

Economics and Politics in Mihai Eminescu’s Works

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Abstract

Mihai Eminescu (January 8, 1850 – June 14, 1889) was a poet, a prose writer and a publicist who was active around the year 1848. He was equally interested and approached the economic, social and political themes that defined the Romanian society of his times. This paper wishes to point out the guiding lines of Eminescu’s economic thinking and the fundamental reference points of his economic and political ideology.

Key words: nationalism, liberalism, superimposed layer, theory of forms without substance

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1. Introduction

Mihai Eminescu was not an economist, neither by training, nor by profession. We cannot say that there is a certain writing of his that presents his general economic beliefs, but he practically approached all major economic issues of the Romanian society of his times. (Nechita, 1989, p. 91). Rightfully considered to have been *un uomo universale*, Eminescu had remarkable contributions in at least four fields of research: philosophy, history, linguistics, and economics (Noica, 1992, p. 188).

He was well acquainted with the writings and views of the great economists of those times – Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Thomas Robert Malthus, Friedrich List, Henry Carey, Jean-Baptiste Say, John Stuart Mill, Francois Quesnay, Gustav von Schmoller, and he laid the foundations of his economic knowledge in Wien (1869-1872) and in Berlin (1872-1874), where he was taught, among others, by the economist and sociologist Lorenz von Stein and by the philosopher and socialist economist Eugen Dühring.

Eminescu died at the age of 39, after having fully participated in the literary and cultural life of those times and after having closely analyzed the economic, social and political life of the country. Throughout his rich activity as a journalist, he was against the Romanian liberalism of those times. He criticized the excessive red tape, the tendency to acquire positions within government-controlled institutions, and he supported the development of productive labor, that could increase the country’s income.

2. Theoretical background

Eminescu’s economic writings were not collected and presented by the author in a theoretical corpus. They have been analyzed from a multi-disciplinary perspective (history, political science, sociology, demography, statistics).

As far as Eminescu’s life and activity are concerned, we consider the following writings to be referential: G. Călinescu, *Viața lui Mihai Eminescu* [Mihai Eminescu’s Life] (1932), as well as the studies written to foreword various editions of his works, signed by I. Crețu, D. Murărașu, Perpessicius (Dumitru S. Panaitescu), Al. Oprea, D. Vatamaniuc.

Vasile C. Nechita analyzed the specific and original features of Eminescu’s economic writings in a coherent and consistent manner in his work *Meditații economice eminesciene* [Eminescu’s Economic Contemplations] (1989), in his introductory study to the anthology *Economia națională* [National Economy] (1983), but also in the chapter titled *Mihai Eminescu – geniu și în economie* [Mihai Eminescu – A genius in Economics as well] in the book *Economiști români cu vocație universală* [Romanian Economists with Universal Calling] (2015).

Radu Mihai Crișan published some important books titled *Economistul Mihai Eminescu* [Mihai Eminescu the Economist] (2003), *Actualitatea economiei eminesciene* [The Contemporaneity of Eminescu’s Economics] (2003) and *Spre Eminescu. Răspuns românesc la amenințările prezentului și la provocările viitorului* [Towards Eminescu. Romanian Response to the Threats of the Present and the Challenges of the Future] (2004).

Ilie Bădescu considered Mihai Eminescu’s sociological doctrine as the pivotal point of his scientific thinking and critically presented it in his writings *Sincronism european și cultură critică românească* [European Synchronism and Romanian Critical Culture] (1984) and *Sociologie eminesciană* [Eminescu’s Sociology] (1994).

The controversial issue of antisemitism in Mihai Eminescu’s works was tackled by Gică Manole in his book *Mihai Eminescu și evreii* [Mihai Eminescu and the Jews] (2017) and by D. Vatamaniuc in the foreword *Eminescu și chestiunea evreiască* [Eminescu and the Jewish Issue] to the anthology titled *Chestiunea evreiască* [The Jewish Issue] (2019).

The ideological underlayer of the nationalist streak that comes to the surface in most of Mihai Eminescu’s articles and studies was analytically and structurally presented by D. Murărașu in his writing *Naționalismul lui Eminescu* [Eminescu’s Nationalism] (1932): enthusiastic nationalism, with love for the people and for the country; criticist nationalism, with antisemitic and xenophobe shades; cultural nationalism, in favor of the purity of the national language and literature.

In his monography “*Suntem români și punctum!. Mihai Eminescu publicist* [“We are Romanians and punctum!”. Mihai Eminescu the Publicist] (1997), George Marinescu analyzed Eminescu’s economic doctrine as it appears in certain parts of academic lectures and courses on the history of the Romanian economic thought. One good example would be the course *Doctrină și curente în gândirea economică modernă și contemporană* [Doctrines and Currents in the Modern and Contemporary Economic Thought] published by Sultana Sută-Selejean in 1992.

3. Research methodology

The starting point for our paper was the large number of bibliographical resources that exist and deal with Romania’s national poet. Many Romanian writers have been keen on collecting, presenting and interpreting various aspects and topics that Eminescu touched in his works, beyond his literary corpus. Our interest was focused on the poet’s economic and political views, on how they are relevant to the realities of those times and on how they are similar to or different from the economic theory of the moment. Our primary tool was the method of descriptive research that helped us gain valuable insight into Eminescu’s contribution to the history of the Romanian economic thought.

4. Findings

4.1. Liberalism, Conservatism, and Economic and Social Progress

In short, Eminescu’s historical and economic national model can be summarized like this: 1700 the foreign element’s domination (the Phanariot element), 1821 national rebirth, 1866 reinstatement of the foreign domination (Carol I). In 1876 Eminescu published *Influența austriacă asupra românilor din Principate*-The Austrian Influence upon the Romanians in the Principalities, a study which is considered to be a landmark of his economic thinking. Eminescu noticed that at first, the Austrian influence was mainly religious, based on an “international element” without country, without nationality, without its own language: the Catholic clergy. (Eminescu, 1941, vol. I, p. 46). Later on, once the idea of religious freedom spread throughout Europe, the Austrian influence shifted towards the commercial element; Eminescu claimed that any Austrian patriot has

the duty to open the gates of the East in order to colonize it with their children and to sell their merchandise. (Eminescu, 1941, vol. I, p. 47)

In 1820, besides the layman and monastical clergy, in the Romanian society there were three main social categories – the big boyars, the small boyars (the clerks) and the serfs - who were not under direct rule and control of the government. There were also two more relatively independent elements: the peasants that had become owners of land / freeholders and the incipient bourgeoisie (the traders and the guilds). In his study, Eminescu drew a picture that was realistic, suggestive, complex and historically argued of the social dissolution of those times, that was favored by factors such as alcoholism and gambling. Eminescu found that social mobility that was inherent in the existing conditions – Eminescu observed that the trader wants to be a boyar, the peasant wants to be a boyar’s son, the small boyar wants to be a big boyar, the big boyar wants to be the ruler of the country (Eminescu, 1941, vol. I, p. 56) – left behind “economic gaps” that were filled in by an element that was foreign “by origin, by morals, and by education” and that was rising: the Jews (Eminescu, 1941, vol. I, p. 56). Eminescu synthetically described the views of the Jews on the government and on the society as follows: “to enjoy all the rights, but to avoid, if possible, all duties” (Eminescu, 1941, vol. II, p. 41).

On the other hand, the peasants got poorer and poorer as a result of unfair trials. The middle class, which was so important in the evolution of the western societies, was considered by Eminescu as a “balancing element”. In our country it was barely “rudimentary” and in its place there appeared an unproductive and extremely harmful class of “proletarians of the pen”, “without a great positive importance for the government”, made up of “people who did not believed what they said and did not say what they believed” (Eminescu, 1941, vol. II, p. 21); the sons of the layman clergy, the servants of the former boyars, the former tradesmen (Eminescu, 1941, vol. I., p. 57).

As the aristocracy as a historical class had disappeared, it meant that the only remaining “positive” class was the peasantry, which was increasingly subdued and less numerous. Eminescu pointed out the negative natural growth rate: “100 die and 60 are born in their place” (Eminescu, 1941, vol. I, p. 61) and the Romanian race falls into decline, and reaches the status of monkey. (Eminescu, 1941, vol. II, p. 10). The peasant was the only producer of “raw materials” necessary to satisfy the fundamental needs of the human being and the only social layer that yields the biggest production is the rural population. (Eminescu, 1941, vol. II, p. 27)

Eminescu was in tune with the ideas of the great economists of those times when arguing for the economic importance of the peasantry. He quoted the physiocrat Francois Quesnay’s famous epigraph addressed to king Louis XV in the beginning of his *Economic Table* (1758): “Poor peasants, poor kingdom. Poor kingdom, poor king.” The peasantry was considered the fundamental class of the Romanian people, whose freedom was insured by the right of ownership on land.

At the end of his analysis, Eminescu offered some solutions to improve the state of the country, which, in his opinion, was the result of internal factors (“the evil is therefore within”) and the background of the “killer” proximity to Imperial Austria:

- stability: attained through a monarchical hereditary government (political parties were established and acted based not upon principles, but in accordance with personal interests); as a matter of fact, as there was no educated and wealthy middle class, Eminescu believed that is dangerous to leave this delicate instrument of the government, this representative of both the historical life and of the harmony of a nation’s interests, at the absolute discretion of a single political party; (Eminescu, 1941, vol. II, p. 41); thus, Eminescu opted for a hierarchy of merit to the detriment of the liberal egalitarianism;
- labor: by excluding the “proletarians of the pen” from the government structure and by forcing them to do productive labor;
- economy: by rationalizing and making efficient the spending of both the government and of the individual.

Eminescu considered that the Romanian civilization retained the exterior forms of the European culture, but lacked any real substance. Given the generalized lack of culture and the preserved byzantine mentality, it had always been characterized by the contradiction between forms and substance. It was an era of empty forms: “Not a utopia, but a thousand utopias lingered in the heads of the past generation, who imagined freedom without work, culture without learning, the modern

organization without an analogue economic development” (Eminescu, 1941, vol. II, p. 33).

The past, “the necessary historical element”, appeared as the basis of the modern society, not in the sense that it was necessary to go back to the previous economic and social situation, but to put social progress in the spotlight. The evolution of the Romanian civilization had to be part of a causal chain that should start with tradition, and not a development pattern borrowed from abroad.

4.2. Nationalism and the “superimposed layer”

Fully aware of the national reality, Eminescu showed patriotism since his first writings and he had an essential contribution to the development of the national idea. His economic, social and political thinking reflect his theoretical background, but also his position within the political life. (Murgescu, 1990, vol. II, p. 576)

Eminescu’s nationalism has as its core the idea that any economic and social change had to spring from the requirements of the evolution of the nation. Given the negative influence of the forms borrowed from abroad, the mission of the government was to launch, support and develop the native Romanian element, especially in the economic field. Preserving and protecting the national element against foreign competition was, in his opinion, the only approach that could guarantee the independence of the country.

The Gordian Knot of Eminescu’s economic view is the congruence between needs (very important within the process of economic development) and the productive conditions that ensured their satisfaction. The widening of the gap between the system of needs generated by the demands of the modern civilization and the ability of the economy to yield a production in accordance with the new needs twists and bends the normal trend of the economic development process. An example would be the exponential increase of imports, with devastating effects upon the trade balance.

A right-wing individual, Eminescu wanted a natural, organic progress for his country. For him, the authentic progress of a nation was a natural link between the past and the future, as a result of the slow, progressive assimilation of the intellectual work done throughout the previous centuries (Eminescu, 1941, vol. II, p. 32). Basically, any state of affairs has its cause in a previous state of affairs and an event is nothing but a causal relation which has not been discovered yet. (Eminescu, 1941, vol. II, p. 32).

In Eminescu’s view, there was cause-effect inter-generational dynamics. What was required as the solution to the problems was “an *iron hand*, fair and aware of the well-established goals, to inoculate to all political parties the conviction that the Romanian government, inherited from dozens of generations who had fought and suffered for its existence is the legacy of other dozens of future generations and not the toy and the exclusive property of the current generation”.(Eminescu, 1997, p. 230)

His organicist economic view helped him foresee the risk of major unbalances generated by sudden bursts in the evolution of the national economic structures, which had deep historical roots. Eminescu noticed that putting into practice the liberal ideas and policies had brought about the government’s being taken over by a “superimposed layer” which excluded labor from their existence and which, as the economy dealt with mechanisms to integrate itself into the international capitalist economy, generated alienation, poverty and hatred for undertakers and for peasants.

Considering these, the conservationist Eminescu considered modernization and colonialization to be one and the same. Being at the meeting point of three civilizations (Slavic, eastern and western ones), the Romanian nation was “polluted” with all the Bulgarian, Greek, and Jewish “waste” that had constituted a “superimposed layer” that was ruling the society. These “strangers” (foreigners from other countries) were a “virus” and had taken over the role of the historical aristocracy as a form of governing exerted by the “seed of Phanar’s eye discharge” (Murărașu, 1932, p. 87)

5. Conclusions

In his analysis of the Romanian economy, Eminescu used a double approach: from the perspective of the historical heritage, but also from the perspective of the values of the European capitalism.

Given his way of understanding the economic phenomena by relating his own observations and analyses to the ideas of other Romanian and foreign economists, given the solutions he deemed suitable for the development of the Romanian economy (industrialization and economic protectionism), we can say that Eminescu was one of the pioneers of the Romanian doctrinaire economic thought.

In a traditionalist and nationalist spirit, Eminescu focused constantly upon the Romanian economic identity in a historical period in which the values of the western European system were a bench-mark and a model to follow. In his view, preserving our national individuality against the imperial economic expansionism was a desideratum of the process of economic modernization.

P. Pandrea considered that Eminescu was part of the “creative current” of the Romanian culture. He “bore the curse of inner restlessness” (Murgescu, vol. 2, 1990, p. 227). He was constantly concerned about the prosperity of his country’s economy, about discovering the ways to ensure his country’s progress.

The fact that Eminescu’s economic thinking is so up-to-date comes from “a great internal logical coherence”, which is apparently surprising for a poet who “seemed to have been living in sideral spaces in his poems” (Constantinescu, 1999, p. 163).

Mihai Eminescu was “an economist of action, not a teaching one”, “an important representative of the theory in action” (Nechita, 1989, p. 152-153), and the universe of his economic ideas continues to fascinate us through its richness and geniality.

Eminescu was a revolutionary scientific spirit by excellency, as he understood the fact that the postulations of the classical political economy become relative or even false in the case of an agricultural economy such as Romania’s. Just as M. Manoilescu noticed, “in the economic science, what is true for the West can be a lie for the East”. Eminescu’s economic patriotism has three cornerstones: “independence, justice, the Romanian spirit” (Manoilescu, 1993, p. 64).

6. References

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