Guest Editors’ Introduction

Interaction of Social and Political Processes

This issue is a sequel to the fall 2005 issue of the International Journal of Sociology (IJS) on Social Inequality and Social Problems in Romania. There, the effects of the 1989 systemic transformation were assessed in terms of the relationship between social inequality and social problems, with the analyses focusing on the following aspects: social stratification and poverty, unemployment and migration, social policies and poverty, and social structure and ethnicity. The articles in this current issue of the journal take a different approach to studying change in postcommunist Romania. Emphasis is now on the intersection between social and political processes, particularly democratization, the effects of which on the new social structure are examined in five domains: (a) demographic structure, (b) social inequality, (c) intergenerational social mobility, (d) political elites, and (e) parliamentary representation.

To provide the background for reading the specialized articles in this issue, we give a brief account of the overall transformations in Romania in the years following the overthrow of the Ceaușescu regime as they relate to the specific topics addressed here. We also comment on each of the five articles in the context of the country’s democratization and structural change.

The Restructuring of Romanian Society

For Romania, as for most of its counterparts in the so-called Soviet bloc, the year 1989 marks the beginning of major transformative processes in the political and...
socioeconomic spheres. Contrary to countries such as Poland and Hungary, however, the pace of the Romanian transition to democracy and market economy has proved slower and more difficult, with significant consequences for overall structural change. A brief look at the specifics of the country’s communist past provides a better grasp of the reasons for the lengthy transition process, as well as the various aspects of the transformations themselves. While there is no unitary view of which factors counted most, we consider the following characteristics of Romanian communism to be critical for the 1989 events as well as for the country’s subsequent development.

Political and Economic Traits of Socialist Romania

Politically, communist rule in Romania exhibited strong dictatorial traits, especially after Nicolae Ceaușescu became general secretary of the Communist Party (CP). In the late 1980s, Ceaușescu’s “sultanistic regime” (Linz and Stepan 1996), instead of relaxing in the form of “perestroika,” tightened its grip on society, using an efficient system of social control to suppress any form of organized dissent. While the restriction of political and cultural liberties was enforced on a large scale, ethnic minorities, especially Hungarians, felt its effects strongly as a result of the CP’s nationalistic policies (see Veres in this issue). The Hungarian minority was less able to resort to emigration, as it lacked a system of agreement similar to that by which the CP allowed Germans and Jews to leave the country.

The political ideology of the CP also defined Romania’s economic trajectory, and had dramatic consequences for the country’s social structure. In achieving the goal of a new class organization centered on workers, the government abolished private property, including in agriculture, which, together with rapid industrialization, led to a decrease in the peasant population and a boom of the working class (Urse 2003). The ban on private enterprise also pertained to small industry, trade, and the service sector, thus preventing the development of a Romanian middle class (unlike in other socialist countries, such as Poland or Hungary, for example). Almost the entire active population became state-employed, and relied on the state for all types of social assistance. Despite official no-unemployment, however, the economic situation in Romania was bleak, especially after Ceaușescu’s decision to pay off the country’s foreign debt. This policy curtailed investments in the economy (technology imports, in particular), and led to the population’s extreme impoverishment.

In general, these aspects help to explain what happened in 1989 and in the following years. Specifically, the social upheaval that led to the regime change was not initially an anticommunist movement, but aimed to overthrow Ceaușescu and his entourage. With the dictator gone, many Romanians preferred the continuation of socialist policies of job security and state-provided social assistance to radical, tough economic reforms. Hence, it is not surprising that leftist governments
were voted into power consecutively until 1996, and then again in 2000. This affected the pace of the Romanian transition, as the left-wing governing party adopted an equivocal approach to economic and social reforms, at least until its 2000 mandate.

Transformations in Postcommunist Romania: Interaction of Social and Political Processes

Selected domains in which transformation has occurred—demographic structure, social inequality, intergenerational mobility, political elites, and parliamentary representation—bridge social and political processes. In this section we provide some background for the five articles included in this issue.

Democratization and Changes in Demographic Structure

After 1989, Romania’s population decreased significantly from an estimated 23,150,000 in 1989 to 21,680,000 in 2002, mainly due to massive emigration in 1990–91 and to negative rates of natural increase. This latter factor is the result of the sudden and substantial reduction in birthrates (from 16 percent in 1989 to under 10 percent since 2000) in the years immediately following the fall of communism, once legal restrictions on contraception and abortion were lifted. Despite low fertility rates (the total fertility rate [TFR] has been 1.3 per woman for about the past decade) however, the Romanian labor market is not at immediate risk of experiencing the negative effects of demographic aging. As a result of aggressive communist pro-childbearing policies, the median segment of the population, that is, people of working age, will continue for at least the next two decades to make up an important segment of the population.

The annual number of marriages has decreased annually from approximately 8 percent in 1990 to below 6 percent after 2000. Divorce rates, however, have not changed (about 1.5 divorces per 1,000 people), despite liberalization of the applicable legislation, which suggests that other factors discourage this type of behavior (the most important ones are likely of an economic nature and relate to housing and child rearing).

Traian Rotariu’s article examines some of these demographic transformations in light of the “second demographic transition,” understood as the birth–death rate imbalance—currently manifested in many countries including Romania—and its roots in the system of values. Findings indicate that for Romanian women, as for many of their counterparts in Western countries, the classic model of the “bourgeois family,” which centers on the child, is still the dominant one. However, Romania currently has one of the lowest fertility levels in the world. The premise of the “second demographic transition” thesis—stating that the birth–death rate imbalance is conditioned by the system of values—is rejected.
Social Inequality

In this issue of *IJS*, the notion of social class is distinguished from that of social stratification. Social class refers to broad segments of society that control different types of resources, primarily economic, social, and cultural capital. Social stratification is understood as social inequality among individuals in such dimensions as educational attainment, occupational status, and income. From a methodological standpoint, social class is a nominal variable, while social stratification is usually measured through interval (or quasi-interval) scales.

In recent years, both social class and social stratification underwent profound changes in Romania. One researcher summarized these changes as follows:

The social effects of the transformation process in Romania have been increased inequality and poverty (even to the extent of pauperisation of large sections of the population). The transformation has meant a new social stratification, with a new class of rich people not necessarily connected to productive economic activity. Large sections of well-educated middle classes experienced a social mobility downwards. A new opportunistic meritocracy was created. During the early stage of [the] transition period this new social stratification development generated tensions in [the] relation[ship] between the levels of education and payment received. This problem was also related [to] educational system incapacity to adapt to new demands of [the] labour market. (Răduțiu 2004: 5)

The dynamics of the Romanian class and stratification structure inform the analyses in the article by Valér Veres. The author examines the influence of economic, social, and cultural capital on individuals’ social position since 1989. The focus is on the Hungarian ethnic minority in Transylvania, which constitutes about 7 percent of the total population of Romania but is ecologically concentrated. Veres’s analyses compare this minority to the Romanian majority.

Intergenerational Social Mobility

Social mobility in Romania is another area that has been affected by the postcommunist transformations. We see the development of some new means of upward mobility that were uncommon under communism, such as a reliance on (more or less legally accumulated) wealth, on politics, and on quickly achieved fame through mass media. Education, on the other hand, continues to remain one of the most important roads to social advancement, as indicated by the development of higher education, including a large number private universities.

In terms of openness, overall the postcommunist social environment shows relatively high rates of intergenerational education and occupational mobility. Nonetheless, there are major discrepancies between urban and rural areas, which point to the problem of inequality of opportunity (Cartana 2000), with children from rural areas (as well as those form the poorest social categories) becoming less and less able to afford the costs of higher education.
The significant restructuring and reconfiguration of the social space in postcommunist Romania, however, make intergenerational mobility studies difficult. The old social classes have either disappeared or have changed in content and relevance. To tackle some of these problems, Irina Tomescu-Dubrow studies flows (movements between origin and destination positions in the social structure) and relationships (dependencies of the destination positions on positions of origin) for two conceptualizations of individuals’ locations in the social structure: social classes and socioeconomic index.

Political Elites

Regarding elites, if we refer to the Weberian concept of power, prestige, and wealth, perhaps expanding the prestige component by including fame, we see that Romanian society is on its way to forming this important social segment as well. While some formerly high-positioned members of the communist regime have successfully moved into the current economic or political elite by relying on the state’s resources and on their personal networks, neither in Romania nor in other former communist countries do they make up the dominant proportion of the new economic and political elites (Slomczynski and Mach 1996; Szelenyi and Szelenyi 1995).

In Romania, the political class is probably the least structured form of elite. Its members come in part from those who knew, at the moment when communist rule was falling, how to take lead of political organizations and how to use the prestige gained in “taking communism down.” Nonetheless, few of the former nomenklatura have successfully remained politically active after 1990; the ones who have are those who took advantage of their status as persecuted or as opponents of communism (as was the case of former president Ion Iliescu), or as technocrats. Other members of the political elite are people who benefited from cultural capital: they worked in prestigious institutions, were descendants of families highly positioned in the interwar period, or were members of “historical parties.”

Irina Culic’s article analyzes the transformation of the Romanian political elite from 1990 to 2004 focusing on professionalization processes. Looking at the social characteristics and personal biographies of the members of the Romanian Parliament, the article scrutinizes the reconstitution of the political elite and its change alongside and in interaction with the changes in the sociopolitical and economic system as a whole.

Parliamentary Representation

Rapid social transformation also brought substantive changes in the representation of women’s interests, particularly their numbers in parliament. Beginning around 1980, the Ceaușescu regime began to implement quotas for women such that their representation in various legislative bodies more than doubled as compared with
previous levels (Fischer 1985). By 1985, Romania had one of the highest proportions of women representatives in the communist bloc (Ruminska-Zimny 1995: 47; Montgomery 2003: 2). Their proportion in parliament, however, did not translate into real political power, as women dominated positions with little legislative influence and were unable to successfully challenge Ceaușescu’s aggressively pronatalist policies (Fischer 1985). After the fall of the official Communist Party, Romanian women experienced slow but steady growth in both parliamentary representation and positions in power. Typical of other postcommunist societies, however, today’s Romanian women’s parliamentary representation has yet to reach the high levels it had in the 1980s (Dubrow in this issue).

Using a combination of data sources and electoral districts as the units of analyses, Joshua Kjerulf Dubrow examines the contribution of economic development to the relative stability of women’s representational inequality between 1992 and 2005. Results indicate that, standardizing for district magnitude, the greater the level of economic development the greater the level of women’s parliamentary representation in the Chamber of Deputies. Women’s postcommunist experience with descriptive representation therefore varies by district, such that women in poorer, more rural districts have a much different representational experience than those in more economically developed districts. Though Romanian women are more likely to enjoy substantive representation of interests under democratic rule, this finding calls into question the ability of elections, in and of themselves, to perform the function of implementing descriptive representation in terms of placing women into parliament in an ecologically diverse setting.

Note

1. For information on the development of Romanian sociology see Larionescu and Sandu (2001) and Tomescu-Dubrow (2005).

References


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