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PhD Thesis - Summary

**Power Dynamics in Rural Communities
in post revolutionary Romania**

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Key concepts: community development, power dynamics, community development models, power structures, case studies, community development and religion, values in democracy.

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Introduction

I have always been intrigued by power games, by the mechanisms responsible for some having power and others not, and by the unseen world behind all these: social norms, values and customs transmitted generation after generation.

This paper focuses on power games noted in Romanian rural communities where various community development models have been implemented. What mechanisms encourage a community to participate in a deliberate and focused process aimed at a holistic development of the individuals and of the communities? What makes them sustainable? Who has power? How does he / she use it? How can the number of individuals with power in a community increase?

These kinds of questions have generated the efforts channeled into the research of power dynamics in rural Romania explored in this paper. The change of the political system in 1989 generated a whole series of challenges and opportunities. Both at the macro level and at the micro level they found themselves being given opportunities to make decisions; their value system and their personal and community interests found forms of expression. With this freedom a series of problems and challenges have surfaced. Up to that moment society was governed by a system in which the locus of control was predominantly outside of the individual. Suddenly it is internalized but at the same time responsibility has to be taken for the decisions. The government (theoretically) no longer bore the whole responsibility because they were elected representatives of the people. A similar challenge is found in rural areas where the mayor, the priest, the teacher and the doctor are no longer the only significant “voices”, as others are making themselves heard. This paper aims to analyze which “voices” are allowed to influence the rural community where development initiatives have been implemented and to what extent the implemented models create the necessary framework to multiply these “voices”.

This paper comes as an addition to a series of studies on the transition process from a non-democratic to a democratic regime, with emphasis on the dynamic observed in rural regions. Based on the insight provided by the mentioned research papers and other works from the same area of interest, this thesis concerns itself with the close study of power dynamics in Romanian rural communities after the revolution, respectively its effect on the sustainability of community development initiatives. It does this on the basis of the following hypotheses:

- a. The distribution of power in the rural communities in Romania in the post-revolution period differs according to the development model implemented in the community.
- b. A sine qua non condition of lasting community development is a change in the perception of power: from “weberian power” to a “parsonsian” one.

In testing these hypotheses I divided this thesis into five chapters, the last of which summarizes this paper’s conclusions.

Chapter 1, Group processes in rural areas, aims to explain the concept of the social group, and the importance of understanding it in the context of community development. The aim understands the way these rural groups of individuals work and how they are organized. This way the concept of the social group is reviewed, from its definition to the typology, group functions and dynamics as they are found in rural Romania.

Chapter 2 the Post-revolutionary community development phenomena in Romania, makes another step forward in understanding the theoretical framework in which this research is taking place. In the second chapter the meanings of community development are being explored, as are the paradigms most commonly encountered when such a process is initiated. Another important part of this chapter is the characteristics of the rural communities in Romania and the forms of organization found in Romanian villages. A last aspect studied in chapter 2 is the influence of the values and faiths of the community members on its development.

Chapter 3, Power and its significance in rural communities, discusses the concept of power and the influence exercised by one or more individuals at a community level. As recent entry into the universal vocabulary, leadership is a concept that describes any group of individuals in relation to power. This chapter presents different theoretical approaches to power and leadership, which are then contextualized in the socio-political situation of a post-revolutionary Romania.

From ancient times, the tension between the power holders and those who wished to have power, between the ones who make the rules and the ones who submit to the rules, has marked the life of each society, of each group of individuals that got to live together. So, each individual, regardless of career, living environment or social / cultural context, is affected by the *power* others have *over* him, i.e. *together with* him. On the other hand, he

will act out power in the different circles in which he operates: family, community, workplace etc.

Researchers from different fields have studied power. We are focusing especially on three of them: Weber, Parsons (and Giddiness); their theories provide the basis for developing the analysis instrument created and applied in the methodological part. In Weber's view, the power holders can achieve their goals even if it means going against those who don't agree. In other words, for someone to have power, someone else is dispossessed of power. Parsons considers power as being a general resource that society in general has, a resource that belongs to all. Power is neither limited, nor can it be used up. The more individuals develop their potential by using the power they have, the more the society in general will win. Giddens, quite opposite to Weber, defines power as being the *transforming ability that human being possess*. Throughout their lives, individuals have the opportunity to develop this capacity, by collective mobilization of different resources (information, goods, and abilities, local resources) to achieve certain goals without having negative impact on others. Based on this theory, several expressions have been formulated to describe how much power to change a particular individual has.

- *Power over someone* (based on Weber's theory): can be seen when one or more individuals make a choice that affects someone else. This form of power expression is the one we see most often.
- *Power with someone* (based on Parsons' theory): is at work when a group of individuals make a choice that affects all, promoting change, mutual support.
- *Power to* (anchored in Giddens' theory): refers to situations when an individual makes a choice that affects primarily him, using his unique potential to influence his own destiny and the universe around him (Giddens).

Being theoretical models, they serve rather for orientation, indicating a preference for understanding power one way or the other.

- In the Romanian rural context, the concept of power seems to be understood and applied most often in the Weberian sense. An immediate consequence being that most individuals are uninvolved politically or in local initiatives, because they don't think they can generate change.

Muller brings some more knowledge and understanding to power and its intrinsic potencies as he brings into equation people's worldview(s). In each culture, the political behavior of individuals, the way they relate to power, is based on one of the three value continuums described here below, or on the combination of two of them:

- Guilt and innocence,
- Shame and honor,
- Fear and power.

Romanian rural communities are still deeply marked by the 50 years of communism, by the transition period, and by the time since joining the EU (see chapter 1). As a consequence, the villagers' worldview is the result of a combination of elements in the fear-power continuum (stemming mainly from the communist time) and guilt-innocence (achieved in the transition time, i.e. since joining the EU).

The term “empowerment” has been brought in the equation of community development to illustrate the form of expression of power between the different social actors taking part in the process. In Romanian, the term has been translated as *capacitating*, that is increasing the interior power of individuals, as well as empowering in the sense of transferring power towards the ones who are in the process of being equipped with different abilities and knowledge that consolidate their interior power. The empowerment process also connotes the shift from a *power over* to a form of *power together with*, from a *weberian* understanding of power to a *parsonsonian* one. The result being that the empowered person has learned new patterns, abilities, and the confidence that he/she can adequately use them. In this way, the community's capacity increases, together with its social capital, generating the necessary conditions for sustainable change in the community.

This paradigm brings significant change to the *modus operandi* of development agencies, who are challenged to rethink the help they are offering to the communities they are investing in, a that said communities are not just temporarily receiving paternalistic help, that actually perpetuates dependent status, but empowering the community so that they will be able to take care of future problems on their own, without the need of intervention from outside.

Chapter 4, Restructuring in rural Romanian power structure - data and their analysis - the methodological part of this study.

Romanian community development has been studied primarily with qualitative methods, occasionally quantitative ones. This study, trying to test the influence of the community development methods on the dynamics of power the rural communities where they have been implemented, employs following methods and qualitative instruments:

- a. an analysis of CD models implemented in Romania from the perspective of power distribution, using my own research instrument;

b. case study: three communities where two of the described CD¹models ;

An analysis of the power dynamics is not an easy undertaking, considering its visible and invisible facets or the explicit and implicit value and structures that support it. In this study we propose an analysis instrument which, without a claim to perfection, or of catching all the intrinsic and extrinsic facets of power, will help identify the type of power promoted by the models of development applied in Romania, as such contributing to a better understanding of power dynamics in CD, i.e. their outworking.

- For this, we suggest operationalizing the concept of power, understood as the quantity and quality of resources individuals can access and control in order to achieve their set goals. By using two of the theories described in the previous chapter, Weber's and Parsons', we describe a series of "symptoms" which indicate the presence of a weberian i.e. parsonian view of power in the model used to initiate / promote CD. Our assumption is that a theoretical based entirely on the Weber's theory is less likely to significantly and sustainably impact the power structures, whereas a theoretical model built solely on Parsons' theory will facilitate the creation of new power structures, where power will be distributed between several social actors, and consequently will have better chances at facilitating a sustainable development process.
- The instrument we propose is meant to be simple, easy to use by CD practitioners, as well as by members of communities that are involved in such processes. Without claiming to be a methodologically rigorous instrument, it is based on instruments used by other CD practitioners that have searched solutions to identify mechanisms, norms and values that perpetuate community organizing / governing systems in which power remains a privilege given to a small group, i.e. community organizing / governing systems in which power all participants in the process are encouraged to take ownership of the power for change they have, and use it together with other community members they share common goals with.
- The instrument consists of 12 categories, each accompanied by one or two statements that connote a weberian view of power, i.e. one or two statements that connote a parsonian view of power.
- Each model presented, with more or less detail, according to the available descriptions in the specialized literature we had access to, is filtered through the grids of these

¹ La implementarea combinației de modele am participat direct în calitate de consultant pe probleme de dezvoltare comunitară, la celelalte două am făcut parte dintr-o echipă de cercetare a impactului accesării fondurilor europene asupra dezvoltării, informațiile culese conferind o imagine de ansamblu suficientă a impactului modelului de dezvoltare comunitară implementat pentru studiul de față.

statements, quantifying the number of answers in each category (weberian, i.e. parsonian). The number of statements found in each model is just a first, general hint on the theory it is built on. The suggested grid can probably be refined by weighting the value given to each category with the impact it has on the dynamics of power. In the present paper, we have not done this, and as a result each statement is weighted equally, with 1 point. The maximum per category is 15 points. The assumption we start out with in analyzing the different models is rather to find combinations of the two extremes that is why the result will be placing each model on a spectrum that has the weberian model on the left side, and the parsonian model on the right side.

Chapter 5, final conclusions and discussions, is the closing chapter for this paper. In addition to the synthesis of the partial conclusions reported at the research hypotheses, included in this chapter we find discussions concerning the research's limitations, possible research perspectives and future interventions.

- In a rural setting, the leaders that are trusted by the members of the community are the village intellectuals (priests, medical doctors, and teachers), followed by the local authorities: some are respected for their knowledge, for the answers they provide to spiritual problems, and other for the power they have to shift resources, and to solve the community problems. As the success of CD initiatives requires trust (generally, but especially in leaders), and presently priests seem to receive the highest degree of trust, followed by the doctor, teachers, local authorities, it follows that it is worth exploring avenues by which priests, together with other should leaders, could become active actors in the CD process, without increasing their power capital, but employing their resources to grow the power capital of the community members.
- The participative methods employed by many CD models are worth considering when a higher degree of tolerance is promoted / desired. Still, their efficiency is arguable in the absence of an intentional reflection process on the present situation, of individuals own values, emotions, history etc that fuel an intolerant behavior towards community members that are different, a process of the establishing of and commitment to common goals, aiming at increasing tolerance. To induce a sustainable change at this level, dealing with the symptoms might be an inefficient approach.
- Although participation is low, and often local initiatives are missing, Romanians stay optimistic regarding the success of community projects, should they be started. Local authorities can act to involve the villagers into public decision making based on this optimism. They can create frames where decisions can be questioned, with platforms

for accountability regarding actions and resource allocation etc. In other words, political and spiritual leaders alike, if they want to boost community development, they need to avoid practicing *power over* citizens as often as they can, and in turn use *power with* them.

Further research could be also considered for assessing the relevance of considering and integrating people's values and beliefs in the CD interventions...

Although far from an exhaustive paper, through it I hope to attract attention to the importance of the continued study of the problematic of power distribution amongst community members. Also, to the impact of the models used in the short, medium and long term, so that practitioners and theoreticians of community development in our country can serve the communities in which they are implemented more effectively.

Annex 1

Tab.1 : Instrument for power model evaluation

Attitude towards:	Weberian theory	Parsonsian theory
	One or more individuals make decisions, others are affected.	All those affected by a decision participate in making the decision.
Accountability	The absence of an accountability system that allows community members to monitor and evaluate progress, resource distribution, etc.	Community projects are being monitored and evaluated together.
Corruption	Corruption is tolerated at a public level.	Structures and opportunities are created where corruption can be addressed openly.
Trust	The community does not trust the character of the leaders, and the leaders don't trust the members' capacity to develop.	There is an environment of mutual trust between members and leaders.
Inclusion	The less educated are being intimidated by leaders and external facilitators by modern technology, complex terminology, by assuming the leadership role and of the according status.	Interaction of all individuals is encouraged, regardless of which social or economical class, ethnic group, religion, gender, age group they come from.
	Some categories of people are excluded, deliberately or not, from opportunities, benefits.	Participation of all members of the community to available opportunities and benefits is encouraged.
Resource access	Elitist groups are favoured in access to information and resources.	Fair rights are given to control community resources.
Interests	Elite interests are promoted first, if it is possible also those of other community members.	Common interests of community members are promoted, or of a highest possible number of them, including vulnerable groups.
Involvement	Community is involved only occasionally, very rarely in major decisions.	The community is actively involved in all stages of CD.
	An apathy of the majority can be observed regarding community development needs and opportunities because of the perceived self-helplessness.	Individual contribution to common good is encouraged and appreciated.
Solidarity	Solidarity, the creation of a common vision, are not pursued.	Common principles and values are promoted.
Power	Unbalanced power is accepted as status quo.	Deliberate effort is made to reduce the imbalance in power distribution.
	Implicitly, a teaching-learning relationship is promoted.	Mutual learning is promoted: everybody learns from everybody, and all learn together.
Constructive criticism	The creation of a platform where the solutions proposed by the formal or informal leaders can be criticized is discouraged or avoided.	Cooperation between community members, critical analysis of solutions suggested to solve current problems, is encouraged
Governing	Governing is done by authoritarian social and political structures, or structures that do not allow the involvement of community members in community decisions.	Governing is done by social and political structures that allow the involvement of community members in community decisions.