

Education and Meritocracy under Communism

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Résumé: *Comme tous les domaines, en Roumanie l'éducation a connu les défaillances du totalitarisme et du communisme. Initialement placé sur des principes modernes, l'éducation a été obligée de fonctionner conformément aux pratiques stalinistes, d'adopter des valeurs soviétiques. Progressivement, la méritocratie a été remplacée par l'utopie égalitaire, par « prendre soin de l'homme ». Toutes les mesures de réforme éducative promues pendant 1948-1989 avaient annulé l'esprit critique, ont produit un déséquilibre axiologique, ont détruit les élites. L'éducation est devenue l'outil de manipulation des individus, de la promotion de l'idéologie socialiste. Malheureusement, les effets de l'idéologisation et de l'endoctrinement sont ressentis même aujourd'hui.*

Mots clés: *méritocratie, élites, communisme, idéologie, endoctrinement*

The attempt to make a contrastive comparison between past and present education in our country becomes, in our opinion, a compulsory task in order to understand the mechanisms that have conducted the promotion of a certain type of education, and, especially, the immediate or long-range perspective. Even from the very first outset it should be noticed the fact that Romania is a singular example in Europe, but certainly a particular one, specific of the geopolitical area of this part of Europe.

It is common knowledge that, before 1989, namely, during the communist regime, education was profoundly affected mainly by the political and socio-economic context which also influenced the educational scope. Therefore, the essential feature of the Romanian education was represented by the occurrence of an axiological imbalance which entailed the individuals' loss of orientation.

At the level of the educational policy, the fundamentally centralized matrix of the society ardently promoted the egalitarian utopia, theory which practically allowed no protrusion from the imposed “normality”, from the dull and non-competitive reality. The educational ideal of this society was represented by what is called “the machine man”, whose reflection or critical analysis was strictly forbidden.

During this period, education was an instrument of propaganda, the mouthpiece of ideology, gradual indoctrination, promotion of stereotypes, prejudices, assertion of the authority argument. It is also worth mentioning the fact that the gradual implementation of the Soviet totalitarian political model and the destruction of the elite have left behind blanks, subsequently filled with false professionals in all fields of knowledge.

This represents one of the causes that led to the disappearance of important landmarks in the Romanian society, whose effect is felt even nowadays. Holding the rank of virtue, mediocrity dominated schools with repercussions that can be witnessed even nowadays. This is one of the reasons that determine us acclaim even more intensely the need for meritocracy and reforms, at the level of education included.

As far as the administrative perspective is concerned, meritocracy represents an administrative method, according to which the assignments and responsibilities are ascribed to individuals in virtue of their merits, intelligence, abilities, knowledge, references and education, aspects measured by assessment procedures. The meritocratic society is that type of society in which wealth, benefits, responsibilities or social position are obtained through competition, talent and a proven competence. This principle assumes that social status or social prestige, in general, are not inherited but acquired according to clear criteria. The same term is also used to describe the competitive society that accepts differences dependent on talent, merit, competence, motivation and effort.

Although not exempted by the critics, meritocracy has always been considered more just and more productive principle, a factor of progress. Unfortunately, the communist regime rejected it. Moreover, the ideologists of the communist doctrine labeled meritocracy as an anomaly. In their opinion, the meritocratic class would be responsible for monopolizing the access to merit, which would allow the perpetuation of power and privileges.

The difficulties encountered in the reforming process of the Romanian education must be analyzed in terms of the influence that the communist ideology had in this domain. It is common knowledge that (not only) in Romania, the communist regime represented the enemy of the values of any kind (cultural, political etc.) even if, similar to all political regimes, it put forward the implementation of a number of reforms. Moreover, the disparagement and destruction of the values represented an essential objective. Therefore, we can speak of three distinct periods that marked the “reform” of education:

- a) the 1948-1960 period, which represented the beginning of the class struggle and the establishment of the Soviet educational system;
- b) 1962 - 1979, marked by a relative normalization of the system and
- c) 1979 - 1989, marked by the revival of ideology and political violence.

Each of these periods has caused major changes in the Romanian education, with effects that are felt over several generations. Thus, on the 23rd of August 1948 is promulgated the Decree no. 175, which, among other things, provide for the education of the youth in the spirit of the popular democracy and the training of specialized secondary and higher education teaching staff on a scientific basis which meets the need of establishing a socialist society [1]. The “new man” could only be created by means of education. He had to be easy to manipulate and control.

Withal, as a result of the initiation of the industrialization plan, the communist party pays special attention to technical education and suppresses private educational institutions. In addition to this, during this period, religious schools were taken over by the state, and gradually disappeared, religious education being replaced by scientific atheism. After 1945, the politicization of education generated the mediocrisation of education at all levels. Study disciplines such as psychology, law and philosophy are replaced with dialectical materialism. As far as foreign languages are concerned French language is disappearing, while the study of the Russian language becomes compulsory. These measures were claims forwarded within the framework of student demonstrations in 1956, initiated against the events in Hungary [2].

As concerns higher education, the effects of the “reform” were equally injurious. Suffice it to say that the graduates of proletarian faculties entered higher education institutions if they obtained the average 2 in the oral exam, regardless of the results obtained in other tests. There are being established the polytechnic universities and higher education institutions dependent on the Ministry of Education, which set the number of places and the run of the entrance exam. Moreover, technical institutes replaced universities. Subsequently, the higher education reform has resulted in the removal of teachers from their departments, on the ground of an “unhealthy origin” and partisanship to groups of fascist orientation.

In relation to human resource management, this becomes a highly centralized one. We pertain to the employment of the teaching staff, which became sterner. They are employed by distribution centrally regulated and monitored.

Education through and for labor represented the creed of Stalinist education in full compliance with the ideals of the regime as far as industry and agriculture are concerned. The cult of labor as a supreme value of socialism, will allow the set of a dividing line between intellectuals and the working class.

Paradoxically, during this period there have been established some positive policies. For example, mass literacy - typical of the totalitarian regimes - was a policy that aimed at the reduction of illiteracy, the increase of the number of educated adults (documents indicate that literacy had

reached 90%). The liquidation of illiteracy served the regime for its political and economic goals. However, it contributed to the increase of the level of culture, offering people the opportunity to write and read in the national language. It is also during this time, that the regime allowed the education in the minority language, especially in Hungarian.

In addition to this, the promotion of access to education, the increase of the number of students and teachers in pre-university and university education, the development of the school infrastructure and its material resources fall under the head of success.

These are only a few of the measures that regarded the Romanian educational system during this period. Despite the fact that some of them had a positive character, we must be aware the fact that unlike other Sovietic states, Romania underwent a period of genuine de-stalinization [3].

The Stalinist educational reform in 1948 alienated the Romanian school from its European traditions which prejudiced the quality of education. The idea of forming a group of intellectuals of working-class social origin, the adjournment of the scientific connections with similar institutes in the West and the exclusive orientation towards U.R.S.S, the compulsoriness of learning the Russian language within three years of study, the introduction of the Soviet teaching system, the politicization of the management and educational process at all levels etc. were instruments by which any form of academic autonomy was suppressed.

During 1962 – 1979, there are mentioned two educational laws that have “moulded” the Romanian according to its socialist doctrine: the 1968 and 1978 law. In a nutshell, the 1968 law provided for the people’s access to education, irrespective of their nationality, religion, race or gender, the compulsoriness and gratuitousness of education. In its turn, the 1978 law forwards the introduction of polytechnization, as well as with a ranking of the subject matter, with the strong assertion of the political and ideological role of the social sciences. In spite of all the measures, the “concern for the man” of the party, the quality of education is the one to suffer under it.

The “new man” and the socialist education have hallmarked education until 1989, having a considerable impact especially on the youth. Socialism was the means to provide prosperity and set at rest oppression and inequality. The educational policy imposed by the political regime generated various effects in regards to the higher education entrance exam, where over 50% of those admitted had to be peasants, workers or children of party activists. The consequences are immediate: many young people, although well trained, are rejected from the university entrance examination based on social origin criteria and not at all competence. Education enters the stage of communist dictatorship.

After 1989 at the level of the educational policies there is noticed an attempt of liberation from past doctrines. The transition from centralism to a society trying to find the pathway to democracy has enabled a review of the educational ideal, of the general values of education. The attempt to express its new content was witnessed in the first project of the educational reform, started in 1990. Moreover, the period 1990-1996 is marked by numerous attempts to develop various educational policy documents (such as the Romanian Educational Reform, 1990, the White Book, 1993, the Education Act, 1995).

The momentum put forth by a new beginning has made possible the relinquishment of theories that never had the real possibility of being transposed into reality. The current context of education, now having reached the stage of postmodernism, reiterates the elements of modern education, emphasizes and gives it new and more complex dimensions.

Notes:

[1] Păun, Ștefan, 2005, *History Education*, Bucharest, Cartea Universitară Publishing House, p. 19.

[2] Jela Doina, Tismăneanu Vladimir, 2006, *Hungary 1956. The insurgence of the minds and the end of the communist myth*, Bucharest, Curtea Veche Publishing House, p. 176.

[3] Someșan Maria, Iosifescu Mircea, 1998, „Legile din 1948 pentru reformarea învățămîntului”, in *Analele Sighet*, vol. VI, București, Editura Fundația Academia Civică, p. 439

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