation does not wish to rule other nations, nor does it wish to suffer the rule of others, but it wishes equal rights for everything”. (Zane, 1980, p. 291)

By everything he thought and wrote about, Simion Bărnuțiu constantly advertised the thesis of the Roman origins of the Romanian people and of the Latin origins of the Romanian language: “The Latinist school direction Simion Bărnuțiu follows represents national fanaticism, sacred solemnity crowned by the laurels of erudition and academic rhetoric” (Pandrea, 1935, p. 147)

Simion Bărnuțiu wanted an autonomous Transylvania in which the use of the Romanian language in schools and administration was to be granted. Language is the cornerstone of any language. Without it, a people loses its character and nationality, as Bărnuțiu noticed. (Hitchins, 1998, p. 275) „Language is the most valuable wealth of an innocent individual and of an uncorrupt people”, it is an inner treasure „closely linked to the personality of each individual and the nationality of each people”, wrote Simion Bărnuțiu in his article *O tocmeală de rușine și o lege nedreaptă*. [A Shameful Bargain and an Unjust Law] (Cornea, Zamfir, 1969, p.377)

The situation in Transylvania was totally different compared to the other Romanian provinces. Romanians in Transylvania had no civil and political rights whatsoever, as the ruling class was made up mainly of privileged representatives of other nations. The political program of the 1848 revolutionaries had this reality as its starting point and identified as a possible solution for the political, legal and administrative disagreements the simultaneous and integral solving of the political and of the socio-economic problems (national liberty and abolition of serfdom, respectively). From this very perspective, in the opinion of some researchers, from a practical point of view, Simion Bărnuțiu considered that reaching the nationalistic and patriotic goal (proclaiming the freedom and independence of the Romanian nation) was a priority, and he believed that the economic problems would automatically be solved (abolition of serfdom, development of trade and industry) (***, 1964, p.134)

Bărnuțiu included elements of economics into his philosophy lectures. One example is the logical reasoning related to taxation and income distribution that Bărnuțiu presented in *Psihologia empirică și Logica* [Empirical Psychology and Logic]. He wrote: “All citizens are to bear the tasks of the country. The noblemen are citizens. Therefore, noblemen are to bear themselves the tasks of the country”; then “All citizens are to share the goods and also the tasks of the country”, and “Peasants are citizens. Therefore peasants are to share the tasks of the country”. By emphasizing a logical contradiction, Simion Bărnuțiu planned on demonstrating the necessity of reforming economic practices, which were essentially unfair: even though noblemen had huge income, they did not pay taxes, while the peasants, who paid so many taxes, had no benefit out of the “wealth of the country” (social transfers, in modern terms) (Pantazi, 1967, p.70)

Simion Bărnuțiu’s attitude towards the Orthodox Church and towards religion in general shows an intertwining relation between his rationalistic and liberalist ideas and his nationalistic ones, according to the current social realities of those times. Far from being an atheist or an anti-clericalist, he looked upon the church as an essential social player, as it had the role of keeping and continuing national customs and traditions; to do so, the Church had to have a representative leadership, by creating a diocesan synod (Hitchins, 1998, p. 277)

Simion Bărnuțiu was a liberal by training and by attitude. He created “a school”. His oratorical style, his talent of putting forward his convictions, his pedagogical vocation, all attracted numerous followers, but also many critics. The most virulent of his critics was Titu Maiorescu. He contested the fundamentals of the liberal view on the modernization of Romania, based upon the fact that the Western European institutions were to replace the local ones. He believed that in Romania there were no historical fundamentals to have generated the necessity for the national institutional structure to evolve and transform, just as there was no training and mentality to help the adaptation to the new.

4.2. The agrarian issue

Simion Bărnuțiu’s stand on the problem of the peasants was as clear as it could be. In his chapter titled *Despre necesitatea împrăștiării țăranilor și a unei noi organizări a vieții economice în România* [On the Need for Peasants to Become Owners of the Land and for Economic Life in Romania to Have a New Organization] from his course of *Public Law* taught at the University of Iași (1860-1864), he used arguments taken from the Roman law to emphasize the need for peasants to become owners of the land: “Strongly ask for serfdom to be abolished, because, when working for nothing on the landlords’ land for about ten hundred years, you have already paid about one hundred times for the land that gave you your daily bread. Moreover, you have paid in honesty for nothing, as the land was yours” (Zane,1980, p.131).

Simion Bărnuțiu believed that “the Romanian state owed the Romanian nation” the reform of the institution of property which was “feudal and hostile to the Romanian nation”. He referred both to the property owned by Romanians and to that “which served the foreigners”. Making the peasants owners of the land and highly compensating landlords for that was simply not just in Bărnuțiu’s view as it was not the case for peasants to “buy” their own emancipation.

His legal view naturally extended into a socio-economic approach based upon the idea that the state was to regulate the competition between the small landowners and the big landowners, Romanians and/or foreigners. To that effect, he put forward four sets of measures. (***, 2010, p. 169-173)

- Creating funds for each community to pay for the current expenses of the community and to lend to the members of the community; setting up regional and national banks; building communications means (we notice again the nationalism and the patriotism in Bărnuțiu’s analysis, as for him the banks and the communications means had to have Romanian ownership);
- Banning the selling of agricultural land to members of other communities and keeping it in the property of the community;
- Banning the system of hereditary leasehold (*embatic* or *emfiteuse*) and farming leasehold (colonat);
- Imposing the rule according to which the big landlords were to sell their land to Romanians only.

Bărnuțiu was permanently concerned with the consequences of making peasants landowners since there was the risk for them to get extensive surfaces of land and not be able to insure their economic independence in the absence of a legal framework meant to protect them from the competition of the big landlords.

Generally speaking, the representatives of the Romanian school of economic thinking had identified the practical solution: promoting a rational agriculture. To this end, Bărnuțiu wrote: The time has come for people in the field of agriculture to stop believing that a heavenly or earthly power can help them unless they help themselves by adopting better means than before” (op.cit., p. 163)

In his article *Observațiuni statistice despre cultivațiunea pământului Europei* [Statistical Observations on Europe’s Crop Land] (1853), Simion Bărnuțiu tackled the issue of agriculture. To begin with, he noticed that there were two completely different situations in Europe: the first one, in which agricultural land was exploited almost to its full potential (England, Germany, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Denmark), and the second one, in which agricultural production was high because the fertility of the soil made up for the lack of industry (Russia, Poland, Ukraine, Turkey, Spain, Portugal).

The fact that he was not a trained economist did not prevent Simion Bărnuțiu from voicing an idea that was both innovative and valuable in those times: the essential role of the industry in the development of a modern and efficient agriculture. Later on in his analysis he identified a series of causes that prevented the progress of agriculture:

- Physical causes: climate, terrain, poor fertility of the soil;
- Moral causes: a hostile mentality against agricultural activities (the Spanish, the

Portuguese, the Turks, the Jews), the proclivity towards manufacturing activities (the Russians);

- The lack of practical agricultural knowledge (especially agricultural chemistry) as a result of the lack of specialized schools;
- Political causes: a very small number of landlords who owned the lands, the excessive dissipation of agricultural land, the high taxation, grazing someone else’s pastures, the system of hereditary lease (*embatic*);
- Local causes: insufficient labor force, inappropriate infrastructure, absenteeism.

Simion Bărnuțiu’s views were concise, clear, scientific and analytic, objective. In the end he crossed the t’s and dotted the i’s when referring to serfdom: “Blessed are the countries where this predatory means has been wiped out!” (Cornea, Zamfir, p. 381-385)

In a sequel of this article, Simion Bărnuțiu analyzed the agriculture in Transylvania through the two fundamental economic views of those times, protectionism and free trade. Being aware of the abolition of the Corn Laws in England, the Romanian author went beyond the obvious and realized that adopting the measures of free trade which favored industry to agriculture meant that “the focus was on the public benefit (that is national interest) more than on the loss of private beneficiaries” because, since England was mainly an industrial country, this free trade policy allowed it “to rule the world due to its industry”. In other words, the free trade policy was an instrument of the English economic imperialism...

Transylvania was in a completely different situation. There was a severe lack of food, and famine was constantly lurking. Domestic agricultural production was totally insufficient (agriculture was rudimentary, there was a lack of solidarity and farmers refused to build associations, there were no agricultural schools and therefore there was no modern scientific knowledge to exercise this basic activity). There was no money to import agricultural produces; the road infrastructure was archaic, while exports only included raw materials such as salt and timber. Under such circumstances, an agrarian reform was compulsory and it had to come along the establishment of a strong and sovereign national state that was to adopt measures for the development of the domestic agriculture and to protect it against the foreign competition. (***, 2010, p. 162-163)

5. Conclusions

Simion Bărnuțiu found in philosophy and law the fundamental principles to support social and national freedom. The true civilization is fed by a twofold source: Christianity and the spiritual legacy inherited from Ancient Greece (rationalism) and from Ancient Rome (Roman law). Thus, Bărnuțiu placed Roman law at the basis of Romania’s legal edifice and claimed the *ubique et semper* validity of the Roman political organization (the republic) which was to be a model in the process of reforming the Romanian state.

Simion Bărnuțiu’s name is inseparably connected to the first scientific approach of legal concepts and their study in an academic environment (Iași, 1856 și București, 1959): “The Romanian nation has lived with its Romanian right, its laws, its domestic, religious and political customs and traditions, under the rule of the Goths, the Huns, the Avatars, and so much so since the establishment of the Romanian states; [...] the greatness of the Romanian nation, which was claimed by those barbarians, has triumphed” (***, 1966, p. 318). The right of the Romanian people to choose its own destiny and to elect its rulers and the creation of certain democratic institutions were among the ideas that the Transylvanian jurist put forward, ideas which contributed to generating a favorable climate for the development of the Romanian legal and political philosophy.

In time, the rationalism, the progressivism, and the patriotism of Bărnuțiu’s writings have endured and they have given them perpetual value. Nicolae Iorga mentioned the fact that Simion Bărnuțiu was “a man with a single vision and with a single mission” and, just like any other old Transylvanian, did not see anything around him, being locked up in his great theory (Iorga, 1967, p.253-254). Iorga mentioned the fact that Bărnuțiu did not have any descendents, but from a cultural perspective, we believe that we are all his rightful descendents.

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