

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE STUDENT SOCIETIES IN THE CITY OF IAȘI DURING THE SECOND HALF OF THE 19TH CENTURY. EUROPEAN MODELS AND LOCAL FORMS¹

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Abstract: Created in 1860, more by political reasons than as a response to the local intellectual market needs, the University of Iasi had a complicated evolution not only until 1864, when the new Law of Education recognizes and regulates the existence of two universities (of Iași, and of Bucharest), but decades after. In the relatively provisional situation of the beginnings, the students of the Iasi University hesitated to build their own bodies, as they existed in civilized Europe. In fact, in an institution with no tradition and without successive generations of graduates, it was not possible to immediately develop an awareness of the body, and especially an associative spirit.

The first attempt in this direction is due to a young man who had studied law in Vienna for a while and then entered the University of Iași as an auditor in the academic year 1863-1864. The model was that of the Literary and Scientific Society of Romanian Students in Vienna, recently established in the capital city of Austria. Unfortunately, the attempt failed, just like the next one, of a "literary society", in 1870. Only in 1875 the students of Iasi succeeded in building their own association, under the name of "The Student's Club of the University of Iași".

The local specificity is given by the absence of associations like the fraternities (so popular in Germany and in other countries), where the focus is not on the side of patriotic, national and even scientific life, but on physical and cultural maturation of the novices. At the University of Iasi, the student associative spirit was consumed by an important mission: to raise the people's level of culture and civilization and to inoculate the national ideals, a goal that needed all the energy of the educated youth. Which was not, actually, a surprise, as the Romanian universities were not created as institutions designed to ensure balanced and disinterested knowledge, but as powerful weapons, perhaps the most significant ones, in the battle for the national evolution and prosperity.

Keywords: Keywords: student societies, University of Iași, national identity, 19th Century, modernity

The investigation of the student associations of the University of Iași, the first modern university of the Old Kingdom, created in 1860, raises many problems pertaining, first of all, to the research sources. If the archives of the University were mainly preserved, part of the local (and especially the student) written press was lost.

The associative spirit sorted itself out here with some difficulty, compared to the University of Bucharest, while the activity of the student societies only grows consistent and richer from a qualitative and quantitative point of view in the late 19th and early 20th century. Yet, in an institution with no tradition and no successive generations of graduates, the development of group awareness could not have been possible, and even less the creation of associations since its very first years. It is true that at the beginning of the University a strong binding was created by the presence of the Transylvanian Professor Simion Bărnuțiu, who managed to create, by means of personal example and charm, as well as with the help of his firm ideas, the first “school”, characterized by a dense, if not intransigent national spirit.

¹ This work is part of the research project "Student Associations and Societies of the University of Iasi in the Modern Period (1860-1918)", code PN-II-RU-TE-2011-3-0165, financed by UEFISCDI Romania.

The insecurity that characterized the existence of the University (let us not forget the conflicts between the teaching staff and the Ministry in 1862/1863, the suspension of some of the professors, the resignation of others as a form of protest, and then their reintegration in the academe), together with the general impression of incertitude and, eventually, with the absence of an institutional and academic culture, rendered problematic the students' capacity to establish relations. The common preoccupations and the feeling of belonging to the same group were missing, the very term of "student" containing a quantity of conceptual imprecision. If we focus on the students' social origin, training and age in the first years, as the data appear in the timid attempt of Enrolments Register that we possess, we can observe an extent of diversity able to inhibit any tendency of coming together.

The student population of the University of Iași decreased particularly in the first two decades. After the mirage of official ceremonies and the inaugural festive spirit were forgotten, the state of things started to deteriorate. The very way in which the institution had been created, hastily, with no consistent discussion with the society, showed now its consequences. The student population records a decreasing trend starting with 1861-1862, reaching in 1865-1866 the derisory amount of 29 new enrolled students, and timidly and variably rising afterwards. The most significant number of new enrolled students (90) could be found in 1870-1871; then the enrolment figure decreases again, exceeding the abovementioned number only two decades after, in 1889-1890, with the important contribution of the Faculty of Medicine, whose funding was approved in 1879-1880.

The first attempt to establish a student association is due to the student Alecu Boteanu, a former student at Vienna, who audited for several months the Law courses of the University of Iași during the academic year 1863-1864. From a letter to a friend, we find out that at the beginning of 1864, he was fighting in Iași to inspire "to some [students] the consolidation of a society like the one in Vienna". To this purpose, he had lent his fellows the statutes of the student association of Vienna, while the young men decided on a committee of seven, meant to work on this statute. But things did not evolve, maybe because of the fact that the initiator withdrew from the University. The motivation of the failure is not easy to find for sure, although one could make a comparison with the next attempt, a still failed one. It is quite possible that the teachers would not have accepted such an initiative or, just as likely as that, the students of Iași might have lacked the necessary energy and determination, as they were rather known for their inconsistency.

The next attempt, in 1870, was not more successful. Although the 1864 Law of Instruction made no mention of student association, the 1866 Constitution guaranteed the right and freedom of association, so that the minimal premises existed in order to ask the academic authorities to approve the students' actions. Under these circumstances, an initiative group (led by Ion Bădescu, who was already introducing himself as an interim chairman) was appointed by the group of students to draw a "ruling draft and statutes in order to found a literary society". The committed even solicited the Rectorate a free room to discuss the issue. So that a special Faculty Council accepted the novel form of reunion of the young people, but reserved the right to decide on the fate of the association after the reading of the statutes and of the ruling, which were not yet drawn at that moment.

The chairman Ion Bădescu presented the academic authorities, on 28 November 1870, the documents of the "students' society", but the special Council convoked by Rector Ștefan

Micle for the day of 2 December, who were supposed to pronounce on the issue, did not gather, maybe because things were not quite clear yet.

The reading of the Statutes and of the Ruling indicates clearly a foreign source of inspiration, coming from the Anglo-Saxon area, all the aspects being carefully regulated. The data offered by Boteanu were probably completed with others, taken from different German universities, where the associations were numerous. The new creation was entitled *The Students' Association of the University of Iassi*, and considered itself a “scientific association” whose ultimate purpose was “the unification in ideas and actions, the intellectual development and the cultivation of the Romanians”. The ways in which the proposed target was to be reached were also detailed, i.e. “small group communications, readings and literary-scientific discussions” as part of ordinary, extraordinary and public meetings. The statutes did not insist upon the race or religion separation, an important fact in the understanding of the subsequent evolution of the associative sphere, considering “all the University students” potential members, in exchange for a yearly fee. The association did not manage to work, in spite of the obvious prudence of the committee charged with the documents, who eliminated all provisions that could have raised the teaching staff's suspicion at an ideological, legal or moral level.

A new attempt took place five years after, when the students announce their desire to group into a society, again a “scientific” one, resuming the previous efforts. This time, the authorities approve it, so that the association is born on 5 March 1875, under the name of *The Students' Club of the University of Iași*.

The activity of the first years is less known, but one can document a certain socialist influence. The most important action in which the Club participated, a national first, was the students' strike started in the autumn of 1880, the most radical student protest in the 19th century by far, which gathered, in an insufficiently clarified way, the totality of the students of Iași.

The protest had a rapid, even spectacular evolution, the events being told, with a significant dose of subjectivism, by Rector Petre Suciș; he considered that the beginning of the strike was determined by the fact that the leader of the Club, Teodosiu Motașu, had not passed the examination in Roman Law (3 October). He would have convoked, three days after, a meeting of the society to decide the beginning of the protest. It is certain that starting with the day of October 8, the young men refuse to go to classes, sticking on the walls of the University posters in which they accuse the Rector's defying attitude towards the student population and particularly towards the Law students. Given the novelty of the situation, the academic authorities treated the problem with maximal attention, announcing the Ministry right away, while the University Council delegated the deans to convince the students, combining advice and threats, to get back to classes; in case of failure, they were proposing the Ministry a set of gradual measures, according to the date when the situation returned to normality: abolishment of State scholarships, interdictions to participate in examinations for a whole academic year, and, eventually, exclusion from the University without the possibility to enrol to the University of Bucharest.

That was an apparent peace, as the students' strike actually aroused, of course, the authorities' interest, who started to watch more carefully the youth organizations, focusing, at the same time, on the control of socialist ideology. It is hard to say now, after half a century of

Marxist historiographical investigation, whether the relations with the socialist circles were a defining trait in the beginning and the organization of the action, or if they were mere circumstances, followed by a voluntary exaggeration by the official literature.

One of the extremely unpleasant consequences of the strike, beyond the surveillance of several young men and their exclusion from the University, was the politicization, one way or another, of the student population. The ninth decade is determinant for the future evolution of the student societies. The partisan politicians, as well as the State structures become aware of the young people's ideological potential and take the initiative. Apparently at least, the influence of the socialist circles on the students took place in a context in which there was no coherent, innovatory ideological orientation, able to fully stir up the utopian, idealist spirit that is so developed at the young age.

As a reaction to the comprehension of this opportunity, the State national ideology grows more militant, more active in the academia, and the patriotic and nationalist demonstrations are consistently supported. The socialist doctrine is thus outclassed by the nationalist one, and the students start to be tempted rather by the latter. There is no surprise that the authority of the students' Club, somehow related to the socialist circles, decreases consistently. It seems that the association counted in 1881 only 7-8 students, "suspected of adherence to the nihilists' doctrine".

In 1880 occurred another event, representing a genuine turning point in the student movement. The "Unirea" society of the students of Bucharest urges now their colleagues from Iași to make up together the "General Association of the Students in Romania". This was not exactly a unification of the student movements, but the series of national student congresses started this way, in which young people's delegations from both institutions participated, favouring, in the long run, the development of the national ideology, as well as of the nationalist thrusts. These meetings took place annually in different cities of the country; the first one was in Focșani (1880), a centre with a particular symbolism, followed by Pitești, Bacău, Turnu-Severin, Galați, Brăila, Bârlad, etc.

Let us mention that during the Congress that took place in 1886 at Bârlad, the communications of the students of Iași, visibly influenced by the Darwinist and socialist ideas, produced some concern in Bucharest, especially after their publication in the famous socialist review of Iași, "Contemporanul".

D.A. Sturdza, the Minister of Instruction of the time, asked the universities of Bucharest and Iași to start systematic investigation of the Congress of Bârlad, where the students' conferences and discourses played the role, he said, of "attacking the religion of the country and making anarchic-socialist propaganda and manifestations against the state of things established today in the Romanian state". The first such measure was to forbid the participation of the State scholarship owners (that is of all the students who were regularly attending the courses and were passing the examinations) in the congresses of the "General Association", as well as to enforce a stricter verification, followed by the surveillance of the student associations and new rules for the approval of their functioning.

In the last decade, the socialist influence had significantly decreased, the place having been taken by the nationalist ideology, much better received by the authorities. Thus, in 1892 some of the students representing the "General Association", discontent with the ignorance of

the national feelings, established the “Solidaritatea” [Solidarity] society, an active body in the student sphere until the end of the period we have in view. The old association, deprived of the authorities’ and sponsors’ support, gradually reduces its audience and disappears. The same thing happens with other student societies of Iași, less important ones, like “Naționalitatea” [Nationality], “Dreptatea” [Justice] or “Carmen Sylva”.

The intersection of the 19th and the 20th centuries is marked in Bucharest and especially in Iași by a special effervescence of the student movement. The teachers, most of them party members, and even the university authorities, get actively involved, trying either to control better the phenomenon and to keep it away from excesses, or to gain it in terms of personal influence and image. What strikes is a total absence of fraternity-like associations, bodies in which the focus is not placed on the patriotic, national aspects and not even on the scientific ones, but on the physical and cultural growing up of the novices (the innocents, the imperfects) and which at that time were present in universities of tradition, in areas that did not need any more that whole nation’s effort in order to accede to civilisation. In the Old Kingdom the focus is placed on the people’s cultural development. Even the physical side misses, i.e. the appetite for sport, present in most of the student associations of Anglo-Saxon origin. The owners of gymnastics halls in Iași often complain to the Rector that the students enter their institutions but very rarely, and when they do, they actually participate in parties in the rented halls, with the usual Bacchic excesses.

This should probably not surprise us. After all, our universities were not created as bodies meant to ensure, in a disinterested, balanced way, knowledge, but as redoubtable weapons, maybe the most significant ones, in activating the nation to outclass its rudimentary stage and in participating to “progress”.

On the other hand, turning our attention back to these Romanian typical societies, there is a fundamental difference between the stated principles, the means used to reach the targets, provided in the programmes, and the actions proper. A detailed analysis could bring forth relevant information regarding the pretty big gap between the programme or the intention, and the actual actions, considering that, although the action of the associations has a theoretical support (incipiently at least) in their statutes, the trigger is often in completely other areas.

A damaging reality, in the long run, was that the associations were sponsored (documented especially as far as the second stage is concerned) by different forces on the political stage, as well as the fact that different groups of students got involved in political events or intrigues. “The students should study” was one of the answers of the civil society, especially of those directly interested in the condition of the student life at the beginning of the 20th century, but this did not have the expected result, especially that the academic authorities themselves could not fix, accurately enough, the frontier between political involvement – condemnable –, and civic involvement – absolutely necessary in the process of the student’s formation as a future citizen.

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