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SPIRU HARET-REFORMER OF THE ROMANIAN
SECONDARY EDUCATION

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Abstract

This article presents the activity of Spiru Haret, mathematician, scientist and an emblematic personality of his time, as his reform of the Romanian education system as as Minister of Education, a function he held for three terms during liberal governments at the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Appreciated for the rigor, work and professionalism he demonstrated throughout his entire activity, and at the same time vehemently attacked by his political opponents, Spiru Haret understood that reforming the education system lies at the heart of reforming Romanian society. He saw education as a key factor of social progress, despite the fact that the Romanian school was facing major problems at that time: lack of qualified teaching staff, lack of infrastructure and poverty, but also the precariousness faced by pupils and their parents. After an in-depth analysis of the previous legislation, Spiru Haret capitalized what he believed will improve the Romanian education. Considered the founder of the modern Romanian education, Spiru Haret aims to meet the needs of a country that had just acquired its independence, and that was in the process of building an unitary national state.

Keywords: education reform; literacy; education law; Spiru Haret; Education Minister;

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to highlight Spiru Haret's contribution to the reform of Romanian education. The education system condition was not at all encouraging, even after thirty-five years have passed from the institution of the first law of education, the 'public education law', one of Alexandru Ioan Cuza's great reforms.

Although the law imposed compulsory primary education, it is obvious that this provision has not been implemented, and thus, the 1889 census showed a huge illiteracy rate: 78%, or as high as 84% for the rural population. It is therefore obvious that the law facilitated free and compulsory education was not only unattainable, but had also become inaccurate.



One of the causes of this disastrous state was, in fact, the lack of qualified human resources, as the same census showed that the number of teachers at that time was only half of the number needed, alongside a lack of educational infrastructure.

Some of the problems that prevented the progress of the school and, implicitly, of the Romanian society were, in Spiru Haret's view, the emphasis on instruction rather than education, the predominant focus on the theoretical side, the lack of legislative coherence, the lack of qualified staff (more than 23% of the departments in the secondary and high schools were filled by substitute teachers. An unusual problem, specific for the predominantly agrarian Romanian economy at that time, was the participation of children labour in agricultural work (Schifirneţ, 2009).

Nevertheless, Spiru Haret had an optimistic view on education reform, being an advocate of the fact that coherent and unitary legislation, and consistency in its implementation could have led to a reformed system. Haret is among the few Romanian scientists, who, having a solid international reputation grace to the value of his scientific work, has advocated to reduce the great gaps that our country had towards Western Europe. Beneficiary of a scholarship in France, and awarded a PhD in Mathematics at Sorbonne with a thesis highly appreciated by great mathematicians of the time, Spiru Haret refuses a teaching position in a university in Paris, choosing to return to his country. Other great Romanian pedagogues that studied abroad, using the best practices learnt in France, Germany or Switzerland, take part alongside Spiru in the implementation of reforms that would change and modernize the Romanian education.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

SPIRU HARET-EMBLEMATIC PERSONALITY OF THE ERA

Spiru Haret was the first Romanian to be awarded a PhD in Mathematics in Paris. Parisian journals wrote great reviews against his thesis: 'The invariability of the great axes of planetary orbits (Schifirneţ, 2009).

Although he was offered a position at the University of Grenoble, he preferred to return back to Romania and use his knowledge to change the status quo, being aware of the precariousness of the education system of the time. Haret has combined scientific research activity with the organization and management of the Romanian school, being an important advocate of the Romanian education reform of his time, not as a politician but rather from the position of specialist.

Having returned to the country, he became a professor (1878-1910), a member of the Romanian Academy, and served as Minister of Public Instruction and Cults for 3 mandates: 1897-1899, 1901-1904, and 1907-1910 (Visan-Miu, 2014). However, as a politician, he elaborated and submitted to Parliament's attention legislative acts that determined the establishment of the school as an essential institution of society: 'Law on Secondary and Higher Education', 1898, and the 'Law on Professional Education', 1899.

Both laws have been amended in 1901. The first organized secondary education on two cycles, with three majors (modern, real and classical) with a duration of eight years, and introduced a compulsory criteria for university teachers to 'have an original scientific contribution' (Schifirneţ, 2009), turning universities into scientific research centers. The latter regulated the introduction of primary education in several schools across the country, especially in rural areas. In 1904, he drafted a bill for private pre-university education, a law that was harshly criticized by his political opponents and later withdrawn.

He was preoccupied with the status and dignity of teachers, and included in its reform program the decisions needed to achieve this goal. Spiru Haret saw the teacher as the main actor in the process of modernising the society. From this perspective, he regulated everything that was relevant to teachers' condition, ensuring both good financial and social status. He prioritised primary school, perceived as the basis of education and also as a positive factor that could help peasantry overcome their precarious social condition. Given his intention to reform the rural life, he has been considered by many of his contemporaries as the moral author of the Peasant revolt in 1907. Especially in rural areas, teaching staff had a great influence on the electorate, being able to influence its political views.

As teacher, Spiru Haret was recognized for the punctuality with which he attended his courses, his competence, the clarity, the precision and the rigor of his demonstrations. Throughout his life, he remained preoccupied with precision and accuracy. In 1883 he was appointed General school inspector.

Grace to this position, he travels the country, inspects the schools and writes a report one year later, which he then publishes and presents at the Academy's awards in 1885.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS. THE LAW OF SECONDARY EDUCATION

In the Explanatory Memorandum for the draft law presented in Parliament, Spiru Haret points out that 'the school legislation no longer meets the needs of the country in any of its main points' and that it is a hindrance to the cultural development of the country, instead of supporting it. It also emphasizes on the recruitment process for teaching staff, which he calls 'primitive and faulty', and a major danger to education's very own existence (Schifirneț, 2009).

In conclusion, he presented this bill draft which aimed to regulate the activity of gymnasiums, high schools, girls' secondary schools and universities. Through this law, the education remained free for the Romanian citizens, and foreigners were only admitted on the unoccupied places.

The organization of secondary education was to be different for boys and girls. Secondary education of boys was to take place in gymnasium and high schools. In fact, the eight years of high school were so divided that the first four years of the lower course, the gymnasium were the same for all pupils, and the higher course gave the student the choice between three majors: classical, which predominantly implied the study of the classical ancient languages; real, dealing mainly with the study of mathematics; and the physical-natural sciences, which involved both foreign languages the mathematics.

To support this structure, Spiru Haret exemplifies that this system has already been applied in other European countries, and argues that it is impossible for a pupil to obtain satisfactory knowledge of both classical and real subjects in such a short period of time, thus it is preferable that one majors in the best suitable subject area. He states that: 'the in-depth study of classical languages is difficult and requires a long time. Those who to commit to it are no longer able to pay equal attention to the study of modern sciences and languages'. Thus, for the first time, there is a distinction between what nowadays we call today 'common core' and specific subjects.

Spiru Haret criticized the 1864 law for not providing real sciences education, focusing exclusively on the study of Latin and Greek; and at the same time he emphasized on the advantages of his newly proposed system: a more rational use of the time spent by young people in school, a self-contained existence of gymnasiums, so that students who did not want to follow the upcoming course receive recognition of the first four years of study, and the option of choosing one of the three majors at a slightly older age, when the possibility of having already discovered one's inclinations was significantly higher.

As per girls' secondary education, the bill maintains the previous organisation form, branding them as Secondary schools – Grade I, with a duration of five years. However, we also see the establishment of Secondary schools – Grade II, which recruited their students among the girls studying for Grade I, offering a program 'adapted to girls' skills and needs as future mothers of families' (Schifirneț, 2009). The establishment of these upper secondary schools represents a breakthrough to the previous law, which did not stipulate them.

By increasing secondary education length to 8 years, he gives girls the time to benefit of a solid and varied education. The girls could, therefore, either graduate Grade I Secondary School after 5 years, or to opt, during the Fourth year of study, for the upper Secondary School (Grade II) for four additional years.

We notice a difference in the organization of the education cycle for girls versus boys. While the boys studied only four years, the girls studied five to graduate from the Secondary School. Spiru Haret explains this organizational difference as follows: 'We have allowed five years for these schools, so that they do not pile up the information and do not overwhelm the pupils, as they need greater care than the boys' (Schifirneț, 2009). He is aware, however, that there is a large number of girls trying to pass the baccalaureate or even obtain a degree, but he appreciates that it is only in the view of working in education. In the same time, he warns that this will no longer be possible as obtaining a position in education will no longer be possible without specialized pedagogical studies, and he appreciates that this will 'reduce immediately, if not efface the current that urged so many girls to compromise their health in a profession beyond their power and without any practical use.'

Therefore, Spiru Haret is not an advocate of absolute equality in Secondary education between boys and girls, thinking that boys graduate high school aiming to be admitted to university, while girls' education should be limited to graduating the secondary cycle.

As a result of the direct contact with the realities of the Romanian education system, we can state that Spiru Haret was a Minister who fully understood its real needs, and his activity is closely linked to the two laws mentioned above.

4. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study was to treasure this period in the history of Romanian education to which one looks back with nostalgia, and to highlight the fact that today's society needs to commemorate the great personality of Spiru Haret, the artisan of the reform that led to the progress of the Romanian education.

5. RESEARCH METHODS

For this study, the researcher has chosen the method based on data collection, opting for indirect techniques, literature review, specific for socio-human sciences. The researcher has reviewed various scientific papers in both the field of history, but also related disciplines, as well as Internet sources. This information has highlighted the specific aspects of the general and particular contexts in which the investigated phenomenon integrates.

6. FINDINGS

Perhaps the most important indicator of the success of Spiru Haret's reform is that, in 1912, two years after the end of his last term, the census shows that the literate population doubled its numbers.

Assuming a difficult mission, a raise in the intellectual and economic level of peasantry through education, Spiru Haret has led to real transformations of the Romanian society, especially for the rural society. After more than thirty years dedicated to the Romanian education, critically ill, he retires in 1911 (Adamescu, 1936). On this occasion, all of his collaborators, mainly teachers, celebrated his activity and achievements with a banquet, a grand manifestation of gratitude and love, a celebration that Spiru Haret considered to be the most beautiful day of his life.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Although very little present in the collective memory and consciousness, and hardly used as a role model or inspiration, Spiru Haret's contribution to the Romanian education reform is incontestable. Although the three mandates as Minister of education only added up to 8 years, he made important changes for the Romanian school: he supported the reform of education in rural areas, setting up the educational infrastructure for over 1200 schools, developed the practical/applicative side of education, encouraged extra-curricular activities which cultivated a feeling of attachment and commitment to the country, physical education in schools, introduced transport facilities for students, set up canteens and boarding schools, supported publishers and publications, was concerned by the pedagogic training of teachers, introduced admission exams for secondary education and graduation exams for high school, reorganized university structure, increasing the number of faculties.

He was particularly concerned about the development of the practical aspect of education and avoiding excessive theoretical frameworks, ensuring equal opportunities between rural and urban students and pursuing the development of an education adapted to the economic, social and cultural requirements of the period in which he lived.

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