The Romanian Revolution from a Theoretical Perspective

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This article examines whether theories of revolution assist in explaining the Romanian revolution of December, 1989. The author presents a definition of revolution which incorporates the concepts of fundamental change, violence, and class uprising. Then the theoretical basis of historical, socio-psychological, and structural theories of revolution are discussed. These theories of revolution are applied to a case study of the Romanian revolution. The research indicates that the application of both socio-psychological and structural theories of revolution are particularly helpful in understanding the Romanian revolution. The conclusion is reached that further social science research needs to integrate these two theories of revolution.

There has been extensive work done on the pre-conditions surrounding revolutions. While the theories vary from "natural history" (Pettee, 1938; Brinton, 1965) to social psychological (Davies, 1962; Gurr, 1970; Tilly, 1978) to structural approaches (Skocpol, 1979; Skocpol and Trimberger, 1986), almost all of these theories tend to examine the so-called "great revolutions." These theories examine pre-industrial or semi-modern societies. During the 1960s and 1970s, typologies were developed to explain the differences between the great revolutions (Huntington, 1968; Gurr, 1973). This theoretical emphasis on the great revolutions has continued into the 1990s.2

However, the events of 1989 call into question the validity of these theories of revolution. The revolutions that swept Eastern Europe in 1989 were fundamentally different than the great revolutions, not only because of the level of economic development but also because of the relationship between the state and the society. Perhaps the most dramatic and certainly the most violent revolution in Eastern Europe occurred in Romania. So far, the literature has not examined the appropriateness of applying these theories to the Romanian revolution. This article, therefore, shall explore the major theoretical approaches

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1. The great revolutions include the United States (1776), France (1789), Russia (1917), and China (1949).
2. Although some writers such as Dix (1983) have developed theoretical approaches which are not based on the great revolutions.
to revolution and whether these approaches are relevant to the Romanian revolution of 1989.

Definitions of Revolution

Before examining the different approaches to revolution, we must first grapple with the difficult task of defining revolution. There are numerous definitions of revolution; however, Huntington has advanced a definition which seems to incorporate most of the elements commonly associated with revolution. According to Huntington (1968, p. 264), revolution entails “a rapid fundamental, and violent domestic change in the dominate values and myths of a society, in its political institutions, social structure, leadership, and government activity policies.” Theorists such as Gurr would generally agree with this definition, although he would also emphasize that revolutions entail class uprising from below. Revolution, therefore, has three essential characteristics: (1) a change in the political institutions and regime; (2) the use of violence;3 and (3) class uprising.

Theories of Revolution

“Natural History” Theory of Revolution

Goldstone (1982) has labeled the first generation of revolutionary theory “natural history.” The first generation theories, most typified by the work of Brinton (1965), sought to examine the great revolutions and identify common trends and sequences. They posited that there were certain identifiable stages in which revolutions occur. Natural history theories maintained that the stages of revolution were uniform across revolutions. Goldstone (1982, p. 189) argues that these stages “have become so commonly borne out that they appear to be law-like empirical generalizations.” Although natural history theories were an improvement over previous analysis, they remained descriptive in nature. These theories described how a revolution occurred not why it occurred.

“General Theories” of Revolution

By the 1950s and 1960s, the theory of modernization became intimately linked with revolutionary theory. During this time, theorists were arguing that the instability brought upon the state was because of the transition from a traditional to a modern society. The process of modernization, therefore, was viewed as a catalyst for violence and revolution. The “general theories” attempted to identify those forces within society that caused revolution (Goldstone, 1980). Moreover, these theories examined individual human behavior within the society.

It would be incorrect, however, to view these general theories as monolithic. Indeed, there were three specific variants of the general theories. First, there was the social psychological approach of individuals such as Gurr and Davies. In examining the conditions for revolution, these theorists examined the aggregate level of societal disaffection and grievances. These social psychological theories involved the “frustration–anger–aggression” nexus in which frustration and violence were generalized from the individual to the society. The social psychological theories posited that individuals become frustrated and discontented with

3. Some theorists such as Johnson (1966) would argue that violence is not an essential aspect of revolution.
changes enacted within the society, and this ultimately leads to violence and revolution. Gurr argues that revolution is the manifestation of individual and societal discontent with the political system.

Davies also examines the social psychological components of revolution by reference to the "J-Curve." Like Gurr, Davies (1962) argues that when expectations rise and results fall, revolutions are most likely to occur. It is this disparity between expectations and results that precipitates revolution. "Revolution is most likely to take place when a prolonged period of rising expectations and rising gratifications is followed by a short period of sharp reversal, during which the gap between expectations and gratifications quickly widens and becomes intolerable" (Davies, 1962, p. 6).

Notice that this theory specifically assumes a period of modernization, and thus one must ask why individuals would revolt during a "short period of reversal" if during this period they are actually better-off than during the pre-modernization stage? Davies (1962, p. 5) argues that revolution is not based on objective criteria but rather on the subjective psychological state of the society.

The second variant of the general theories was concerned with the organization of popular discontent. Individuals such as Tilly (1978) argue that the discontent that Gurr and Davies speak of will not lead to revolution unless that discontent is organized and mobilized. The "resource and mobilization" theory states that discontent and conflict are a normal part of the political process. Tilly (1973) goes so far as to argue that discontent is a normal part of modernization. It is only when discontent is mobilized and organized that revolution is a possibility.

The final variant of the general theories was the "structural–functionalist" theory. Smelser (1963) and Johnson (1966) have been most associated with this approach. Instead of examining social psychological factors associated with revolution, structural–functionalist theory examines the systemic factors associated with revolution. Smelser and Johnson argue that the system (society) is composed of subsystems (polity, economics, culture) and that a severe disequilibrium between these subsystems is the catalyst for revolution.

Although these three theories have substantial differences, all three rely on the notion of "voluntarism." Individuals and groups, through their conscious choices, produce an outcome termed revolution. Skocpol (1979) argues that the general theories have over-emphasized the voluntarist element of revolution. Skocpol argues further that individual or group decisions have no impact upon a revolution. Instead, Skocpol (1979, p. 17) argues that "the purposive image is very misleading about both the causes and processes of social revolutions that have actually occurred historically...no successful social revolution has ever been 'made' by a mass-mobilizing, avowedly revolutionary movement."

Goldstone is also critical of the general theories. He argues that in all of these theories the catalyst for revolution is vague and ill-defined. Furthermore, he argues that it is difficult to observe "the cognitive state of mind of large masses of individuals, or the strain or disequilibrium of a social system, or the magnitude of goal conflict and resources of all competing groups" (Goldstone, 1980, p. 431). Ultimately, these general theories never quantify the level of discontent, disequilibrium, or mobilization necessary for a revolution. Goldstone concludes that these general theories lack any form of predictive value.

**Structural Theory of Revolution**

The third generation of revolutionary theory builds upon the work of Smelser and Johnson and is thus known as structural theory. Skocpol and Trimberger have
been the leading proponents of structural theory. Unlike the general theories, which incorporated voluntarism, structural theory is based upon determinism. Structural theory maintains that state structures determine revolution not individuals or groups. Structural theory assumes that the state is a potentially autonomous entity. It is the autonomy of the state which allows it to resist revolution. Therefore, states that are not fully autonomous are susceptible to revolution.

The problem with Skocpol's analysis of state autonomy is that actual autonomy is case specific. In other words, Skocpol does not develop any applicable standard for judging actual state autonomy. Skocpol (1979, p. 30) admits that "state autonomy can only be analyzed and explained in terms specific to particular types of sociopolitical systems." This admission weakens the argument for state autonomy as a comparativist concept. If actual state autonomy can only be analysed by examining the specific state structures, then the concept of autonomy is too restrictive.

Unlike most theories of revolution which tend to examine internal state relations, structural theory examines external state relations, i.e. state-to-state relations. Skocpol maintains that revolutions occur in countries which are at a disadvantage within the international state system. The external pressures brought upon the state by the international community are the catalyst for revolution. These pressures can be economic, military, and political.

It is at this point that Skocpol discusses the role of elites in revolution. The external pressures brought upon the state force the state to increase its attempts at extracting resources from the society. As the state mobilizes resources in order to undermine external pressure, elites within the society often have their traditional privileges suspended. If the state is autonomous, meaning that elites are integrated and dependent on the state, it will be able to extract resources from the society. The state, therefore, will be able to reform and cope with the external pressures.

If the state, however, is not autonomous, meaning that elites maintain an independent and collective existence, then the elites will be able to block state actions. Skocpol argues that the activity of the elites is determined by the state structures. It is, therefore, the state structures and not the position of the elites that ultimately lead to a revolution. According to Skocpol, groups such as elites should be viewed within a structural perspective. There is an absence of traditional Marxist class struggle in Skocpol's analysis. This is because she argues that class struggle is not a precipitating factor of revolution. She discounts the role of class structure in revolution.

Some of the problems associated with the structuralist perspective have already been noted, most notably the difficulty of state autonomy as a comparativist concept. Another problem with structural theory is the assumption of determinism. Skocpol assumes that state structures determine the eventuality of revolution. She dismisses the role of individuals and the notion of voluntarism. Himmelstein and Kimmel (1981, p. 1153) argue that it is the complete omission of voluntarism which limits the explanatory power of structural theory. "Because of her uncompromising stand against voluntarism, Skocpol forgets that human beings thinking and acting (however haphazardly) are the mediating link between structural conditions and social outcomes. Structural conditions, moreover, do not dictate absolutely what humans do."

The following discussion is intended to provide a framework in which to analyse the Romanian revolution of 1989. Obviously, no one theory fully explains all aspects of revolution. Each of these theories has certain strengths and weaknesses,
but I do not believe that the weaknesses of these theories necessitates that we abandon each approach. Indeed, what is needed is an amalgamation of these theories. I will incorporate various elements of these theories in my discussion of the Romanian revolution.

The Romanian Revolution of 1989

Definition of Revolution

Individuals such as Roskin (1991) have doubted whether Romania experienced a genuine revolution. The argument which Roskin and others make is that the post-revolutionary leadership in Romania consists mainly of former communists, and as a consequence there has been no fundamental change in Romanian political or social policy. As evidence, Roskin points to the "flawed" election of 1990 and the incident involving the Jiu Valley miners in September, 1991. Roskin (1991, p. 175) describes the current Romanian democracy as "some democracy." However, I would argue that revolutionary change should not be judged from a Western perspective, but from a country specific perspective.

Gilberg (1990) argues that communists not the communist party will continue to exert influence in Romanian politics. This is an important distinction when one considers that in the short-term so-called "communist expertise" will be needed in running industries and conducting domestic and foreign policy. Therefore, communist political leadership is not in and of itself an indication of a failed revolution. The Romanian elections of 1992 demonstrated greater political pluralism than the elections of 1990, but as Tismaneanu (1991, p. 95) argues "learning the democratic process is difficult in a country with few democratic traditions."

Earlier it was argued that revolution is characterized by a change in the political institutions and regime, the use of violence and class uprising. While many in 1990 dismissed the National Salvation Front (NSF) as a neo-communist organization, there can be little doubt that the NSF and its politics represented a distinct break with the almost 50 years of communist rule. Certainly the Romania of 1994 looks substantially different from the Romania of 1984. As Tismaneanu points out, Romanian revolutionary change is a product of Romanian history. During pre-communist Romania, substantive democracy, and often even procedural democracy, was violated by the traditional Romanian political parties.

Therefore, what might seem like incremental change from a Western perspective is fundamental change from a Romanian perspective and herein lies the debate. Some argue that revolutions are rapid, with no incremental change. This, however, is an incorrect view of revolution. All revolutions have rapid and incremental change. For example, it took almost six years after the Russian revolution before the Bolsheviks consolidated their power. While the movement towards a market economy and a genuine democracy are incremental, the political environment of Romania has fundamentally changed.

The second characteristic of revolution is the use of violence. It is this characteristic which separates the events in Romania from any other Eastern European country. While the violence in Romania was relatively short-lived and not extensive, it was nevertheless an important aspect of the Romanian revolution. The use of force in Timisoara on unarmed protestors on December 16, 1989 was a unifying

4. Of course it is difficult to combine the voluntarist perspective of the general theories with the totally deterministic approach of the structural theories.
event which caused thousands to enter the streets the next day. The demonstrations and violence spread to other cities like Bucharest and Sibiu. Ceausescu’s use of violent suppression was unlike any other East European leader. Moreover, the violence continued even after Ceausescu had fled the country.

Finally, it has been noted that revolutions are characterized by a class uprising. Roskin and others have argued that if the events in Romania were a revolution, then it was a revolution from the top. Members of the *nomenklatura* were replaced by other members, and therefore in Romania there was a palace coup rather than a real revolution. There is an element of truth to this argument. Much of the communist leadership in Romania has remained involved in politics and business. However, Dix (1990, p. 6) argues that “if one thinks the apparatchiks of the old regimes in terms of Milovan Đilas’ ‘new class’...the revolutions of eastern Europe [can] be thought of as massive class upheavals.”

Some may disagree with my application of the term revolution to the events in Romania in December, 1989. I would agree that the “revolutions” of Eastern Europe present a serious challenge to our previous definitions. However, I think one can justify the term “Romanian revolution” by reference to traditional definitions. The revolution in Romania was the first European revolution in at least 30 years. As such, it raises important questions about the theories of revolution. Specifically, was the Romanian revolution an outcome of social frustration, was it due to structural manifestations of the Ceausescu regime, or was it due to external pressures brought to bear upon the state?

Some scholars have argued that the Romanian revolution raises the possibility that new theories of revolution will have to be developed to account for the changes in Eastern Europe. Certainly theoretical models must be refined in light of historical changes; however, I believe that we must first examine the applicability of previous scholarship before totally dismissing it. I would argue that there is a great deal of the previous literature that can explain the Romanian revolution. The remainder of this article shall examine how revolutionary theory can account for the Romanian revolution.

**Theories of Revolution and Romania**

**General Theories and the Romanian Revolution: Pre-Conditions to Revolution**

Certainly the social psychological approaches of Gurr and Davies seem to accord well with the Romanian revolution. These social psychological theories of revolution stress the interaction between social conditions and revolutions. Gurr (1973) argues that discontent is the root cause of violent conflict. The discontent in Romania was centered upon the political and economic policies of the Ceausescu regime.

Gilberg argues that one of the legacies of the Ceausescu regime is “desocialization.” Individuals became detached from the ruling elite. Moreover because Ceausescu was the center of public life, all discontent and frustration became centered on Ceausescu. “There was no bond between the ruler and the ruled, merely despair and a deep-seated hatred ready to flare at the earliest opportunity. Ironically, the Romanian population was ultimately united when this despair and
hatred could be focused upon a common enemy” (Gilberg, 1990, p. 270). The personal politics of Ceausescu had alienated not only the public but also some party members and the military. Ceausescu's circulation of party members, extreme nepotism, and co-option of the military was resented among the ruling elite (Fischer, 1989). By stifling reform and comment both within and outside the party, Ceausescu had sown the seeds for his own demise. In essence, Ceausescu had removed all the political alternatives to revolution.

Romanians were also discontented with the low standard of living that they experienced from the mid-1970s and throughout the 1980s. After almost a decade of economic austerity programs in Romania, the level of frustration and discontent was extremely high (Calinescu and Tismaneanu, 1991, p. 42). During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Romanians enjoyed relative prosperity (Fischer, 1989, p. 249). Thus, Davies' "J-Curve" seems applicable to the Romanian revolution. Economic expectations rose during the late 1960s and early 1970s only to be followed by a period of economic decline. Whether the 1970s and 1980s were a "short period of sharp reversal" is subject to debate (Davies, 1962, p. 6). However, there can be little doubt that during the 1980s the level of economic discontent among the Romanian population increased dramatically. In addition, because Ceausescu was the focal point of the austerity program, the public's discontent became focused upon Ceausescu.

"General Theories" and the Romanian Revolution: The Year 1989

The revolution in December of 1989 was the end of a process which had begun decades before. Along the way, there were incidents that set into motion the events of 1989. There were very visible signs in early 1989 that Ceausescu's regime was out of touch with the growing feeling of despair felt by the population and some party members. In March, six party veterans had circulated an open letter criticizing Ceausescu's economic policies. Two of the signatories (Gheorghe Apostol and Constantin Parvulescu) had been General Secretaries of the Romanian communist party. This incident indicated the level of frustration felt among the nomenklatura. In November, 1989, the Fourteenth Congress of the Romanian Communist party re-elected Ceausescu General Secretary. Ceausescu took this opportunity to denounce the events in other Eastern European countries and to proclaim Romania's adherence to traditional Marxist-Leninist principles. During this time, the Romanian public knew of the changes that were occurring in Hungary and more importantly in Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia. As Tismaneanu (1991, p. 89) argues "It [the 14th Congress] only showed how much Ceausescu and his clique had lost touch with reality. They could not grasp the magnitude of the social crisis in Romania and failed to realize the effect on the Romanians of the revolutionary events in the other Eastern European countries."

The social crisis became manifested on December 17 when thousands of Romanians entered the streets of Timisoara to protest the attempt by the police to evict Pastor Laszlo Toke's from his parish house. Many have argued that the brutal clashes between unarmed civilians and the security forces in Timisoara was the "threshold of violent conflict" in the Romanian revolution. Gilberg (1990) has called the attempted eviction of Pastor Tokes a "triggering event." However, it is unclear exactly what the threshold for violent conflict is in any society, especially a repressed society like Romania.

Gilberg argues that public discontent could not have toppled the Ceausescu regime without being organized. The security forces could have effectively dealt
with the population if it had not been mobilized. The efforts of Pastor Tökes to mobilize the population in Timisoara to challenge the government was an important factor in the revolution spreading from city to city (Socor, 1990, p. 19). This is precisely the argument that Tilly (1978) makes. He argues that discontent will not lead to revolution unless it is organized and mobilized. Pastor Tökes provided a rallying cry and central figure to mobilize the population.

Structural Theory and the Romanian Revolution

While these social psychological theories explain certain aspects of the revolution, they also fail to explain several other important elements. Most importantly, these social psychological theories never address the question of foreign pressure and assistance during the revolution. Structural theory most adequately addresses the issue of foreign intervention. Skocpol and Trimberger (1986, p. 62) view revolution as a consequence of transnational capitalism. "As [states] came under pressure in a capitalist world, these states tried to mobilize national resources to stave off foreign domination." Skocpol and other structuralists would argue that the Romanian revolution was caused primarily by external forces which were placing pressure upon the Ceausescu regime. This position does seem to have a great deal of validity.

During the 1970s, Romania owed almost US$10 billion to the West (CIA Handbook, 1990, p. 48). By the beginning of the 1980s, Ceausescu became convinced that the debt that Romania had amassed was a threat to Romanian economic autonomy and ultimately to political autonomy (Fischer, 1989, p. 250). Therefore, in 1981, Ceausescu began an aggressive policy of economic austerity in order to reduce Romania's debt burden. Romania began to heavily export agricultural goods and other foodstuffs that were normally part of the domestic economy in order to generate capital. While Ceausescu was successful at mobilizing "national resources," he was not successful at dealing with the consequences of this mobilization. The extraction of resources also requires population mobilization, and ultimately Ceausescu could not successfully channel a mobilized Romanian population.

Nor was Ceausescu ultimately successful at mobilizing the elite. In terms of the autonomy of the state vis-à-vis the elites, certainly the state was not autonomous from the political and military elites. Skocpol argues that an autonomous state integrates elites and makes elites dependent upon the state. For a long time, elites were dependent upon the state (i.e., Ceausescu) for their position and privileges. However, Ceausescu's attempts to make elites dependent upon the state ultimately alienated them from the ruling leadership. The circulating of elites into different posts caused resentment and a fracture within the party.

In terms of external pressure, revolutionary forces in Romania knew that the Soviet Union would at least give its tacit acceptance of a change in the Romanian leadership. Gorbachev and Ceausescu had very poor relations during the late 1980s, and in fact, Ceausescu had referred to perestroika as a "right-wing deviation" within the communist bloc. Ironically therefore, the Soviet Union influenced events in Romania because of a lack of interest in intervening on behalf of the Romanian leadership.

While structural theory provides insight into the causes of the Romanian revolution, its rejection of voluntarism limits its explanatory capability. There is no reason to believe that the Romanian revolution was determined simply by the state structures. Although the NSF claims that it was a spontaneous organization (Shafir, 1990), others have questioned the origins of the NSF (Calinescu and
The Romanian Revolution from a Theoretical Perspective: S.D. Roper

Tismaneanu, 1991, p. 47). The evidence is unclear at this time of the role certain individuals played in the revolution; however, it is clear that members of the former nomenklatura and key dissidents were very involved in the revolution. It is also unclear as to the role that international intelligence agencies played in the revolution. There is still a great deal of speculation in Romania that the CIA and the KGB were involved in organizing the revolution. Nonetheless, the voluntaristic element of the revolution cannot simply be dismissed.

This has been a cursory examination of the Romanian revolution and its theoretical basis. However, the theories of revolution do seem to explain many facets of the Romanian revolution. The combination of the social psychological and structural approaches is particularly beneficial. Revolutions are a product of both determinist and voluntaristic elements. This article has not attempted to develop a systematic model that incorporates these various elements. The task for social scientists in the future is to combine these theories of revolution in such a way as to create a model of revolution which explains the events of 1989.

References

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6. There is speculation that President Bush and Gorbachev came to an understanding regarding Romania at the 1989 Malta meeting. Romanians refer to this as the “Yalta-Malta” connection. The argument is made that Bush acquiesced to Gorbachev’s demand that Ceausescu be removed, and in exchange, Gorbachev promised that the Soviet Union would not condemn American intervention in Panama. Obviously, this account is highly speculative, but it is indicative of the relative lack of concrete information available concerning the Romanian revolution.
The Romanian Revolution from a Theoretical Perspective: S.D. Roper