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Ph. D THESIS

**Industrialization and Social Change. The
Birth and Development of the Working Class
in Romania during the long 19th Century**

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Abstract

The social history of the working class has enjoyed real interest from historians in the post-war period. Researchers on both sides of the Iron Curtain have tried to reconstruct different aspects of the development of this social group, but their interest has been due to different causes. The communist parties have used research in this field to legitimise the regimes in Eastern Europe historically, Romania being no exception. Between 1948 and 1989, numerous articles were published with the aim of exaggerating the importance of the workers, the socialist party and later the communist party, whilst studies were limited by existing ideological constraints. Having access to de-classified documentary sources and literature that historians of the communist period were unable to consult, we identified an opportunity to research a topic that has been poorly addressed by historiography. The importance of the topic is not only in filling research gaps, but also in the opportunity to analyse multiple aspects of Romanian society during the period studied, such as industrialisation or the reaction of political elites to social changes.

The hypothesis I started from was that there was a working class in Romania that began to form in the second half of the 19th century. Such an assumption may seem, at first sight, rather simplistic, but it must be remembered that part of the political and cultural elites of the late 19th century initially denied the existence of a “working class question”. Some economic historians¹ have also pointed to the accumulation of economic gaps and the delay of industrialisation, a process essential to the development of labour. Last but not least, the small number of factory workers and the preponderance of workshop workers may indicate that there was no working class. However, the situation is similar to that seen in the West, where it was skilled workshop workers who laid the foundations for modern workers' organisations.

In order to give a broader context to the process of creating a new class, but also to clarify some theoretical issues, we have used several concepts taken from the social sciences. First of all, “modernization” was a useful support for describing essential changes, such as the formation of a capitalist market, the emergence of modern social groups, the increasing division in different social spheres, such as the division of labour, the development of bureaucracy, urbanisation, the emergence of mass culture or the development of communication routes. As an important aspect

¹ See also Bogdan Murgescu, *România și Europa. Acumularea decalajelor economice (1500-2010)*, Editura Polirom, Jassy, 2010, 523 p. and Dan Velicu, *Originile decalajului nostru față de Occident*, Cetatea de Scaun, Târgoviște, 2021, 358 p.

of modernisation and the emergence of labour, industrialisation has been presented both theoretically (revolution or gradual evolution) and in practice, particularly because of the preconditions for the development of a modern economy. Social transformations were a novelty on the European continent in the 19th century, and to identify such movements in Romania, we used the model advanced by Charles Tilly², in particular the WUNC (worthiness, unity, numbers, commitment) characteristics. In the case of social democrats in Romania, the concept of “counter-culture” used by Annie Kriegel³ was also necessary, as socialists set up numerous associations covering a wide range of activities (choirs, libraries, sports organisations, reading circles) that included several social categories. Last but not least, in order to place the actions of workers or political elites in a broader context, we borrowed the thick description method of the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz⁴.

Using a variety of sources was a key step in the research process. Materials published during the communist period were used to identify the most important events in the development of Romanian labour history from the regime's perspective. The works published abroad were helpful in defining the concepts used, but also for the comparative study of the evolution of workers' organisations in other European countries such as Great Britain, France, Germany and Russia. Press organisations close to the political parties, as well as the independent press, provided important information on the activities of workers' associations, working conditions or political debates, both from the floor of Parliament and at local level. Archival documents, especially those produced by the police, highlighted the fears of political elites about the work of the socialist movement or small anarchist groups in Romania. Last but not least, the statistics compiled by the state authorities highlighted the ethnic or religious diversity of workers in Romanian cities.

The paper has been designed to provide a general framework and then discuss the most important aspects of the development of labour history in the country. In the first part, the concepts used were presented, while in the second chapter I focused both on highlighting the debates on industrialisation and the evolution of industrial development in Romania. The following parts covered exclusively aspects of the working class world, such as workers' organisations, adherence to the main ideological currents of the period, and the reaction of the political and cultural elites

² Charles Tilly, *Social Movements, 1768-2004*, Paradigm Publishers, Boulder, London, [s.a.], 194 p.

³ Stéphane Courtois, *Lenin. Inventatorul totalitarismului*, Polirom, Jassy, 2019, p. 104.

⁴ Clifford Geertz, *Interpretarea culturilor. Eseuri alese*, translated by Cipriean Șiulea, Tact, Cluj-Napoca, 2014, p. 13-36.

to the growing importance of workers in the economy. Last but not least, in the final chapter we have been able to highlight the fact that a well-organised workers' movement was able to develop not only in Bucharest, but also in the provinces, especially in the port cities of Galati and Braila.

As a result of the analysis of historical sources we came to the conclusion that, despite the delay in the industrialization process, a working class formed in Romania during the studied period with some characteristics similar to those in other European countries, but also with some distinct features. As in the rest of the European continent, the first workers' organisations were the mutual aid associations set up by skilled workers, while unskilled labourers managed to organise much later. By the outbreak of the Great War, various types of associations had been set up, such as trade unions, cooperatives, corporations and workers' banks. However, poor industrial development resulted in a small number of workers who failed to develop a strong organisational tradition, so that trade unions or cooperatives did not have as large a following as in Western Europe. With a Western-inspired political and legislative system that allowed a variety of political currents to spread, a small part of the workforce tried not only to participate but also to influence local political organisations. The importance of industry to Romania's economy and the increase in the number of workers led to the creation of a "labour question" which attracted the attention of policy-makers who wanted to solve any problems caused by this phenomenon before it became as acute as in more developed countries. This involved both coercive methods, such as the use of the police, gendarmerie and army to intimidate industrial workers, and the creation of modern legislation to protect employees. Wishing to trace the evolution of the working class according to the model initiated by E.P. Thompson, I have sought to present the actions, ideas and grievances of the workers in order to have a better image of Romanian society up to the outbreak of the Great War.