Part III: Cultural Process in Socialist Romania: Introduction

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Introduction

The first part of this research report examined the economic and social changes that have taken place in socialist Romania. While these are the areas of primary concern in the planning process, several of the papers in Part I made it clear that cultural change was also to be a part of the process of transformation. Part III consists of four papers which examine certain aspects of the process of cultural change. It begins with Paul Simionescu's second contribution to this volume in which he discusses the nature of ethnology in contemporary Romania. Reading this paper one is again struck by the relationship between research goals and Romanian development plans. Two types of research are primary within Romanian ethnology. One involves research into the "ethnogenesis" of the Romanian people and the second involves research into the cultural changes taking place as the process of urbanization and industrialization proceeds. Through their research on the origins and development of Romanian culture, modern ethnologists provide information on the distinctiveness of Romanian culture. This information serves a legitimating function for a state and party which attempt to mobilize the Romanian population in support of both development policies and claims to independence within the eastern bloc. The second type of research documents how a combination of state education policies and changing life experiences are creating modes of thought and behavior which are appropriate to a modern socialist industrial state, and at the same time contribute to plans designed to achieve these ends.

The final three papers are written by American anthropologists who have conducted research in Romania, all of them through IREX exchanges. The first of the three authors, University of Massachusetts anthropologist Zdenek Salzmann, discusses the role that the collection of life histories can play in documenting the process of culture change. Salzmann has studied a group of small, Czech-speaking villages in the Romanian Banat. He explains that as a result of their isolation and high rates of endogamy the villagers have been culturally conservative, retaining much of the language and culture of the Bohemian homeland that they left early in the 19th century. Now, however, responding to the changes in the country that surrounds them, the viability of village life is in question. Sensing this, both anthropologist and villagers were eager to record their impressions of the past and the changes taking place in the present. Salzmann notes that the picture of change provided by standard modes of anthropological analysis can be enriched, and a more complete understanding achieved, when the perspective of the villagers is added to that of the social scientist.

Regina Coussens, a graduate student at the University of Iowa at the time of the conference, picked Buciumi, a village already studied by a team of Romanian sociologists, as the site for her research. In this paper she
explains how folk tradition is being mobilized in Romania in the construction of national identity. The state promotes occasions when folk costumes, song and dance can be displayed and honors outstanding performers. Some are even able to become career entertainers with opportunities to travel abroad. Villagers are genuinely fond of these state supported activities, and among the most enthusiastic are villagers who work in the growing urban sector. They include factory and office workers and the local intelligensia. Thus, at the same time that the state promotes modernization, it also promotes a sense of cultural continuity which helps to legitimize modernization.

In the final selection, Mitchell Ratner, a Ph.D. from American University, examines how Romanian formal education has developed into a kind of tracking system in which the careers of Romanians are actually established very early in their lives. The children of educated people working in cities have access to educational and family support which make it likely that they will receive the preparation necessary to achieve the most prestigious and best paying jobs. The children of workers and peasants, on the other hand, have fewer opportunities to succeed in this way. He demonstrates that while the educational system functions to provide society with trained workers to fill all economic slots, many individuals are frustrated in trying to achieve their personal career goals.

The early decades of Romanian socialism saw a great deal of social mobility as peasants became workers and both peasants and workers joined the leadership ranks and the intelligentsia. However, with the slowing of economic growth rates that has inevitably accompanied economic growth there has been movement toward a situation in which children tend to remain in the social class or segment of their parents. Ratner shows how Romania's educational system has contributed to this process. Perhaps the greatest irony demonstrated in this paper is that in the Romanian workers' state, social mobility has come to be defined as movement out of the ranks of the working class into those of the intellectuals or functionaries.

References

While a steady stream of articles and conference papers based on anthropological research by Americans in socialist Romania had already begun to appear at the time of the conference in 1979, there were as yet no book length monographs. Since then three volumes have appeared, by Kligman (1981), Verdery (1983), and Sampson (1984).

Kligman, Gail

Sampson, Steven


Verdery, Katherine