

## MODERN ROMANIAN UNIVERSITIES. THE TEACHER AND THE STUDENT

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**Abstract:** *The aim of this article is to illustrate some of the fundamental ideas that were central to the development of XIX century Romanian higher education; in doing so, it relies on discourses related to the academia. In the context of studies dedicated to Romanian education in general and higher education in particular, this paper offers a critical account of the ideas that animated the creation of the first Romanian universities, subordinating them to the central research topic of the article: the teacher and the student.*

**Key words:** *modern university, ideal, educational model, science.*

In a sense, educational theories can be construed as normative accounts that underline educational policies. This article discusses education in a very particular sense of the concept, looking at the inaugural discourses of the first national modern universities in order to derive the key features of the teacher – student image. The reason behind this approach lies in the fact that these (i.e. inaugural) discourses go beyond the established, synthesized, information specific to scientific approaches (articles or volumes) in addressing a larger, national educational, vision.

In this context, the Romanian modern university model is discussed around the emergence of the first three Romanian universities, namely the University of Iassy (1860), Bucharest (1864) and Cluj (1920<sup>21</sup>). The educational history these universities forward allow for a much more personal view on what determined the need for a specialized kind of educational institution within an era that witnessed great changes both nationally and internationally. The discourses analyzed here offer an account of the university as a place for reimagining the role and the relationship between student and teacher.

First, a few preliminary notes. The modern Romanian university is not a singular event; it is inscribed in a more general European history where

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<sup>21</sup> When the university established in 1872 became a Romanian institution of higher education.

“the modern university is essentially a product of the nineteenth century. In nearly all Western nations, institutions of higher education evolved in that century, at different rates and in reaction to different stimuli, into something approaching our contemporary universities (with all the variations the term implies)” (Weisz, 1983: 3).

In this geographic and temporal context “on the fringes of Europe, Romania, Greece and Bulgaria afford examples of the simultaneous emergence of universities and nation states under powerful foreign influences, in the first case French and in the others German” (Charle, 2003: 42)<sup>22</sup>.

Amidst the grand theoretical and practical divide between the two educational models of the period, the French and the German (Humboldtian model of higher education), Romania, though considered to be part of the former<sup>23</sup>, inscribed a highly applied vision to what higher education should stand for.

However, generalized information is not sufficient for expressing the vision behind the modern Romanian university; though Spiru Haret synthesized the role of the university as an ideal place for knowledge: “a university should be the highest cultural institution of a country, able to focus all the scientific and cultural manifestation of that country” (Haret, 2009: 56) and, generally speaking, the modern university’s characteristics are “the presence of knowledge professionals, the right to formal certification, the instruction in a variety of disciplines, research production, and the training of social and political elites” (Dmitrishin, 2013: 2), the historical reasoning is more complex.

### **The academic perspective**

The inaugural discourses discussed here are Simion Bărnuțiu’s *Inaugural speech given on the 1st of November 1860* (University of Iassy), Gheorghe Costaforu’s *Speech given on the occasion of inaugurating the University Palace in Bucharest on the 14<sup>th</sup> of December 1869* (University of Bucharest) and Vasile Pârvan’s *Duty of our Lives* – lecture material for the first History

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<sup>22</sup> Though, the idea that the university as a concept is a European invention is heavily disputed (see, for example, Alatas, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> The basic distinction between the two models could be reduced to the role played by a centralized form of government in the aim of education: for practical reasons (the French model) and an idealized approach to scientific research in all its forms without any intervention from the state (German model). For a more in depth discussion see Richard Crouter, *Friedrich Schleiermacher: Between Enlightenment and Romanticism*. Also see Ben-David, 1977 and Shin & Teicler, 2013.

and History of Art course (1919, University of Cluj)<sup>24</sup>. As one can notice, the timespan these discourses cover is of almost 60 years; in spite of this fact I regard them as unitary in vision and scope, and since the article does not concern itself with the historical/political events that shaped the country between 1860 and 1919, there will be no implied differentiation from this standpoint.

The salient ideas these discourses advance can be divided into two main groups: the role of the university and what the university should be, on one hand, and the competences it should forward, on the other. Within these broad categories there are certain, well defined, sub-categories. Of direct interest for this paper is the view pertaining to the image of the teacher and student. The paragraphs discussed here represent previously untranslated materials, offering direct insight into XIX century Romanian educational ideals.

### *The teacher and the student*

XIX century higher education and the establishment of national, modern universities address a deficit. We can find direct evidence towards this in Gheorghe Costaforu`s speech; it indicates the precarious state of national higher education (and also the general enthusiasm for the role of the institution) when referring to the position of the University of Bucharest in comparison to other European institutions of higher education:

We are still few and young, for we have just started, but we will endeavor, and we solemnly swear to you to increase our strengths tenfold; with faith in God we will suppress distances in time and steadily close in on our elder sisters, so that we will soon establish an intellectual council and a literary senate within this institution. We can take note of the traditions and of the experience of other peoples; we do have a feel for this century we live in and we will not commit scholastic mistakes wasting time on abstract speculations void of any practical worth. The scientific field is large enough to satisfy any ambition and life is too short to waste energy on anything but humankind`s best interest<sup>25</sup> (Costaforu, 1869: f.p).

In this general state of facts, Vasile Pârvan`s text is the most direct in addressing the teacher`s and student`s profile. On a primary level, the author

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<sup>24</sup> For a complete version see the forthcoming volume, Toma Sava, *Ideea de Universitate*, UVT Press.

<sup>25</sup> All translations belong to the author, unless otherwise noted.

indicates the need for reformulating the basic relationship in student - teacher model. On one hand

We have today art connoisseurs, we have wine and race horse experts; but we have no one to value new souls. You see nobody rejoicing, delighted that amongst the multitudes of school bag carriers there is an anarchist of the present laws of thought, a restless, weary seeker of new laws. On the contrary, the best loved amongst the youngsters who rise towards an individual conscience is the most docile memorizer of the established wisdom (Pârvan, 1920:13).

And on the other, in order to placate this situation:

The professor himself must turn into a mere schoolboy, running together with the children and adolescents in search of the wonderful spark of thought that shines its light through the darkness of daily utilitarian triteness (Pârvan, 1921: 14).

The fragments above indicate a critical position towards the general state of education and are in quite a stark contrast compared to the general idealization of the teacher's image characteristic for the period's usual tone:

Schoolmaster Nicu Căprioară was of medium height, black unruly curls covered his broad forehead, had a small, turned up nose and his piercing eyes were proof of a sparkling intelligence and a harmonious, kind soul. As a whole he had a pleasant face perpetually lit by a compassionate smile. His communicative, sincere and jolly nature brought him lots of friend as well as enemies. [...] With a quivering voice - he was addressing a crowd for the first time - he solemnly promised that if the villagers will support him in his endeavor he will gladly sacrifice his life to elevate the village. (Învățătorul, 1920: 23).

The main idea of Pârvan's two paragraphs quoted above serve a dual function: they highlight a state of facts characteristic for education in general (in the author's vision) and they also allow for the advancement of a more direct insight into the specifics of the national psychological traits characteristic to the domestic student. Pârvan subordinates all the features of a successful educational endeavor to the characteristics of a national soul, which:

First and foremost it certainly belongs to the Daco-Roman peasant. Yet, what are the strengths of that soul?

There is a certain natural selection process of national aptitudes, derived from the struggle for existence peoples must go through in order to overcome natural or artificial difficulties. In order to overcome those obstacles more easily, the mind sharpens from generation to generation (Pârvan, 1920: 22).

More to the point, the specifics of a national soul are the result of two interrelated factors: historical

Nations that are tested too hard by historical adversities - such as ours, martyred by every assailant on earth - develop a kind of spiritual shell in which the soul seeks refuge in order to maintain its integrity. A superficial observer will only notice some features of that rough and inert shell: fatalism, indifference towards the need for a more humane life, traditionalism, distrust of anyone and anything new, harshness and rudeness in various socio-personal interactions (Pârvan, 1920: 22).

And a national psychological fundamental trait:

However, an observer patient enough to wait for the true organism to exit its rugged shell is rewarded with the sight of an intricate and gracefully built being with countless, varied and strong organs for the perception of the world, a being whose existence no one would have suspected based on the appearance of the shell alone. Cosmic fatalism is counterbalanced by a splendid Christo-Pagan ethical optimism which provides a wronged person with the certainty that an evil deed will not go unpunished; therefore, he awaits with philosophical resignation for this immanent punishment of the wrongdoing to be fulfilled. Detachment from the hardships and trivialities of material life is compensated for such beings by an enthusiastic desire to bedeck themselves, at least on some special occasions; this, in turn, fosters their propensity towards various forms of art. Rural traditionalism is compensated by an amazingly multilateral curiosity even for things completely alien to its fundamental experience. Distrust for everything that is new is counterbalanced by a desire to fathom and master its secret: hence, the exceptionally sharp observational and critical spirit that often surpasses that of the cultivated man, who is used only to formulas readily available in books. A certain harshness of manners is counterbalanced by a sense of spiritual temperance and politeness that can exteriorize itself only in a rather clumsy manner, hence to be appreciated even more. The greater this brotherly yearning for the ideal, in all its forms in a school, the greater the freedom of thought, and thus, the greater the ability of souls will be to bloom in that fellowship of future generations (Pârvan, 1920: 23).

The theme of the Romanian peasant and the national is not particular to Vasile Pârvan. Several decades prior, Simion Bărnuțiu, in addressing the role

of the Faculty of Medicine, talks about the same issue, i.e. the specific national soul and its needs:

No Romanian who believes that the government also exists for the benefit of the peasants, that the Romanian government not only has the duty, but also a natural disposition to provide a sufficient number of doctors for the countryside, will dispute the need for the Faculty of Medicine. There are sufficient cases in the countryside where a nearby doctor could be extremely helpful, since contagious and various other types of diseases affect entire generations wiping out so many people from a country whose population is already scarce. Romanians are decreasing in numbers and doctors could prevent this adversity; however doctors cannot be commissioned from abroad the way shoemakers, tailors or confectioners are, because hired doctors would not be able to understand Romanian peasants and the latter would not trust them the way they would trust their own sons and brothers who have learned the trade not only for its innermost function, but also to help their parents and brothers. Moreover, foreign doctors would have to study the locals, their way of life and habits, the climate and other aspects so as not to experiment on Romanians who could otherwise have been saved by wise and knowledgeable doctors. Therefore if the government cannot be indifferent towards the life and health of its people and towards the issue of increasing the number of the population, if the national economy imperiously claims for a sufficient number of learned men who could also tend to the health of the livestock, then all Romanians must welcome this school that will train men to look after the health of the people and of the nation's sons (Bărnăuțiu, 1860:103).

Relying exclusively on direct sources and using them to explain a complex phenomenon like that of the teacher and student profile in a specific historical and social context, has certain drawbacks, especially from the perspective of a scientific article: the conclusions to be drawn have a rather limited critical basis. However, in this case, an approach based on the direct account forwarded by these previously mostly inaccessible materials constitutes a more than pertinent answer.

The reason is twofold. First of all, the fragments are explicit in forwarding a *direct answer* to the question at hand: the university professor's role is to enthusiastically support innovative thinking in an environment of general social fervor simultaneous with the creation of the first national, modern universities. What makes these answers more interesting is the very context they sprung from (XIX century national higher education) and the very form through which they are expressed. The student, defined here through the features of the nation he belongs to, itself needs to serve, scientifically, both the needs of the people and of the country.

Secondly, the very examples given here can serve as direct sources for furthering studies dedicated to education in general and to modern higher education in particular. Depending on the reader's epistemic culture and scientific needs, the information can serve as a valuable source for furthering any study with a similar interest.

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