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# THE RECONSTRUCTION OF ROMANIAN SOCIETY

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## **Abstract**

Our article aims to analyse an epistemological and a sociological issue. When we use, as scientists, the term ‘reconstruction’ we admit tacitly that there is a social agent that could or should make this kind of intervention. Institutional or individual, political or social, this agent can be put (and many think that must be put) in charge with this. Moreover, we admit also in the same tacit manner that us, as specialists in social or political field, we have the power to influence the process of changing Romanian society, and not anyway, but in a proper direction, that signifying emancipation, democratization and prosperity, all these obtained through a good governance. My objective is to demonstrate that this kind of assertions has several problems. Taking in consideration a major theoretical perspective that deals with the role of the social scientist in emancipation – public sociology, I will demonstrate that there are not really chances to reconstruct anything. Or, in other words, it is impossible to develop any kind of scenario regarding the role of political or social scientist (academic or not) in the process of changing the society in a normative direction. If we keep in mind only the moral or scientific values and if we appeal only to theoretical studies or empirical analyses we could maybe understand better the Romanian society, but we will cannot construct or reconstruct anything.

*Keywords:* public sociology, social change, knowledge, enlightened political parties, social changing agent

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## **1. Introduction**

In our public debate, it was legitimized for a long period the idea that Romania needs radical changes, deep structural reforms of the state and society. In fact, this kind of changes is the main attribute of transition. Under various labels such as: ‘modernization’, ‘state modernization,’ ‘Europeanization’, ‘Westernization’ the Romanian political class assumed programmatically this change in the last two decades. It is true that the intellectual elite have also systematically put pressure on the Romanian public space proposing the same topics. Moreover, social and political scientists have often worked in last two

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decades on extensive research projects to define the objectives and steps that Romania have to make in the direction to a good governance.

In this article I tried to clarify two aspects about this social process of transformation in which experts are invited to attend. The first issue is about the nature of this change. So, how this kind of process can occur, beyond political rhetoric, or ideologically-biased academic discourse? We have to understand also if a central role of the social scientists in these social changes is possible. Secondly, we try to see how, with social specialists or not, could a process of structural change be generated, aimed at redefining political culture and the core values of the Romanian political system and implicit of the whole society.

Therefore I start with some fundamental questions. First, which is the direction of change, (assumed as building or rebuilding the society), that we want to follow? In other words, how we want to change the society and which are the criteria that we have to consider in this process? Do we want to democratize the society? (Is this the fundamental criterion?). Do we want to develop the economic system? Do we want to streamline the political sphere? Do we want first of all a better quality of life and/or the technological development? Or, perhaps do we want only cultural progress? Is it sufficient to modernize the state for modernization of whole Romanian society? It is obvious that we are dealing with multiple criteria and that they cannot be discussed in the same way. But different criteria mean different approaches and different principles and tools. Who determines these criteria and their order in the management of the social change? Citizens, politicians, political elite, or academic elite?

Other questions are related to the agents of change. To change society we must accept the thesis that there are some agents of change: those who can generate and coordinate social change. Who are they? Politicians, through their act of government? A 'support coalition' like the model proposed by Paul Sabatier [1], the social specialists that have the advantage of the scientific knowledge of society, the citizens that have the voting power? In the conception of Michael Burawoy [2] this role is dedicated to the sociologists who investigate the society and its mechanisms, including those that generate change. For Burawoy the sociologist analyzes the society from the perspective of civil society and because of this it is possible the emancipatory role of sociology. The idea of an emancipatory role of sociology could be easily found in tradition of humanistic sociology more before XXI century [3, 4].

## **2. Who sets the criteria for change?**

Who knows which is the direction required by the change process? Who defines the criteria for social change, and who can measure the degree to which they are met? Romanian politics does not answer this type of questions because usually the process of governance is referred to only with labels bearing ideological role like 'modernization', 'democracy', 'privatization' or, more rarely, 'good governance'. On a practical level, however, we simply take over

models from the cultural and political European or Western space, sometimes even programmatically, such as the EU model, which we have defined as a reference even at a symbolical level.

There may exist, of course, a variety of criteria, but which is their priority order? Which is more important: democracy or the market? Is it more important the economic development or the cultural heritage preservation? Is it more important the model of Western capitalism or the Romanian political tradition? Is it more important the cultural development, or the economic? What does it matter most, entrepreneurial or civic culture?

Definitely, all of them can be important, but it is unrealistic to think they can count equally in political decision mechanism. Who should define the priority order of the criteria? Political discourse or at least the electoral one tells us that the citizens. But do they have the expertise to analyse various types of development? Burawoy is right in this case. Outside a dialogue such as Habermas's model of the *communicative action* [5] it is rather difficult to discuss about the correct perception of one's own interests. In my opinion *democracy without knowledge is just a manipulation exercise*. Public opinion is important only when it can be an informed 'opinion' and especially if the public knows its interests. Awareness of the interests is neither a simple nor an automatic matter. It is in my best interest not to smoke and I still smoke, it is in my interest to ensure my money for old age and yet if I would not be forced, I probably would not do it systematically.

On the other hand, the interests are not only individual but also collective or public and relationships between them are not necessarily consonant. My personal interest can be clearly defined to me (to make money by cutting the communal forest and splitting the money with the others), but the Community interest may be exactly the opposite. Very often public interests can be seen as opposing the private interests. The simplest argument is offered by the governance, by the fact that politicians always suggest that harsh measures should be taken at the beginning of their mandate. Of course it is difficult to admit that they systematically pursue harming the society, but they simply recognize that there is a significant resistance (electoral we would say) to some changes that are defined by the public interest.

In practice the act of governance tacitly assumes a number of criteria (sometimes with an ideological foundation), but generally they are caught up from the Western political models and sometimes even at the pressure of some international institutions. Also, intellectuals, specialists or not in social sciences, constantly offer various political approaches and solutions, but they also operate usually with tacit criteria of change.

### **3. Who can change society?**

The social change is the product of change agents. They have the ability to generate, but also to manage the change. We firstly analyse the public sociology

thesis that sociologists (the specialists generically named by us) can be instrumental in this process.

If we accept the solution of a dialogue with the audiences (in public sociology terms) as a possible solution to generate public awareness of individual interests and thus collective social movements capable of generating social change, it is still not clear how this is possible since social action that characterize any social change is generated by power, rather than knowledge. The 'Knowledge is power' expression is a figure of speech. Knowledge is useful in defining effective or fair social action but without power it has no effect.

Power is concentrated in a few areas of social life which have only minimum contact with intellectuals, the presumable agents of change. Clearly, the political system has the main role as political power main manager, along with the bureaucratic system that has its own power component. But also other systems (to a much lesser extent) given by the interest groups in civil society or in the economic sphere (political parties, corporations, churches and so on) have different kinds of power.

Sociologists and generally the intellectual elite can help triggering structural changes only if they are attached to important spheres of power, ideally to the political sphere, that which has in addition a quasi-monopoly of the governmental decision. But then we might ask: why would the political sphere (or another sphere of power) need specialists? In practice the political system reacts only rhetorically to experts because this has a good public image. In other cases, the use of specialists is given by rather electoral interests (how it is appreciated a certain extent policy, which is the trust evolution of political actors, what message should be given at certain times and so on). On the other hand, the appeal to the experts often means 'appeal to technocrats', who lead us to a technical area of the governance, namely to the specialists that could say how certain actions must be 'technologically' instrumented. And usually it is not about the specialists in the political or social fields.

An important sphere of power within society is also held by the bureaucratic system [6]. By definition, this system resorts to specialists and usually chooses them from the non-political areas. However, the bureaucratic regulatory system is defined as a system applying a procedural framework, closed to changing possibilities from within the procedural framework, this being contrary to his own definitions. Bureaucracy is by definition hermetic, not open to the exterior, being structurally defined as autonomous from anyone including their own public [7]. The system only accepts at its top politicians who have to connect it with wider social interests, but only that. While working with specialists, the bureaucratic system does not allows generating change other than by the intervention of the politicians in the decision making and in no circumstances by that of the social specialists, therefore being less open even to the political system.

In fact, any other power agent within society needs to appeal to the political sphere to implement change. Of course, pressures upon it can be very large, if we think of the economic agents, or very reduced, if we refer to the

sphere of civic organizations. It is obvious that the fundamental centre of power is the political apparatus, so the main agent of change can be found there. How can change be initiated and directed (by experts) while the political system has its own autonomy? Is the electoral pressure enough, especially since we have shown that the electorate is not automatically aware of its own interests? But how can specialists put pressure on the political sphere? Only by their public prestige?

Apparently there is a paradox. The objective that we set is to change the society, but our approach seems to be one exclusively political. Namely, we define change (sometimes in very precise terms) as political and implicitly institutional change (political decisions mainly concern functioning of institutions). The tacit belief in this approach is that institutional reforms will ultimately change society, though usually it is not clear how this happens.

Implicitly, over the past twenty years, the political sphere has operated with a postulate that the components of the reform measures are desired by citizens for being in their interest. This is a false argument, at least because society is too diverse to ever reach a consensus regarding governance. In practice there is always one measure of governance that is negative for at least one group of people or for the public interest.

But even if we start from the idea that political actors have the power to implement the structural change of the Romanian society through governance (primarily at a level that underlies a particular operating mode of society), why would they change the society? Firstly, the political area is functioning, before all, through political parties, which are in Romania poorly formalized organizations with a culture centred primarily on an economic paradigm [8]. Even the status of membership in organization having an economic value of exchange (I am a member and I get involved because I want something in return for myself or a close person: cash, a position, etc).

On the other hand, another question can be raised: do parties, as organizations, value the criteria of change we are talking about? At the level of political culture and not just rhetorically. If these criteria are not present in the political organization, how could they become priorities in the government's political approach? But we can just as well relate to other bureaucratic structures that manage power within society, such as the system of justice. In this case the question remains the same. How an entity that is a power agent and one of social change can transform society according to a pattern of values and criteria, if these are not values and criteria of the internal political action of the organization? Hence the paradox: on one hand parties are the expression of the functioning of a society at a given time, so they have a value system and criteria of development consonant with the society, but they want to change this framework of values within the society, which means that they should change it to a value pattern that they do not actually rely their own functioning.

Apparently, it is a paradox because it is solvable either if we *ab initio* believe that parties are 'lighted' by their nature, therefore actually having a background of values different from the majority of the population, and we will

call this thesis the thesis of liar parties (because they lie to us saying that they believe in the same values as we do). The paradox is also solvable if we believe that, through internal or external resources, there is the possibility that parties redefine their own value and implicitly institutional pattern thus allowing the social change. We call this the thesis of '*enlightenment*' because the parties are '*enlighten*' by specialists or illuminated leaders. In the public sociology version, these would be specialists in social sciences [9], but this is also possible in the version of an enlightened political leader.

In general, an organization, irrespective of its type, reproduces itself to the extent that any bureaucratic structure (including the political party as a private bureaucracy of public interest) tries to maintain for a long time a system of rules and procedures. It is true that over time, change usually occurs in small steps as adapting to new social and institutional contexts. But how are possible major changes within the political system, those concerning civic cultural system or political values? It is clear that a structural change is possible only on the basis of an associated value pattern. Vote buying cannot be eliminated without a value context of political culture that does not allow this behaviour. The health or educational systems cannot be reformed without proposing a set of referential values of the changes wanted. Viable solutions for environmental protection cannot be proposed without inculcating the public with values that lead to such behaviour and acceptance of the policy measures.

If we turn to history, we see that only major external pressures on political systems, given by the social context in which they functioned have pressed into the direction of changing the practice and the normative-value models. Economic or political major crises are such contexts. The wars in history have been other means of social pressure on the political corpus. Intellectuals, in turn, are influenced by the social context and usually have political influence especially in this kind of situation. Also, history gives us the example of changes generated by dictatorships, or by the discretionary power of an individual who has a monopoly of power in society. Sometimes this kind of leader could have different values of the majority of society. Sometimes these forms of government have been called '*enlightened monarchies*'. Occasionally they were even '*enlightened*'.

Therefore, politicians and implicitly the bureaucratic system, the main actors of power are the main agents of social change, but normally they haven't intention to generate major structural changes. In fact, any political system is based on a corpus of values and governments reproduce this model of values. The problem is that we want to change this corpus that is non-penetrable. Fundamental values of the governance (the ones that lead to certain criteria, tools and an operating mode of social life) cannot be changed except by systems governed by the political apparatus (including education, administration, law, etc.). But the political system has own code of values according to which manage the governance in a particular time. The two theses about parties in this context should be analysed in detail.

#### **4. Liar or enlightened political parties?**

The liar parties thesis would imply that they are by nature different from the majority of the population, that they are based on referential values, superior to those of the rest of the population, that they would possess not only the required knowledge, but also the criteria and principles required for the social change that they will accomplish for some public interests. This happens even if it is in contradiction with the interests and expectations of the population (and sometimes even of their own members). This thesis could be a realistic one if we could find an organizational mechanism within the selection and operation norms of the political parties corresponding to a selection system of members according to their shared values, oriented towards a particular kind of social change. Or, the thesis might be true, if we could find within the parties, political training systems that should have the purpose to inoculate ideological theses or political ideas. Everything that is happening at the moment inside the political parties makes such a thesis seems very unlikely. Even if we can identify a sort of internal political training, it fails to ensure the needed 'enlightenment'.

On the other hand, the fact that the selection of new members in a political party usually takes into account only the correspondence between their perception on the party and their values and interests raises a new problem. The public image of parties is consistent with the general values and frames of thought of the population, thus different from those of the enlightened party. Therefore, the individuals who are drawn to join the political parties are usually not 'enlightened', or, if we want to dismiss this thesis, we then have to admit that political parties have a secret selection system that uses the enlightenment criterion.

The enlightenment thesis, (describing the influence of an 'enlightened' agent over the political environment and implicitly over the government process) requires either professionals that convey knowledge and offer new value patterns, either 'enlightened' authoritarian leaders that can rule in an autocratic manner the parties and probably the overall society. This last solution seems historically and functionally more realistic. Our political parties operate with internal power spheres, informal relations and on a great readiness of their members to aggregate around an internal power sphere. Within the parties, the authority of the leaders is usually very high (especially during the party's political ascension). On the other hand, the professionals can also offer value models, and implicitly political patterns, that differ from those of the majority of the population.

However, as I have previously shown, the practice of involving professionals is not normatively established within the political parties, and even less the practice of involving them in a dialogue with the different publics within society. Beyond the declarative level and beyond the case of politicians that pose as professionals (in Romania, a large part of the politicians involved in the decision making process have obtained scientific titles, including academic titles, as part of the construction of an intellectual sinecure) there is not in fact

any systematic role of the professionals within the political body. Even when they are involved, their opinion is required regarding the technical process of governance, and not the political mechanisms of decision.

## **5. How is change possible?**

From what I have previously presented, it may seem that only the dictatorship inside political parties has the potential of radically changing them and indirectly, sometimes the society. But what should we do if we aim at a fundamental democratization of the society (namely for the values of a democratic culture to be assumed by the majority of the citizens)? In this case, the parties should be the first to internally assume this model. But it would be at least peculiar if this should be done through dictatorial means (as long the political parties do not have such a model).

In fact, the structural change of the Romanian society is not really possible. At least, not without a social context that should be 'shaken' at the level of referential values by external factors of the governance. These factors could be for example large scale crisis or military conflicts. Historically, they have generated the social contexts for the redefining of the core values of the political culture and society as a whole. The war has been one of the most important solutions, especially when it has involved interactions with other political and cultural models [10]. Even if we accept the thesis of the enlightened leaders, we still cannot apply it. That is because these leaders also depend on a social context in which they can arise and especially on the fact that the change they generate have to be based on a force proportional with the resistance to change of the political environment and society. But the larger this power is, the more are blatantly infringed some of the central modern values such as: free will, democracy and public participation.

Beyond all these considerations, if we turn back to the issue of the criteria for social change we can ask ourselves: who guarantees that an authoritarian leader will change the political environment and society towards the public interest? It seems that only chance can do it. It is true that we do not have either any guarantee from the professionals in the field of social sciences, since they cannot have a monopoly of the knowledge of public interest that is completely free of an ideological component. But it is also true that professionals could define much better the public interest, and that they could also make predictions regarding the social problems, or comparative analysis on different government systems. However, the possibility to transform this knowledge in governance acts is small, since it is essentially dependent on the characteristics of the political system itself.

Consider the following example. If we admit, according to the historical data regarding the modernisation process of the European states (those with which we resemble or we legitimately try to resemble nowadays), that a major objective of the modernisation was the secularization and total separation between the state and the Church, meaning the independence of the state to the

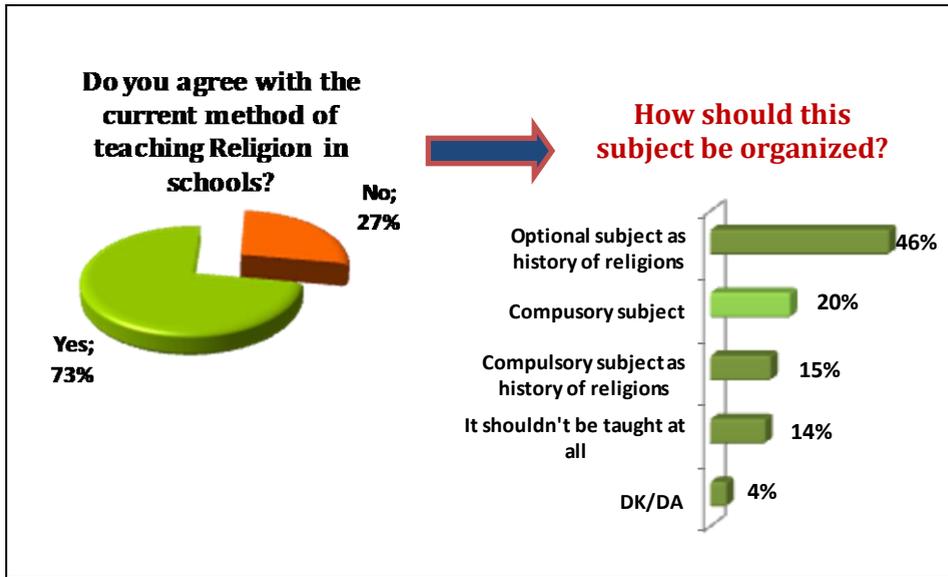
Church and its independence to the state. Taking into account that the secularization involves restraining the role of the churches in the production and control of knowledge, then this latter relation between church and school can be considered as an indicator of the changes inside the contemporary Romanian society. In the post-revolutionary Romania, when religion was introduced as a compulsory subject starting from primary to secondary education, there has been a shift from a forced atheism to a forced religiosity. In the first years following 1989, the study of religion in school was defined differently from the modern European area where religion either is not present in school or when is present most often it is an optional subject, non-confessional, treating religion as a component of the spiritual life of the society. At the beginning of the 1990s our educational approach was established as a form of religious propaganda, with a confessional component). Most often the teachers were priests, and later on teachers prepared in the theological educational system (which is the same thing). In fact, the Orthodox religion (and only in some very few exceptions other religions) is taught to minors that do not have their own judgement or options. Furthermore, the analysis of religion textbooks would demonstrate us that they often contradict with the textbooks used for other subjects (regarding the scientific knowledge), precisely because they aim at a confessional and engaging vocation [11].

Taking into consideration the information presented so far, I suggest the following experiment. We admit for the sake of the example that changing the way Religion is taught in school (not necessarily its exclusion from the public education curriculum) is an instrument for modernizing the society (as it is the case for all developed European countries). In other words, Religion should be taught in a non-confessional manner, as a subject that should include information about religions in general, about their history, regarding the suggested moral codes, about their practices and the history of their significance, etc. Also, it is natural that religion should not be taught in the educational system of a state from the 21<sup>st</sup> century, more than are taught subjects such as: Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Geography, Social sciences, or those that are included in the educational curriculum for just one year.

According to our experiment, the first agents of change that would perceive the values driven necessity of this change regarding the way Religion is taught in schools should be the teachers. In a research conducted by the National School of Political and Administrative Studies, in January 2013, among Romanian teachers from primary and secondary education, which included questions regarding the way Religion is taught in school, we obtained the data from Figure 1.

As we can see, almost three quarters of the teachers consider that no change is required. Moreover, from the 27% of the teachers who consider a change as required, 20% of them would want for Religion to no longer be an optional subject, but compulsory one, turning the 73% to almost 80%. Theoretically, only 16% of the teachers want Religion to be taught as History of religions, compared to approximately 4% (in absolute values) of the teachers

considering Religion should not be taught at all. Regarding the period of time when religion should be thought, the data are listed in Table 1.



**Figure 1.** The level of consent regarding the way religion is taught in schools. Source: NSPAS. Research Report. January 2013 [<http://academos.ro/document/rezultate-cercetare-preuniversitaruniversitar>].

**Table 1.** Number of school years in which Religion should be thought at each educational stage.

	Primary school	Gymnasium	High school
No at all	7%	9%	27%
1 year	6%	5%	11%
2 years	9%	10%	15%
3 years	4%	2%	1%
4 years	61%	61%	34%
DK/DA	13%	13%	12%

We can notice once again that the data is consistent with the previous data. More than half of the teachers want that religion be kept during an entire educational stage (4 years) for the elementary school (primary school and gymnasium). A significant difference being present for the high school, where only 34% chose Religion to be taught during the entire stage (this is however the modal value of the distribution). This data shows that teachers are most likely resistant to changing the way in which Religion is taught, or about the number of Religion classes. For sure, it is very likely for them to be resistant to many other types of changes.

Why would then the political system make such a change? Only if the political system should consider such a change as legitimate and necessary. But this would require for the political system to perceive the actual model as negative or to critically assess some of its elements. There is no argument in this direction, since publicly for this subject is considered to be a sensitive one and it is not publicly discussed. Also, in many other situations, the model is considered by politicians as a perfect model, no changes being required. As long as for those directly targeted that have a high degree of competence regarding the role and functions of education (the teachers) seems that do not want a political intervention inside the system. More, there is a suspicion of resistance, and then why should the political system intervene? We should not forget that the political democratic model actually works in opposite way. The population organised as interest groups and eventually the elite involved in specific fields of activity are the ones that should put pressure on the political sphere and not the opposite. The approach from political to society is based on the idea of abolishing the public interest as a socially generated product, in the favour of an enlightened leader that should have personal political interests accordant with the public ones.

Beyond rhetoric, Romania is changing only in the logic of the small steps, made as an adaptation to different external factors (for example, the admission in the European Union). Systematically, the governance is focused on the acquisition of foreign models, to which the population constantly adapts even through avoiding the proposed normative framework. It is not possible to have a major structural change in Romania (one that would require the change of the political culture) because our agents of change do not have the required power resources. The doctrine of the enlightened monarchy that would impose model changes in a constraining manner cannot be functional (although it was an historical solution). The pressure cannot come from some reformist political leaders since they can exist only if the political model is changed so that they can be accepted in key positions within their political parties.

Then how can society be changed? Basically it is possible only through a social cataclysm that should produce new basal value definitions for social reality. From a theoretical point of view, it is necessary for only one thing to be changed in Romania: the law, or more broadly, the regulatory framework of the political parties. Nothing else can be the priority, this being the first step. The electoral system, the type of elections, the constitution, or regionalization, academic debates and published volumes, none of these will produce a change and especially none of these will generate structural changes within the Romanian society. Unfortunately, I have shown that it is practically impossible that the political parties would change their current organisation against their own interests. For this particular reason there are no big hopes for something good to happen.

The small tango steps, equally back and forth, will further characterize the social change in Romania. Of course, many theoreticians will offer information and advice, and some of them, with more or less luck will be retrieved and

maybe used by the political system. But everything will take place in the logic of the small steps of the governance, without actually knowing where we are heading and especially why do we want to get there.

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