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Scholarships for studying abroad during the '90s

Alexandru Bălşescu



The scholarship, meaning the purse with gold (or silver) pieces offered by various education institutions or by organizations/ foundations, like Soros, to students from Romania, was (and still is) an opportunity which is viewed from a variety of perspectives by each individual. I am the fortunate beneficiary of such an opportunity. I shall briefly recount what and how it happened and how I perceived/ still perceive the series of events which has brought me here (meaning to Teheran at the moment and to Bahrain in general).

My story can only refer to education in the field of social sciences and I cannot presume to generalize... I began my studies in sociology in 1993 – I think that the Soros foundation had arrived to Romania a year earlier and this was among the first pieces of information that I acquired at the faculty: Soros was giving scholarships to those who wanted to study abroad. It wasn't until 1995 that I discovered how things were supposed to proceed: I was in Prague at a conference on civil society from the perspective of European enlargement, which was organized by the afore-mentioned foundation. I liked it there and I began to think of getting a more consistent experience abroad. The idea of continuing my studies abroad was born on that occasion. Only later did I begin to understand the mechanisms behind scholarships and their diversity.

Were I to classify and qualify them, I would say that there were long-term scholarships (M.A. and doctoral programmes) and institutional or individual scholarships which somehow coincided with the place: institutional scholarships in Europe and individual scholarships in the US. These are of course very broad definitions ... I mean, the European “money purses” were received from continental institutions or through continental programmes, which were represented in Romania, such as Tempus, Tempra, Socrates etc. ... all sorts of names which sent to a more or less imagined antiquity ... They involved prior and independent acceptance from a chosen University and an examination of the programme by a jury. One implied condition was scientific, theoretical and physical involvement in one network or another, meaning placing yourself under the patronage of one or more personalities. My first scholarship was through the Tempra programme, it was for a DEA in Lyon.

The American “money purses”, a lot more sought for back then (I'm not aware of the current situation), stood under the sign of intellectual adventurism: it was necessary that the student should pass the TOEFL language test, the GRE “intelligence” test which contained the same kind of problems and picture puzzles that one could have found in Romanian magazines during the communist period, before the arrival

of the coloured pictures in the publications nowadays; the student was also required to translate a series of essays or students' papers and to try and get recommendation letters (or just signatures on already written letters) from professors with whom he/ she had closely worked. The candidate was also supposed to spend some time on the Internet (a novelty at that time) and to select a series of universities where he/ she intended to apply. Due to the high cost of each application (an average of 50 USD per university), this lottery depended on the financial power each person had. If you were rather well-off, you had the possibility to apply for more universities ... The average recommended number was 5; I really don't know why ... All documents had to be placed in nice bubble envelopes and sent via air mail to resounding addresses ... As a colleague and good friend insisted, who is now in a doctoral programme at Columbia University, in New York, I participated in the recommended average number of applications and found myself, after the French DEA, at the University of Columbia, Irvine, in a doctoral programme at the department of anthropology. The scholarship was offered by the Centre for European and German Studies at Berkley. This is the point at which we begin to observe the similarities between the European and the American systems. In the American case, those who examine the student's application file try to obtain a scholarship from an institution somewhat independent from the university (in case the university doesn't have enough money). The difference between this system and the European one is that more often than not the student and the intellectual patron have never met. Happiness or deception with erotic undertones take place after the student is admitted in the educational factory across the Ocean.

I couldn't exactly tell why I had chosen Irvine and I even remember being asked about it several times, and each time I gave a different answer, while being secretly convinced that that would be my opportunity to meet the California

of the 60s. I was sorely mistaken but that's another story ...

Let me go back to the theme regarding the "possibilities" of getting a scholarship abroad. The prior conditions regarded general education, being fluent in one foreign language or another weighing as a decisive element ... my French was rather bad, yet there were some signs of us being somewhat familiar (I had after all spent 10 years trying to learn it ... These conditions had also to do with curricular activities during the faculty graduation exam (what we could abstractly call "merit"), with more or less fortunate life occurrences and decisive encounters and with the financial power the student/ his family had if the student aimed at getting an American scholarship ... It sounds rather Marxist, I'm sorry, but the costs of the above-mentioned procedures, including the costs for legalizing all necessary documents, easily reached the sum of 600 dollars, and that was quite a fortune ten years ago (and I believe it still is for most students nowadays).

I don't think that I would exaggerate things if I said that the desire to "leave" was a general feeling among my faculty colleagues, but information and awareness of the possibilities and the real conditions were really insufficient. It so happens that most of my friends (from sociology or Letters) left on scholarships: some came back, others are still wandering ... I had a colleague with the funniest trajectory which went straight against the general flow: he went to Moscow for a MA programme. The fact that his name was Ivan could have helped him. I met him at the Dales Bookshop in the summer of 2001, if memory serves. He told me that he intended to go to the West after having figured out how things went in the East. My case appears to be a mirror case: after experiencing the Wild West, I'm headed for the Exotic East ...

Translated by Alina Popescu