

# Consideration on the Process of Family Transformations in Communist Romania\*

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## The context of the research

**T**HE CHANGE of the Romanian political climate occurred in 1947 was going to represent the debut of an extremely complicated period in Romanian family life. The 50 years of socialist policy were going to produce, while trying to build the multilaterally developed society, a series of ruptures from the old Romanian society, ruptures which were going to be heavily seen in the family life.

It is said that the group is the first shaper of the personality and the group itself is shaped by society. In our case the society is shaped by the state which claim and pretend to play the role of a patriarch in a time when the patriarchy was fall.<sup>1</sup> One could identify at least three major ways for documenting and analysing the influence of the state on the family in communist Romania: (1) the legislation, (2) the industrialisation and urbanization and (3) mass education. Each of these is responsible for a plenty of changes inside the family institution: the legislation - especially through the Family Code (1954) impose the principles of the equality between men and women—both in the public and private life—and subminated the power of the father in the family and the power of the husband inside marriage; the industrialization and urbanization had changed of proportion between the traditional and the nuclear families. Eventually, the mass education had meant the acceleration of the process of women emancipation and changed their status on the marital market. Although many researchers of the socialist period tend to give to the equalitarian policies of the state just a superficial character, a more theoretical than an actual one<sup>2</sup> one cannot deny that the socialism offered women a chance to be educated and to

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get a job—with a corresponding income—and a social statute never enjoyed before. In 1970, for instance, 75% of women were working.<sup>3</sup>

Researchers talk about the family changes using terms like *affecting*: “the communist regime has affected deeply the evolution of the Romanian family” or *brutal turnovers*: “through the brutal and painful social turnovers it enforced a new way of social organization, a new economical, social and political context, a new way of life.”<sup>4</sup> We agree that the measures of the communist regime took the family life of Romanians by assault, but we incline to believe that the purpose of this assault was to set the society on new bases, different from the traditional ones and not to destroy the familial social order, as Gail Kligman<sup>5</sup> or many other authors suggests. The “destruction” seems to be more a result than a purpose of this policy. Trying, by all means, to strengthen family life—as main private institution—and, through the family, the state, the communists ended up destroying the old norms and values, enforcing principles that contradicted the individual rights stipulated by the international Conventions they adopted and to which the Romanian state adhered at the same time while it harshened the laws regarding the private life. It remains to be established to what extent what was easily defined as “destruction” after 1990 had actually contributed to the spreading of the modern family in Romania!

Marriage remains the main type of union between partners, even if towards the end of the communist period concubinage gets a relatively higher ratio<sup>6</sup>. But what really happens at this time is the change of proportion between the traditional and the nuclear families. Forced industrialization, the steep and continuous increase in the demand of work force led to the first break with the past: the big rural families are displaced, disrupted and this break allows their members to occupy the jobs generously offered by the party. Attracted by the mirage of the city, by the benefits of living in blocks, young people spire to these jobs and leave the villages. The nuclear family lives geographically further and further away from the household, from its roots. We fit perfectly in the model that Goody described as being specific to European socialism.<sup>7</sup> Indirectly, without having made a goal out of it, the socialism contributed, through the effect of its various measures undertaken in order to promote the industrialization of the country (industrialization being the key word for “new,” modern society, compared to the agricultural system, specific to traditional societies<sup>8</sup>), to the making of the “modern” Romanian family. Epistemologically speaking, there is not much of synonymic relation between communism and modernization but, as we shall prove, in spite of the above mentioned paradox, the modernization of the Romanian family, according to the most widely used definitions of the present time, occurred during communism. We shall nevertheless avoid to calling all the modifications “modernization” since we lack the totality of elements<sup>9</sup> that would allow us to categorize the socialist Romanian family as being a modern one. We chose, for a change, to illustrate the changing—so called by us “disruption”—process of the Romanian family on its way towards modernity.

In order to understand the notion of disruption of the traditional Romanian family it is necessary, on one hand, to define the characteristics of this traditional family and, on another, to identify the elements that give substance to this disruption or, to put it other way, to mark the differences that transform the traditional family into a modern one. If these elements are induced by the specific of the socialist regime we can already define the first working hypothesis of this study: the modern Romanian family (that modernism identified in the great theories on the European family) was defined during communism, regardless of how much we do or do not agree with this idea.

- The traditional Romanian family went through various forms, according to the medium it came from, the geographical environment, the social statute of its members etc. According to the time we are talking about, we find as a dominant model either the patriarchal family—where children get married and remain in place, creating a genuine household—; the stem family, where one of the children remains in his parent's house after marriage, taking over the obligation of caring for his parents when they grow old but also the benefit of rightly inheriting their fortune or, even at a reduced scale, the nuclear, neolocal family, placed in the proximity of the family it originated from.
- The *modern family* is represented by the nuclear family—which is, as La Play presents it, a “degraded” form of the family, an unstable form, maybe because of the exaggerated individualism of its members and of its high need for independence.

If we dissociate the elements that make the difference between the two models, as they appear in theory and as they were synthesised by Iluț<sup>10</sup> or Ghebre<sup>11</sup> we shall see that the most important characteristics of the modern family take shape during communism: individual autonomy (in relation with the elder members of the family), neolocality, the increase of women employment, the equilibrated distribution of roles in the household, reduced differences in the education of men and women, exclusion of children from the work force, mass education in specialised institutions, social protection through exterior institutions. Iluț identifies the changes in substance inside the two types of family, according to the dominant criteria a family is based on: the choice of partners, residence, power relations inside the couple, parent—child relations, the functions of the family, the structure of the family, the stability degree and the importance in the social ensemble.<sup>12</sup> We do have to mention that the spreading of the nuclear family does not eliminate the extended family; it is its increased proportion among the population that leads to the apparition of those characteristics of the matrimonial behaviour that are specific to modernity.

Regardless of the uniformization introduced by communism the environment will continue to have an important role in defining the Romanian family. Even if the systematization process attempted to extend the urban lifestyle and its facilities into

villages, two different worlds continue to manifest. According to Vladimir Trebici, when we analyze the different types of families, we have to consider at least three elements which have different manifestations in the urban and in the rural areas, in spite of the *socialist cultural model* in use in both environments: different natality, different mortality, and different nuptiality. He proves that in spite of the behavioural uniformizations, the rural fertility remained clearly superior to the urban one during communism, regardless of the false impression that the trend was being set by the urban natality.<sup>13</sup>

### **Industrialization, urbanization and familial change in socialist Romania**

**T**HE PROCESS of industrialization began in 1949—1950 and was followed by a immediate and massive movement of population from villages towards the urban centres on the way to industrialization. If at the 1948 census there were 3.486.999 inhabitants in the cities, their number had raised to 5.667.559 in 1965, to reach 11.540.494 (50,4% of the population<sup>14</sup>) in 1985. At the same time with the industrialization and the urbanization of the country, immediately after the war and after communists took the power, an act with deep significance and effects that last until the present times occurs: the nationalization of buildings, through Decree 92 from April 20<sup>th</sup> 1950, an act which not only would destroy the private property (for a while) but would also deeply change the social structure, a large part of the population passing suddenly to a lodger statute. There are plenty of studies that, analyzing the phenomenon of inhabiting the communist Romania, show that, even not in equal proportions at least in variable ones the flee of former land owners towards cities meant a ruralisation of the cities. These disinherited over night brought into their new destinations attitudes and rules that were specific to the rural environment they were born and raised in. There are numerous documented situations where the outskirts of the cities looked more like villages, with poultry cages, stables and grocery gardens around the blocks.<sup>15</sup>

The 1966 census was already showing the extent of the relocation of Romanians into cities: over 60% of those interviewed were born in other places than the ones they lived in (1966 census). The 1977 census took notice of a migrational flow “village—town” of 78,4%, the other way being nevertheless not at all negligible (21,6%).

We can identify several mechanisms which led to such a big increase of the urban population:

- people left without land as a consequence of the collectivization of the agriculture—a violent process that took place between 1949 and 1962—the peasants

fled to the cities to become workers, driving up the number of those seeking work and shelter at the same time

- taking advantage of the benefits of mass education, of the opening of apprentice schools towards the children of peasants these leave the homes they were born into and head towards cities to study. Soon after graduating they join the work force, make families and either remain in those cities or, following a governmental repartition they end up in various places, both different and remote from the starting point
- a third way was the changing of the statute of localities, many communes being turned into urban communes or cities. The law of the territory issued in 1972 tried to legalize the phenomenon of the disappearance of differences between villages and cities by building blocks in the previously rural areas.

No matter which of the three aspects is being analyzed, the end result of the migration process towards cities was the disruption of the traditional family—regardless of the way it may have looked like in various provinces or areas of the country.<sup>16</sup>

This massive movement of the population—both from rural towards urban and inside these two categories, especially at a rural—rural level—led to a change in the inhabiting way. We were interested in seeing these aspects beyond theory and these is why we go beyond the specific limits of history entering, through sources and methods, into sociology. At the same time we have to confess that although this project intended from the very beginning to make use of sociological researches, the hazard also played a major role in what concerns the sources of the present work and of works to follow, but this would be discussed at the appropriate moment.

The migration towards cities, as a form of the quest for wellness has its origins at the beginning of modernity; there was also a significant flow between the wars, but this was a natural one, without any form of control of the state. Moreover, it was a seasonal movement due to those going to the cities in order to supplement their income or to those who had no means of living and tried their luck in the cities.<sup>17</sup>

The census realized by the communist authorities in January 1948 showed that 22% of those interviewed (approximately 3,5 million people) lived in cities.<sup>18</sup> Actually, every subsequent census showed that the urban population had increased with 1,3 to 2 million people with respect to the previous census, the most significant increase occurring during 1966–1977. At the same time, the population of the communes decreased or remained at constant levels, with respect to the choice of the reference point. If we consider the whole 1948—1992 period we shall see a 2 million people decrease in the rural area. Of course, this is just raw data, without taking into account the natural growth of the population. What is nevertheless striking is the huge disproportion between the growth of the urban and of the rural population respectively. We also have to mention that the rural population is no longer made up exclusively by peasants but, according to the plans for the collectivization of the agriculture and of systematization of the rural area, we find several categories

of peasants (most of them working for the cooperatives, only a few with individual properties), a thick layer of workers (mostly in agriculture) and a thin layer of intellectuals and clerks. At the 1977 census, for instance, 44,6% of the active population of the villages declared to be workers while the peasants were split between those working for the cooperative (39,2%) and those with individual properties, whose ratio had been reduced to just 6,7% of the whole rural population.<sup>19</sup>

Comparative researches socialism—post-socialism focused on the topic of entering adult life and leaving the parents' house show that the medium age when young people left home in the 80s was 20 years for boys and 18 years for girls.<sup>20</sup> The author proposes three possible explanations for which the young ones left or separated from the parents' house: a) before what is called in specialty terms *first union*<sup>21</sup>: for studies, to serve in the army (for boys) or just to escape the parents' authority; b) to form such a first union—which automatically assumes a place to live for the newly formed couple and c) forming a new couple but in the parents' house—in this case we talk only about separation. These reasons are important enough to bring forward one of the major resources that was at the base of the modification of the structure of the Romanian family: the dwelling. After the communist state had turned the industrialization of the country into its main purpose the construction of dwellings for the working class became a priority. Through various means—including cheap long term loans granted to the population—the number of dwellings exploded.

There is no doubt that the collectivization of the agriculture has played a key role in the changing of the family structure, the expropriation creating a new class—the landless peasants—but we incline to believe that the mirage of the city, combined with the desire of the young ones to escape parental tutelage was determinant for this transformation. Children and youngsters left the villages to get teaching and education in the schools in the cities, to prepare for an occupation or for a skill in order to get a job. The data shows that at that time most of those who had left did not want to return to live in the villages they had left.<sup>22</sup> At the same time the rural family had to face the fact, the changing of functions brought by the collectivization determining the diminishment or even the cancelling of the traditional functions (see in the first place the transition to the form of collective cooperatist “property”). We can nevertheless encounter continuity factors in the behaviour of the village community, where the structure of familial authority, the distribution of the roles of the members, the work and mutual help system, the education for work in the under aged etc.<sup>23</sup> are to be noted.

For the young students the state built campuses, for young workers it provided hostels while married workers suddenly became good candidates for a dwelling from the state. Actually any worker who was a member of the party and of the union could get an apartment where he could enjoy a certain degree of comfort, previously unknown to some: running water, access to services (nurseries, kindergartens etc.).

At this moment and on the background of these mutations another phenomenon occurs, giving the Romanian traditional family the final hit: for most of the popula-

tion the power of parents to decide for their children becomes history. All evidence shows that during the 20th Century the autonomy of marriage increases, even if the parents continue to play an important role in the matrimonial life of their children, especially in those parts of Europe where the extended family continued to exist among and together with other familial forms.<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, in 1966 all women under 30 were schooled and illiteracy was eradicated (at least on paper).<sup>25</sup> Schooling meant the acceleration of the process of women emancipation. All communists' laws insist on the equality between men and women both at work and in private life as we described before.

Marriage remains the only way of founding a family and the proportion of married people in the population remains high for the whole period although the nuptiality rate decreases constantly starting from the 60s, from 11,6 marriages per 1000 inhabitants in 1956–1958 to 9 marriages per 1000 inhabitants during the next two years (1959–1960) reaching 7,3 in 1984.<sup>26</sup> What change, as we have already shown, are the mechanisms of founding a new family. Between the wars the age at the moment of marriage was very young—even the 1930 census considered the population above 13 for marriage which was more a *business* of the parents than of the future spouses. We know the rules regarding marriage, which had to respect certain social layers like military or priests.<sup>27</sup> Generally, in the inter-wars period, similar to what was previously going on, marriage happened inside the same social group, defined by fortune, social status, studies and the differences in social statute generated real dramas. Very recent studies<sup>28</sup> prove a degree of marital homogeneity, which was increased for several social categories (intellectual or peasants who marry predominantly inside their own group), for those born before 1939. The authors conclude that the structuring of the society for this generation was a masculine one, where production activities, work and all other activities generally belonging to the public space belonged to men. On the opposite, the data for the generation that married in the 60s shows a destructure of the class relations but also a closing of the social group of intellectuals who were going to marry in higher proportions inside their own group. One decade later, the highest degree of homogeneity was to be found among the qualified workers, 62,8% of who were going to marry between them but the destructure continued, all other social categories marrying in important proportions with qualified workers (the most numerous were the clerks—50%, workers from the commercial sector—46% and unqualified workers—over 42%). The fact that only 10% of the intellectuals marry with workers proves, according to the two authors, that the university education was, for the last period of socialism, the most important border between classes.

## Conclusions

**D**URING THE communist period, the Romanian family passes through a series of functional and structural transformations, influenced by the social dynamic—urbanization, industrialization, mass education—and by its own way of dealing with this dynamic. We cannot deny that during this period the balance inclines in favour of the nuclear family that the traditional family—smaller or larger, by case or by the environment it came from—is dislocated, disrupted especially by the young ones leaving for the cities, either to work or to study. The disruption is facilitated by the existence of dwellings: any worker who was a member of the party and of the union received sooner or later a dwelling from the state, with a rent set according to his income. This explosion and, then, availability of living space was generated by the need of the party for work force and the work force “from cities and villages” benefited from the advantages that no other social system had offered to such an extent by then.

The leaving of the young ones for the cities, this abandonment of the nest, had two main consequences: the weakening of the familial authority regarding the choice of the partner and the redefinition of the characteristics of the marital market. At the same time, the reform of the education and the obligativity to graduate at least 10 grades opened the gate for women emancipation wider than ever—in conjunction with the new equalitarian statute set by the Constitution and by the Family Code. Under these circumstances, the families change their structure—social-professional homogamy, autoreproduction and the closing of certain social groups (especially for workers and intellectuals), exogamy and opening for the groups formed by the so-called “functionaires” who were more willing to cross the social statute barriers and to form misalliances.

Having in mind the entire period before 1947 we conclude that three main breaks occurred in the family life under the communists: those related to the equality between spouses, to the reproductive life and to divorce. We must also point that the new legislation brought innovations in the sphere of social care, since almost the entire set of supportive measures for families with children (state allowance, paid maternity leave, various aids for mothers with more than one child) were introduced then.



## Notes

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2. Aknieszka Zembrzuska, “The social model of woman in Poland and its sovietic prototype” *IWM Junior Visiting Fellows Conferences*, VI/2, 2000; Massino, Jill, Shana Penn.



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  4. Georgeta Ghebrea, *Regim social politic și viață privată* (familia și politica familială în România) at <http://ebooks.unibuc.ro/StiintePOL/ralu/index.htm>, accessed at 20 October, 2010.
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  6. Hoem et al., "Traces of the Second Demographic Transition in Four Selected Countries in Central and Eastern Europe: Union Formation as a Demographic Manifestation" in *European Journal of Population* (2009), 246.
  7. J. Goody, *Familia Europeană, O încercare de antropologie istorică* (Iași: Polirom, 2003), 178.
  8. I. Scurtu, *Viața cotidiană a românilor în perioada interbelică* (Bucharest: Rao, 2004).
  9. A recent theory states that contraception and the family planning are the main characteristics of a modern family. See Arland Thornton, Dimiter Philipov, "Sweeping Changes in Marriage, Cohabitation and Childbearing in Central and Eastern Europe: New insights from the Developmental Idealism Framework" in *European Journal of Population*, 25(2009):2, 123–156.
  10. P. Iluș, *Sociologia și antropologia familiei* (Iași: Polirom, 2005), 46.
  11. G. Ghebrea.
  12. P. Iluș, 88.
  13. Trebici, Ghinoiu, *Demografice și etnografice* (București: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1986), 150.
  14. National Institute of Statistics, *Statistic Yearbook* 1985, 1987.
  15. Ruxandra Cesereanu&Comp, *România îngesuită. Cutii de chibrituri, borcane, conserve. Ipostaze ale ghețozării în comunism și postcomunism* (Cluj-Napoca, Limes, 2006).
  16. It is regrettable that not even until today the specialists have not elaborated a model or possible models of the Romanian family, either traditional or modernized, to be taken as landmarks in the great syntheses on the European family. Stating this I do not mean phenomena like nuptiality, natality, marriage proportion – namely those features that are specific to the Eastern European pattern as defined by Hajnal (1965); instead I'm aiming at Mason's definition (2001) which defined a familial system as one being founded on blood, heredity or marriage, where every individual has social, economic and sexual rights and responsibilities, a system where we could see who was living with who and at what time during their lives, how the individual sees himself in relation with the other members of the family etc. Unfortunately we have many narrow studies, parts of the local, of the particular and no synthesis dedicated to the Romanian family system (or systems) across the time.
  17. I. Scurtu, 142.
  18. <http://www.inss.ro/cms/files/RPL2002INS/vol1/tabele/t01.pdf>.
  19. Trebici, Vl., Hristache I., *Demografia teritorială a României* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române, 1986), 45.
  20. Cornelia Mureșan, "Family dynamics in pre- and post- transition Romania: a life-table description" (MPIDR WORKING PAPER WP 2007-018, 2007), 24.

21. First union is defined as a stable relation, when the couple lives together for at least three months.
22. Octavian Neamțu, Ovidiu Bădina, Dumitru Dimitriu, *Buciumi, un sat din Țara de Sub Munte* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române, 1970), 247.
23. Maria Fulea, G. Tămaș, *Schimbări și tendințe în structura sociodemografică rurală* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române, 1989), 153.
24. G. Therborn, 107.
25. Traian Rotariu, *Demografia și sociologia populației. Fenomene demografice* (Iași: Polirom 2003), 142.
26. Vladimir Trebici, Ion Ghinoiu, *Demografice și etnografice* (Bucharest: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1986), 79.
27. I. Scurtu, 130.
28. Alina-Sandra Cucu, Irina Culic, “Procese de configurare a claselor sociale în România. O analiză relațională a căsătoriilor pentru cinci generații” in Traian Rotariu, Virgil Voineagu (coord.), *Inerție și schimbare. Dimensiuni sociale ale tranziției în România* (Iași: Polirom 2012), 159–170.

### **Abstract**

#### **Consideration**

#### **on the Process of Family Transformations in Communist Romania**

In this study we suggest that the communist period, through the mechanisms of urbanization, industrialization and mass education changed the Romanian family in all of its aspects: structure, functions, size, roles, power, gender roles and so on. We argue that *disruption* is the proper term for describing the process of family transformations. Our conclusion is that, paradoxically, the roots of the modern Romanian family originate in the communist period even though one could claim that there is no such thing as modernity or modernism in communism!

### **Keywords**

family, communism, Romania, nuclear family, traditional family, internal migration, social mobility, family disruption