

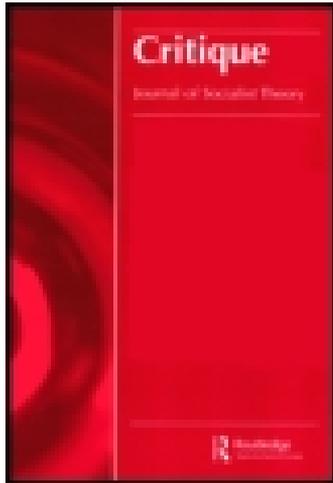
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On: 21 January 2015, At: 06:29

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number:

1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street,
London W1T 3JH, UK



Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory

Publication details, including instructions for
authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcso20>

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Steven L. Sampson ^a

^a Instructor in Anthropology at the University
of Copenhagen, Institute of Ethnology and
Anthropology , Eastern Europe

Published online: 08 Nov 2007.

To cite this article: Steven L. Sampson (1988) Is Romania the next Poland?,
Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory, 16:1, 139-144

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03017608808413318>

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Is Romania the Next Poland?

STEVEN L. SAMPSON*

On February 14, the Romanian Party newspaper *Scinteia* published a decree raising food prices between 20% and 100% (averaging 35%). This decree follows other measures taken to alleviate Romania's hard-pressed economy: rationing of bread, penalties for hoarding, forced reductions in energy consumption and the rescheduling of Romania's \$10 billion debt to Western banks. Taken together, such measures have led Western observers to speculate whether Romania is on the way to becoming another Poland, and in particular, whether a mass movement for social and political reform (a "Solidarity"-type movement) will arise in Romania. Was the emergence of "Solidarity" a result of Polish conditions, or does it represent a new development in the history of East European "real socialism"? If this type of movement does not appear in Romania, does that mean that Romanian socialism is of a fundamentally different type than Poland, or simply that Romania's security apparatus is more efficient? Can the Polish experience tell us anything about what will happen in the rest of Eastern Europe? A comparison of Polish and Romanian conditions can shed light on these problems.

On the surface, Poland and Romania share many of the necessary conditions for social movements. Both have serious economic difficulties; low productivity in industry and agriculture, shortages of consumer goods and combinations of official and hidden inflation. Next to Poland, Romania has the largest debt to West European banks among East European countries. In the political sphere, both countries have ruling Communist Parties led by powerful leaders (Jaruzelski and Ceausescu) in which institutionalized opposition is heavily restricted or, as in Romania, not tolerated. Both share nationalistic traditions which invariably lead to widespread anti-Soviet sentiment in the population and tense relations with the USSR. In Romania, this has resulted in Romania's "independent" foreign policy and is a principle source of President Ceausescu's legitimation. In Poland these anti-Russian sentiments were channeled into the Church and Solidarity. Finally, as visitors to either country will quickly discover, there is extensive citizen dissatisfaction with the internal political and economic situation. This alienation led to the formation and growth of Solidarity in Poland, while in Romania it is manifested as lower

* The author of this article is an instructor in Anthropology at the University of Copenhagen, Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, specialising in Eastern Europe.

productivity, sporadic protests, incessant complaining, political reorganizations and purges, widespread apathy and cynicism, especially among urban populations and in requests to emigrate to the West.

While Romania has not experienced a mass movement on the scale of Solidarity, it has not been without organized dissent. There was a miners' strike in 1977, a fledgling "free trade union" in 1978, and small groups of priests and writers protesting for human rights. Generally, these movements were easily contained and quickly disbanded and their few members either "hospitalized", imprisoned or emigrated. Explanations of why Romania has been without a mass movement usually fall into two categories: people will claim that Romanian workers are without a "revolutionary tradition" and are thus passive, or that Romania's security apparatus is more brutal and effective than those in other Eastern countries. Both explanations are inadequate. The first considers workers to be only passive objects of the state, and the second forgets that any security apparatus can function only with a degree of social support or acquiescence from the population. The question is, why does this passivity seem so much greater in Romania than in Poland, when objective conditions would predict more widespread social protest? Why do Romanians seem to be able to "pull in their belts" at seemingly endless government restrictions in living standards and cultural life? Why are another set of price rises being accepted with resignation rather than with street demonstrations? It is here that the differences between the two countries become important.

Industrialisation and nationalism

One difference lies in the relation between industrialisation and foreign policy. Poland through the 1970's was attempting to modernize its industry and stimulate production of consumer goods. Romania, like many Third World countries, has been trying to build a wholly new industrial base. Where Poland's industrialization was intimately tied to the Soviet Union/COMECON, Romania was using industrialization as a means of achieving political independence from the Soviet Union. Each new factory became a symbol of raw materials for the advanced countries of the Soviet bloc. For Romania's population, the 1970's were a time of sacrifice. The lack of consumer goods was accepted because Romania's industrialization became a national goal. Those who called for slower growth or increasing consumer goods were perceived as working for the interest of the Soviet Union in maintaining Romania as an agrarian dependency of the USSR. In Poland, there were no political goals attached to industrialization. Poles were led to have higher expectations and saw no patriotic advantage in sacrificing for the future. Less motivated to bear the costs meant that their level of tolerance was lower. Where Poles protested, Romanians pulled in their belts.

Consumer goods and the Second Economy

The consumer goods sector, and especially food products, are crucially

important for maintaining political stability in East European societies. Solidarity grew out of rises in the price of meat, not steel. Procuring scarce consumer goods has been especially difficult in Poland and Romania, and to supplement standing in lines, people use the notorious black markets, underground economies, and informal networks of friends and family. In Romania these networks seemed to function adequately, so that even when there are serious shortages of meat and eggs in the markets, most families still have meat and eggs in their refrigerators. The crisis of 1980-81 in Poland found Poles unable to use their informal networks. It led them to form a competing bureaucratic organization—Solidarity—to help fulfill their needs. Why did this network of informal relations fall apart in Poland?

One reason was the legal circulation of Western dollars among Poles, forcing them to pay bribes and even rent apartments in dollars. Local Party elites, unable to procure dollars through relatives abroad, either embezzled from the state or were compensated with privileges by the Party. This only put more pressure on informal networks. Stimulated by contributions of Poles living abroad, and by the network of hard currency shops in the country, the Polish zloty quickly became worthless. The informal networks were unable to cope with the pressure.

This kind of pressure was absent in Romania, since, unlike Poland, it is illegal for Romanians to own dollars. Hard currency shops are smaller, limited to a few tourist hotels, and sell Western luxury items (cigarettes, whiskey, cassette recorders) rather than essential consumer goods and food products. Where Romanians would not accept dollars as bribes, the circulation of dollars in the Polish economy tended to "overheat" the network of informal relations so that many Poles were simply unable to compete for the scarce goods in the black market.

Yet the most important difference in access to consumer goods is that Romanians had more extensive links to the countryside than the Poles, and could procure food supplies from family and friends in the villages. Poland's working class is larger than Romania's, the country is more urbanized and many workers (miners, dockworkers who were the core of Solidarity) are several generations removed from the village. Romanian industrialization has been so recent that most workers are first or second generation. Urban factory workers maintain close ties to their home villages and 30% of the workers actually live there, commuting into the city. During periods of food shortages, Romanian workers can easily draw on the resources of their own or their family's farm plots, where chickens, pigs, vegetables and milk are produced and sold privately. This makes most Romanian workers extremely flexible in reacting to food shortages. Where kinship and friendship ties helped Polish dockworkers and miners to establish Solidarity, these social ties enabled Romanians to borrow more food from their rural relations. They were effective enough that they prevented Romanian workers from mobilizing as workers.

Party and Church

Solidarity arose as a counter-organization to Poland's Communist Party (Polish United Workers Party). It was a party whose legitimacy was contested because of its elitism, corruption and slavish dependence on the Soviet Union. The Romanian Communist Party is a mass party, with 20% of the adult population as members. The kinds of arrogant privileges which created so much animosity in Poland are both more restricted and more discreet in Romania. For example, no one in political or economic leadership positions is permitted to build a house while in office, and the number of chauffeured cars is severely restricted. Extensive privileges are limited to President Ceausescu, his family and top advisors, and most Romanians consider these the legitimate prerequisites of office. More important, however, is that the Polish Party has been pro-Soviet, while the Romanian party is ardently nationalistic. Romania has no Soviet troops within its borders, and Romania's strict centralization in the economy, socialist realism in culture and the arts and the Ceausescu personality cult are not Soviet implants. In fact, the Russians are more feared than respected, and subversion in Romania is considered as likely to come from the KGB as from the CIA. Because of its nationalistic stance, Romania's Party leadership seems to have greater legitimacy (and even pride) among the population.

Next to Poland's communist Party, the strongest institution was the Catholic Church. It served as a magnet for anti-government and anti-Soviet feeling, and later as a mediator between Solidarity and the Party. Romania had no such institutional counterforce that could provide support to a Solidarity-type organization. The Romanian Orthodox Church is thoroughly integrated into the state-party organization, and it has many of the same nationalist positions as the Party itself. Were a Romanian Solidarity-type movement to arise, it could not count on the support of the Church, a support that was crucially important in Poland. And of course, there is no counterpart to a Polish Pope that Romanians could appeal to in the West.

Romania's anti-Soviet nationalism binds the state and the people in a way that the party can use this ideology to stifle internal dissent. Many Romanians believe that tensions among the ethnic (Hungarian) minority and even certain worker protests are the result of Soviet subversion. When the state cracks down on these protests, they may have the understanding (or at least the acquiescence) of the population. For the Poles, the idea that the Soviet Union would be supporting protests and dissident groups would be unthinkable. In tapping Romania's anti-Sovietism into the Party policy and his personal leadership style, President Ceausescu is able to stifle dissent by attributing it to outside (CIA, KGB) plots while taking a major ideological support from any potential Romanian Solidarity organization.

The Working Class

For many Western observers, Poland's Solidarity represented an almost utopian unity of workers and intellectuals fighting for political demands on a mass scale. Part of this success can be attributed to the painful experiences of Poland's workers during the post-war period, traditions which began in Poznan in 1956 and continued through 1968, 1970, 1976 and 1981.

Romania's working class lacks this experience. The miners' strike of 1977 brought down no government; it resulted only in replacing the director. Furthermore, Romania's workers are not only inexperienced but fragmented. The number of urban workers is lower than in Poland, and the many workers living in villages do not experience the kinds of daily frustrations in the consumer sector that their city counterparts do. Living in villages, or in close relations with the peasants, they have conflicting obligations and are harder to mobilize. Romania's working class is also divided on ethnic lines, especially in the industrialized region of Transylvania where the Hungarian minority lives. Worker protests involving Hungarians can easily evolve into a Hungarian nationalist movement, which the state would consider extremely dangerous and Soviet-inspired. Given the ethnic tensions and the patriotism of ethnic Romanian workers, few of them could remain in such a movement which involved Hungarian separatism. The State knows this and can manipulate Romanian ethnic consciousness to restrict widespread mobilizing across ethnic lines. This has occurred among some of the dissident groups and worker protests which involved Hungarian intellectuals and workers. Poland, of course, has no such ethnic tensions to deal with in its workers' movement, and the Party's attacks on Jews in Solidarity and KOR have little foundation.

Even more important than fragmentation within the Romanian working class is the gap between the workers and the intellectuals. Within Solidarity, the workers and intellectuals seemed to give each other mutual support, helping to turn "bread and butter" demands into revolutionary ones. In Romania there seems to be a mutual suspicion (if not hostility) between intellectuals and the working class. The intellectuals are preoccupied with retaining their own rights for creative expression; there is a jealousy among the intellectuals over workers' salaries and among workers over intellectuals' privileges; and many of the most articulate intellectuals have chosen or been compelled to emigrate from Romania.

Finally, there are so-called "subjective factors" which militate against a Romanian Solidarity organization. Starting from a lower base, satisfied with less, Romania's population has had generally lower expectations than the Poles. Romanians are able to "get by" with the help of family, friends and connections. They solve their problems on an individual or familial basis, viewing others as competitors for resources rather than allies. This makes them more difficult to mobilize to achieve long term, social goals. Romanians complain, and they may even protest against the lack of meat. Unlike the Poles, the social conditions in the country and their own suc-

cess at getting by, prevent them from turning a meat shortage into a social movement. As one Romanian told me, "If we had unions here, every Romanian would have his own." It is these subjective attitudes which combine with the Party's monopoly on nationalist mobilization, the exploitation of anti-Soviet suspicion and the fragmentation within the working class which all seem to give us one conclusion: a Solidarity-type movement is unlikely to appear in Romania.

Postscript

It is perhaps too early to call our analysis of Solidarity a post-mortem. But it seems remarkably curious how similar the Polish militarization is to Romania's ongoing social and political structure. In fact, one might say that Romania has been militarized for years. President Ceausescu has a distinctly military style, with strict discipline, a restricted, tightly controlled economy, and a Party which is made the tool of the leader's ideas. As in Poland, internal problems are reduced to "lack of spirit" or to "outside agitation" (either Western or Soviet). Like Poland, many Romanian generals are placed in positions of economic leadership. If militarization is the solution for keeping the economy and society "in line", the Poles might draw some lessons from the Romanian experience. The Romanian "militarization" of society has been able to channel potential social protest into individual flexibility. But it has also served to increase citizen alienation and has not eliminated the social causes that could give rise to social protest in the future. For those who seek a more genuine socialism in East Europe, a socialism without Generals, the task is to discover how meat shortages become successful social movements, and to make sure these movements are not "normalized" as in Poland or privatized as in Romania. In this sense, the experience of Solidarity is relevant for the rest of Eastern Europe as well.