Guest Editor's Introduction

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Guest Editor’s Introduction

The main theme of this issue of the *International Journal of Sociology* (*IJS*) is the relationship between social inequality and social problems in post-1989 Romania. The radical transformations that followed the breakdown of the communist regime, and, more specifically, the changes in the Romanian economy from central planning to privatization, strengthened this relation and made its effects more readily visible. The articles in this issue of *IJS* examine, from a sociological perspective, four broad levels at which the challenging outcomes of social inequality become manifest: (1) social stratification and poverty, (2) unemployment and migration, (3) social policies and poverty, and (4) social structure and ethnicity.

The Tradition of Romanian Sociology

*The Foundations of the Discipline*

Romanian sociological research began in the second half of the nineteenth century, and was directly linked to the country’s goal of modernization in all aspects of society (Costea 1994). Thus, in its initial stages, sociological investigation centered on monographs that allowed a close look at concrete social issues and offered guidelines for social reforms. At that time, the boundaries between sociology and ethnography were blurred.

Another important component of the Romanian sociological tradition was classical social theory, which professionals began to develop at the end of the nineteenth century and continuing into the early twentieth century. A defining component of the discipline was, and continues to be, the Sociological School of Bucharest founded by Dimitri Gusti.
Overall, prior to the instauration of communism, “the picture of Romanian sociology . . . reveals a simultaneous European synchronism with substantial contributions” (Larionescu 2004: 3). In the interwar period, more than a third of Romanian social science publications were written in French.

The Socialist Years

After 1948, Romanian sociology experienced various levels of marginalization that ranged from its official ban as a discipline to political indoctrination in the Marxist-Leninist framework, and severe isolation from the international sociological community (Costea 1994). Compared to the Polish and Hungarian situation, the conditions for the development of sociology in Romania were much more difficult.

The 1948 education law prohibited the teaching of sociology and sociological research, a situation that continued until 1965. Despite deinstitutionalization, however, sociological empirical inquiry went on, at least in some areas. A body of professional sociologists continued their work, usually under the wing of other disciplines such as economy, statistics, social hygiene, ethnology, and anthropology. The Institute for Economic Research, the General Directorate for Statistics, and the Institute of Hygiene provided an institutional framework. During this time, research was confined mainly to data collection ordered by the party-state to enable the adoption of its administrative actions.

This situation improved after 1965. Sociology was reinstituted as both a teaching discipline and a research discipline, and survivors of the Bucharest School of Sociology played a distinct role in its revitalization. Nonetheless, “historical materialism, conceived as a Russian dogmatic and simplified variant of Marxism, took the place of sociological analysis. . . . Political factors intruded on sociology’s revival, making it generally ‘captive.’ . . . Marxist ‘cover’ was indispensable to any scientific manifestation within the system” (Larionescu 2004: 2). Because the theoretical debates on sociology were restricted to historical materialism, theoretical and empirical research developed separately. This often resulted in theoretical studies without empirical validity, as well as in empirical research that was “falling into irrelevant descriptiveness, unable to provide generalization and explanation (Costea 1994: 75).

Although active sociological dissidence was not manifest during the time of the communist system, Romanian sociologists employed a set of “defensive strategies” to be able to carry on work. Since the macrostructure could not be the subject of critical analysis due to the ideology of having been established in accordance with a scientifically proven pattern, sociologists focused on the system’s component units (Costea 1994). “The local character of the surveys allowed researchers to reveal social problems and various malfunctions, such as the ‘decrease in standards’ in organizations, self-perpetuating bodies within the structures of socialist democracy, etc., without pretending to generalize them to the whole socialist system” (Larionescu 2004: 3).
Another means Romanian sociologists used to avoid the defensive reaction of the party-state was to adapt concepts and theories as “intended distortion.” Here, we note the transformation of the American theory on the social development of organizations into the human development of socialist enterprises, and the adaptation of American survey methodology to the Romanian context. Romanian sociologists also reached out to “special modes of communication reserved to writers to build ‘unorthodox’ scientific constructions” (Larionescu 2004: 4). Some authors even mention an alternative sociology, which was practiced outside the system and distributed as samizdat (Gheorghiu 2002).

In sum, despite censorship and heavy politicization of the sociological field, some sociologists did manage to do sound empirical research, mainly focusing on micro-level analysis. According to Costea (1994: 77), using national, regional, or local data, good analyses were performed in urban sociology (Constantinescu and Stahl 1970; Herseni 1974; Miftode 1978), the sociology of youth (Badina 1970; Mahler 1977, 1986), educational sociology (Stanciu 1971; Cazacu and Costea 1972; Paun 1974), and the sociology of social structures and dynamics (Gall 1965; Krausz 1973; Ionescu and Hoffman 1974; Cazacu 1974).

**Romanian Sociology After the Systemic Change**

The social transformations following 1989 put Romanian sociology on a new path of development. Essential to the discipline was the overnight break with Marxism-Leninism, “which was so sudden and visible that . . . the disappearance of the Ceausescu regime coincided with the fall of the official paradigm. . . . Rejection [of official ideology] was so definite that not even after 10 years has there been any significant return to Marxism” (Larionescu 2004: 4).

At the same time, the postcommunist environment created opportunities for areas of studies to which Romanian sociologists previously had no access, either because of party-state ideology or because of their isolation from the international sociological community, especially modern Western sociology. However, current Romanian sociology is facing the drawbacks associated with the lack of a good foundation other than the precommunist tradition and the few exceptions under communism.

**Social Inequality and Social Problems**

The transformation from a one-party state and central planning to democracy and capitalism in Romania differs in many respects from similar transition processes in the so-called successful countries of Central and Eastern Europe, such as Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. While the reasons for this discrepancy are many, including differences in the communist experience itself, a major factor that sets Romania aside is the pace at which the post-1989 reform was conducted. Contrary to the transition economies that carried out restructuring fast and steadily,
Romania “experimented with gradual reforms for almost a decade, a combination of stop-and-go policies” (Teșliuc and Pop, this issue, p. 14). As a result, rather than successfully restoring its economy on a sustainable growth path, as the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary did, Romania experienced repeated recessions, which led to an increase in the occurrence and severity of poverty.

Deepening poverty, combined with high income inequality—Romania resembles the three aforementioned countries only with respect to income inequality, in that all have higher levels than Slovakia or Slovenia, for example—had a severe impact on the population. Nonetheless, the consequences of inequality affect different social groups differently. While current poverty is an important factor affecting one’s living standards, the socialist heritage, that is, the social background on which inequality builds, is likely to compound the social problems experienced by some segments of society. Relevant in this regard are the Roma minority and the population of abandoned children, for whom the negative effects of transition build upon an already disadvantaged social status.

The articles included in this issue of IJS concern this relationship between social transformations, inequality, and social problems in Romania. Using quantitative and qualitative data, the authors examine social stratification and poverty, unemployment and migration, social policies and poverty, and social structure and ethnicity.

**Social Stratification and Poverty**

In their article “Poverty and the Poor,” Cornelia Mihaela Teșliuc and Lucian Pop focus on the poor as a category that grew in number and severity to unprecedented levels during the postcommunist transition. The authors use cross-sectional and panel data to document growth in poverty over the 1995–98 period, and to investigate which factors contribute most to household welfare.

Based on a “static” household-level model of consumption determinants for the whole population, as well as on tailored models for the two largest groups of poor, employees and pensioners, Teșliuc and Pop distinguish among transient and permanent poor, two categories whose exit from poverty requires different policy strategies. While focusing on the dynamics of poverty and inequality in Romania, these issues are also contrasted to the situation in other Central and East European countries.

**Unemployment and Migration**

The transition to capitalism revolutionized the labor market of postcommunist societies. Private businesses, as opposed to state firms, became the major division of the economy in terms of hiring, firing, and rewarding. And with the implementation of capitalist market rules, the risk of unemployment became a very important factor in people’s decision to migrate.
To understand the dynamics of temporary emigration in post-1989 Romania, Dumitru Sandu, in “Dynamics of Romanian Emigration After 1989,” examines structural factors and individual-level characteristics that shape actual temporary migration. Interestingly, results indicate that after 1989, the stages of temporary emigration abroad are closely connected to the stages of permanent emigration and internal migration, and that both human and social capital play a significant role in people’s migration decisions.

Social Policies and Poverty

The interaction of reproductive patterns, social policies, and poverty in the context of radical social transformations in Romania led to the accentuation of social problems for the population of abandoned children, a group that entered the transition with an already disadvantaged social background. In “Children Deprived of Parental Care as a Persisting Social Problem,” I show that abandoned children themselves become a social problem that the state fails to solve. Based on archival data and interviews with actors in the Romanian child welfare system, I examine the government’s response to this situation and discuss the mechanism behind the perpetuation of the child abandonment social problem, with an emphasis on the inability to effectively implement child protection laws over time.

Social Structure and Ethnicity

In all societies, ethnic divisions are correlated with class divisions, with some groups being at a greater disadvantage than others. This is the state of the Roma minority in Romania, whose situation since 1989 has worsened significantly due to the combination of its already underprivileged social position inherited from the socialist period and the negative effects of increased impoverishment following transition.

In her article, “Romanian Roma, State Transfers, and Poverty,” Cristina Rat investigates the effectiveness of policy measures aimed to combat poverty in the case of the Roma. The results indicate that neither income inequality nor the extent of poverty is significantly reduced through welfare measures, but that improving state transfers for children and the family might constitute the most effective way to combat poverty and social exclusion among Romanian Roma.

References


