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Socio-Economic and Cultural Aspects of the Urbanization Process in Romania

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The great transformations which have taken place in Romania during the last few decades can be seen especially clearly in analysis of two main components of social life: industrialization and urbanization. From the ideological viewpoint of the development of socialism, these two components are obviously correlated: the process of urbanization can be defined as part of the process of socialist industrialization and, at the same time, as part of the transformations brought about by the cooperativization of agriculture. Within this framework specific differences can be delimited between the socialist urbanization process and the rhythm urbanization follows in the Western world or on the African continent. Undoubtedly, the first methodological obligation is to understand the sense and significance of these differences.

The complex process of urbanization involves basic changes, primarily in economic and demographic structures. However, beyond these basic changes, others of no less importance can be observed. The nature of their significance differs in that they involve the spiritual life of the human community. They make up its affective, intellectual, esthetic-artistic and educational side. The ethnologist's goal is to understand these secondary changes which, either partially or totally, may redefine the composite profile of new social facts.

Of course, significance is also to be found in analyzing all the implications of the diachronic dimension as each town has had its own particular history determined, over the course of time, by the development of its own social surroundings. We should emphasize that Romanian towns, when compared with those in the rest of southeastern Europe, have followed their own particular processes of development due to the fact that for a long period during the Middle Ages, these town centers grew autonomously (cf. Panaitescu, 1947; Lehr, 1956; Barkar, 1955; Mercais, 1954; Marcu, 1976).

As others have accurately stressed, sociologists formerly considered that urbanization represented nothing more than a straightforward population displacement from country to town. In other words, urbanization implied the simple migration of one social category into another social environment (Constantinescu, 1971). However, the careful study of this complex phenomenon reveals other significant aspects: the process of "reurbanization" of former town dwellers whose social and cultural lives are modified as a result of the powerful rhythm of industrialization; the process of continual growth in rural settlements located adjacent to urbanizing centers; the pendulum-like movements of commuters imposing new cultural patterns in the villages; the variability of urban structures and the tendency to disperse in suburbs. Of maximal importance for an
understanding of the urbanization process as it has developed in our
country today is, of course, an examination of the planned pattern of
development and, furthermore, the impact of territorial planning on town
and country (Matei and Matei, 1977).

Four main analytical perspectives have been employed in the study of
the urbanization process as it has proceeded and continues in Romania:
(1) integration within urban surroundings; (2) the continuously increasing
degree of urbanization of the old town systems; (3) the urbanization
process in rural settlements; and (4) the decreasing discrepancy between
country and town which in fact expresses a gradual adoption of the town
pattern (Matei and Matei, 1977).

Let us give a brief historical overview of the planned urbanization
experiments carried out in the last decades as Romania has built up a
socialist society. In 1948, urbanization designs for 46 settlements (old
town centers) were developed and, in 1949, the first territorial planning
system (the planning of the district of Hunedoara) was elaborated. The
application of urbanization plans to the initial 46 settlements may be
considered as the first such experiment in Romania, and it is seen as the
beginning of socialist Romanian urbanism. As a matter of course all
the plans proposed at that time included broad study and documentation.
Monographs were written containing definite suggestions for development,
division into zones, circulation and building rules. As part of the
initial design described above, a special town planning design was created
for Vaslui which considered both its internal structure and its integration
in the surrounding territory.

Two great periods stand out during the years that followed the initial
experiments. The first was the period of urban construction and the
development of territorial planning, both closely related to the country's
industrialization process. This was carried out in the 1960s. This
process was prompted by the completion of agricultural cooperativization
and by the parallel development of large state agricultural enterprises.
In the present stage we strive to perfect and to expand the planning and
urbanization process to reach the entire country (Matei and Matei, 1977).

However, we should bear in mind the prime mover in this process which
has developed and continues to grow in planned and impressive rhythms.
This prime mover was and remains the process of industrialization in the
country, the process leading logically to the completion of socialist
construction.

If we consider the urbanization process strictly as expressed in terms
of percentages found in periodic population censuses, we note an increase
in the urban population: 5.1% in 1930, 23.4% in 1948, 31.3% in 1956, 38.2%
in 1966, to a current level of 47.5% in 1977. In other words, the
population of Romanian towns rose from 3,051,000 in 1930 to 8,096,000 in
1969. Of course, this increase in the urban population can and should be
understood in terms of its significance for various urban structures in order to obtain an accurate image.

Two particularly interesting phenomena can be observed in Romania, as well as elsewhere: in large town concentrations, one finds an increase in the peri-urban area while, on the other hand, some stagnation has occurred within the old town core.

In a relatively recent study (Marcu, 1976) attempting to determine the present degree of urbanization in various southeast European centers, a series of factors has been investigated to help understand the complex phenomena of urbanization: the proportion of the population in urban areas, the degree of industrialization, the number of town centers exceeding 100,000 inhabitants, the birth rate, the population's position vis-a-vis the production processes, the pattern of actual wages, the rhythm of housing construction, the number of medical staff as compared with the total population, the number of television subscribers compared to the total population, the number of students, etc. The correlational analysis of these data has shown once more the balanced development of the process of urbanization in the whole country, the accelerated rhythm of this renewal of social structures and, implicitly, of the desires of the population. This analysis points to the phenomenon of urban-area concentration by grouping together certain centers organically related to each other (for instance the Jiu Valley or the Dobroudja seacoast). However, urbanization is first of all a social process and the whole problem should be reconsidered from this point of view.

Among the elements important to the definition of the composite profile of the social urban pattern, considered in a strictly cultural sense, certain ones have been especially taken into account in on-the-spot investigations. We consider the following to be essential: the increase in compulsory general education, the drawing of the young toward industrial and intellectual professions, and the use of the mass media. Using these elements we can work out both the amplification and the diversification of culture within human communities.

We should add to all this an observation concerning a possible new relation between what we generally call traditional (popular) culture and the accepted pattern of the new urban-type culture. Out of this superposition or comingling of cultural plans, original new cultural structures result. The process of adaptation to urban life indirectly supposes a gradual blotting out of the old values of the traditional culture (even considering the fact that the sphere of these values is very wide, including literature, music, folklore, customs, personalities, etc.). This is a particularly relevant field of concern for urban ethnology and sociology and one actually less studied, it is true, in the general context of the urbanization process. In general, studies have particularly emphasized (strictly in terms of the human consequences) the possibly unfavorable results of urbanization, for instance, on family unity (the relations between husband and wife, between parents and children, or
children's education), on the disorderly behavior brought about by socio-cultural stress, etc.

Another finding is that mastery of the urban cultural pattern requires an understanding of the old urban centers as assimilation centers for the rural migratory flow. In this respect, there are urban centers with age-old cultural traditions and urban centers which have developed relatively recently; there are centers containing diverse nationalities, while others have more homogeneous populations.

For analyzing the cultural pattern of the urbanization process in socialist Romania, a comparative study involving the degree of integration of the new population has been suggested. This should include, for example, the number of radio and television subscribers compared with the total number of inhabitants and the number of show attendances per capita. All these researches and results, considered individually or in correlation, have some significance. However, they should be integrated within a comprehensive scheme in order to obtain the most convincing explanation.

The main cultural implication of the urbanization process relates to an increased understanding of the complex problems surrounding the development of the new, urban personality and its integration into the new social structures without the occurrence of deviant phenomena. We believe this is the principal task of the researches conducted by contemporary Romanian social scientists.

The problems set forth here—in their totality—are, of course, only signposts in the analysis of the principal economic, social and cultural aspects of the urbanization process as it is being accomplished in the climate of the great revolutionary transformations in Romania.

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