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**S T U D I A**  
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**2**

***CULTURAL LABOUR AND SOCIAL AWARENESS.***  
***HOW ARTS BECOME POLITICAL –***  
***A ROMANIAN AND MOLDAVIAN STORY***

***Special Issue. Guest editors: Miki Branîşte and Iulia Popovici***

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***Special Issue***

***CULTURAL LABOUR AND SOCIAL AWARENESS.  
HOW ARTS BECOME POLITICAL – A ROMANIAN AND  
MOLDAVIAN STORY***

***Guest editors: Miki Braniște and Iulia Popovici***



## **CULTURAL LABOUR AND SOCIAL AWARENESS. HOW ARTS BECOME POLITICAL – A ROMANIAN AND MOLDAVIAN STORY**

*Guest Editors' Foreword*

**MIKI BRANIȘTE<sup>1</sup>, IULIA POPOVICI<sup>2</sup>**

Subject of great political and theoretical support following the Russian Revolution in the 1920s and widely developed in the Western world ever since the Second World War, socially-conscious and socially-engaged arts (also known as social practice) have made their ways behind the former Iron Curtain under either new or rediscovered forms during the last 30 years, alongside their pendant, the political arts.

While these artistic practices are known under a variety of names (participatory, collaborative, community-based, public art, etc., but also documentary-based, and, in the case of performative arts, theatre of the real – Martin, 2013), encompassing a variety of media, focus points and aesthetics, what all of them share is an interest in (collaborative) processes instead of products, in communitarian approaches, or in the reevaluation of the artist-spectator dynamics, and the use of a large and diverse set of sociological, anthropological and/or ethnographical tools (Bishop, 2012; Magris and Picon-Vallin, 2019).

At the same time, artists working in social practice share a common believe in arts as instruments of social and political change, constantly negotiating between the aesthetical tradition and the utilitarian value of art as enabling actual social change (Hammond and Steward, 2008).

One of the countries in the region where the 'social turn' (a term coined by art historian Claire Bishop in 2006) has been the most visible, especially in performing arts, is Romania, where, for instance, the umbrella term 'documentary theatre' is used for a wide range of approaches dealing with contemporary events, local communities, ethnic groups, etc., in forms of critical approach which emphasize exclusively the connection with the real.

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<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Theatre and Film, Babeș-Bolyai University, cultural manager and curator for performing arts at ColectivA Association and The Paintbrush Factory Cluj-Napoca, email: miki@colectiva.ro.

<sup>2</sup> Performing arts critic and curator, email: iuliapopovici@gmail.com.



This special issue focuses on the present and recent history of socially/politically-conscious or socially/politically-engaged arts in Romania and, largely, in the context of former European communist states in (but not exclusively) visual arts/arts in public space and performing arts (in fact, theatre), with special attention to the intersection and cross-pollination between artistic and sociological practices, from a practice-based or theoretical/analytical perspective, also tackling the terminological debate going on internationally around these forms of art (Martin, 2013).

In his article on the “Genealogy of political theatre in post-socialism. From the anti-«system» nihilism to the anti-capitalist left”, theatre director David Schwartz makes a practice-based, historical approach to the vast (since very eclectic) spectrum of socially-conscious performative projects in Romania in the last thirty years. In Schwartz’s analysis, the historical tradition of a left-wing, class-sensitive, engaged theatre is not as much non-existent (he identifies its traces both before and after 1945), but unknown, unacknowledged and disregarded, especially in the theoretical field and clearly in the nowadays mainstream theatre. Which means that, in the end, the emergence of a political theatre after 1990 in Romania is the result of a both personal and collective journeys involving accidental mentoring (through one theatre university professor in Bucharest) and learning from one another, international experiences and the traumatic waking up brought by the latest economic crisis. Through his direct experience as a vocal and established member of this group of political artists, Schwartz tackles the distinct voices that broke first with the “art for art’s sake” mainstream tradition and the birth of the “engaged art” in the theatre, bringing alongside the practice of collective creation and the focus on representing the under-represented – the oft-quoted “giving a voice to the voiceless”. In Schwartz’s view – which doesn’t cover the distinct formal artistic strategies involved –, the core of all these endeavours is the criticism of capitalism, from the specific perspective of the East-European periphery, and it has been exactly this critical approach that made the discussed political theatre marginal and underdiscussed, and its legitimacy, questioned (up to the point when some such political artists became recognized internationally). Even so, he identifies an important impact, which the decades-long persistence of the political theatrical discourse ended up having: the politization, at the opposite pole, of the mainstream, formerly “art for art’s sake”, theatre.

In a more technical – and, this time, formal – approach, largely based on the international theoretical literature about documentary-based theatre, Iulia Popovici takes in “Tortuously Turning Reality into Theatre” a particular example of practice in the theatre of the real (a concept she prefers to “documentary theatre”), that of the Moldavian artist Nicoleta Esinencu – one of the names that David Schwartz mentions in his review of the documentary landscape and the one that Schwartz states to have the most in common in term of working modes – in order to cast a new light on the ethics and aesthetics of this theatre.

Starting from an on-purpose interview and using a kaleidoscopic system similar to Schwartz's, the article deals with the ethical and formal challenges of the central issue in the work of documentary artists – the representation of (under-represented) realities (Stuart, 2017; Feldman, 2018). By doing so, it takes further the discussion started by Schwartz in terms of how the criticism of the current social and political systems is articulated through representations of personal, community-relevant stories not only in Romania per se but in a larger regional context. The two texts are deeply interconnected in looking at different facets of the same body of performances – the thematical one, the engagement motivations, the conventions and strategies of representation and the decision-making processes in the theatre of the real. One distinct aspect that Popovici's article covers is the professional specifics of working with documentary materials in the theatre, as compared to the use of similar materials in fields such as journalism and sociology, and the role of non-professional performers in the theatre of the real (Martin, 2006; Malzacher, 2008; Cantrell, 2013).

Marina Mironică and Miki Braniște's articles can be viewed in the mirror, both texts being informed by the authors' cultural work practice at the same time as their research interest. The starting point for Mironică's approach is the ethnographic analysis of the cultural workers active within the Paintbrush Factory contemporary art space in Cluj, a landmark for the local history of independent visual and performing arts as well as a space for cultural and civic dialogue and debate. The Paintbrush Factory was the first major project – a grassroots one – to convert a post-industrial space into a cultural space in Romania, a symbolic moment for local urban regeneration policies that connects internationally with similar movements (Zukin, 1996). Braniște, one of the founders of the Paintbrush Factory, analyzes the register of existence and development of the practices and the discourse of social art in Cluj, starting from the example of the said venue.

On her part, Mironică uses sociological theories and factual interviews to understand the phenomena the presence of the Paintbrush Factory has generated on the existence of the city, in an ethnography-framed approach, while Braniște uses auto-ethnography tools to interconnect theoretical references and interpretations of documents such as activity reports and organisational strategies. Both authors focus on the contribution of culture to the development of the city and how it is used by the city hall in order to create adherence to new urban policies, whose end result is the increasing of prices for real estate and rents and the gentrification of the outlying areas (Harvey, 2013). All this led to the loss of space including for the Paintbrush Factory in December 2019.

Mironică's initial assumption is that cultural workers, as part of a middle class, are an indispensable element of the culture-led development strategy put into motion by the local municipality since culture was reframed as a profitable resource. She is interested in how The Paintbrush Factory has evolved from an imagined community of artists to a contemporary art institution and what

does this evolution means in the context of a peripheral city in full urban and economic growth. Her article dwells into the struggle for emancipation and social awareness that animated the activity of a relevant part of the members of the Paintbrush Factory, in order to put it in relation with the local authorities' interest for global economic competitiveness and the ensuing result of the commodification of culture.

The opening and spatial expansion of the Paintbrush Factory is connected to a particular moment in the existence of the city – the impact of the latest economic crisis on the plans for the reconversion of former industrial spaces. After the economic recovery and the implementation of new urban policies, the contraction of this artistic and community project ended up in the loss of the space. Braniște's article covers both the activity of the precursors of the Paintbrush Factory and that of its members, which produced tactics in relation to the realities of the context in which they operate, framing said activity as being of a reactive type.

Stating the need for a more stable and broader tactical framework, Braniște analyzes several moments conducive to developing a strategy: the creation of the critical mass, the possible institutionalization of the Paintbrush Factory or the insertion of a social vision on the arts in the cultural strategy of the city. By exploiting an organically developed cultural model (the Paintbrush Factory), the city of Cluj manages to create a new narrative of the city, consolidating it in the direction of the creative city. This strategy results in the intensification of gentrification (already existing for other causes) and it makes Cluj yet another city whose policies of urban regeneration fail the inhabitants and generate social inequalities (Peck, 2007).

Through both their similarities and their differences, the two texts, by Mironică and Braniște, present the image of the current Cluj, presenting the Paintbrush Factory as exemplary for the effects of particular municipal urban policies.

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## **GENEALOGY OF POLITICAL THEATRE IN POST-SOCIALISM. FROM THE ANTI-“SYSTEM” NIHILISM TO THE ANTI-CAPITALIST LEFT<sup>1</sup>**

**DAVID SCHWARTZ<sup>2</sup>**

**ABSTRACT.** What have been the conditions of production for a political theatre to appear in post-1990s Romania? How and why contemporary theatre in Romania ended up ignoring or dismissing the leftwing, engaged or militant theatrical movements active before 1945? Why local theatre history and theory entirely obliterated, also, the politically-engaged theatre forms active during communism itself? What kind of tradition forms the contemporary political theatre, what is the politics that informs their working practices and collaborations, how do the artists engage with the groups they choose to give voice and with the audience? Using a broad and on-purpose multi-faceted definition of political theatre, the article focuses on theatre artists, practices and performances that question capitalism as a social and power structure, sometimes from an intersectional perspective, but always framing this criticism in a class approach. Largely a practice-based analysis, the text gives a comprehensive on-going history of a strong performative movement and its challenges, from the representational strategies and the financial and positioning issues to the scarcity of critical covering and reviewing and the extending of an (opposite) political engagement in the mainstream theatre in Romania.

**Key words:** political theatre, leftist movements, contemporary playwriting

### **Context. About the “engaged theatre”**

During the last 20 years, the political, openly militant direction has coagulated and developed slowly but surely in the local theatrical space. The engagement in political activism or the stage representation of certain marginal perspectives were perceived in the early 2000s as almost heretical – even the simple curses spoken on the stage were seen as acts of sullyng, of invading the theatre space (with capital T), by the “suburban” language, characteristic,

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from Romanian by Iulia Popovici.

<sup>2</sup> Theatre director, email: [davey\\_schwartz@yahoo.com](mailto:davey_schwartz@yahoo.com).

isn't it?, only to the popular, "uneducated" classes. Today, however, less than a generation apart, references to protests or explicit support, through theatrical discourse, of various political parties and movements has become "fashionable", including among the most conservative and elitist directors – see their recent rallying, with all their "theatrical" weapons, on the anti-PSD<sup>3</sup> right, in shows such as *The Forest of the Hanged*, directed by Radu Afrim in 2018, or *Richard III*, directed by Andrei Șerban in 2018. But I would say that the theatre assumed by the left, critical of capitalism, self-reflective in its internal hierarchies or in the process of self-education of the artistic collective, and with the ambition to contribute to the revealing and shaming of oppressive social-economic structures has also gained enough ground.

The present text aims to briefly outline the genealogy and main directions of the social-political theatre with a leftist ethos, the structuring of this theatre movement critical towards the post-socialist capitalist system. The perspective will be an assumed one, from the "inside", of a direct participant in the coagulation of the local political theatre. As such, with all the author's effort to distance himself, I think that the text should be viewed not as an objective analysis and in no case an exhaustive one, and rather as a reading from within, a challenge to critics and historians, both from the cultural sphere and from the more general leftist field, to go deeper into the subject.

In theatre reviewing, three people constantly noticed and analysed the theatre approaches critical to capitalism and tried to do so including forms of political reading – Mihaela Michailov, Iulia Popovici and Oana Stoica. In recent years, people from the field of journalism, critical theory or social sciences have also written about one project or another – the most consistently, Maria Cernat, but also Dora Constantinovici, Claude Karnoouh, Veronica Lazăr, Bogdan Popa, Adrian Schiop. Some important artists have analysed and theorized their own efforts in academic works – Gianina Cărbunariu (2011), Bogdan Georgescu (2013), Radu Apostol (2018). For my part, I wrote a doctoral thesis focused on the relationship between artists and various subaltern groups with whom I worked in political theatre projects (Schwartz 2016). Finally, as far as I know, the only steps with the ambitions (and the success) of historicizing and analysing the various aspects of the context of the emergence and reproduction of the local political theatre belong to Iulia Popovici (especially in *The Elephant in the Room. A Guide to the Independent Theatre in Romania*, 2017; but also in her studies in *Teatrul.ro. 30 New Names*, edited by Oltița Cântec, 2019) and Cristina Iancu (*The Condition of the Romanian Dramatic Text After 1989*, PhD thesis, 2019). The works of Popovici and Iancu are very consistent and established in

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<sup>3</sup> Social Democratic Party.

a social-political context, with a critical approach, which takes into account the material and production conditions, aspects very relevant for the development of the political theatre, as well as the contribution of the actors and actresses to the work process in the documentary theatre, or the various declinations of the role of the dramatic author in the playwriting (and the performance) as assumed by the left developed during 2010-2015. But for the time being, none has exclusively and explicitly dealt with the analysis of the theatre critical towards capitalism after 1989<sup>4</sup>.

The longer-term history of the local political theatre, although complex, contradictory and marked by interesting artistic, but especially political figures and movements, is still extremely little known and studied. The reasons are multiple and go beyond the subject of the present text, but this lack of interest in local art criticism and theory for the left-wing (workers', proletarian, associated with trade unions and socialist/communist parties) theatre movements is vital to understanding the configuration and patterns of the relatively strong movement of the social-political theatre affirmed after 2000.

During the interwar period, numerous interesting examples of militant artists and groups of popular theatre, proletarian theatre, theatre made for workers and/or with workers are documented. Some of the most important playwrights of the time are involved with popular theatre – Victor Ion Popa runs the "Work and good will" theatre for mass education, created in 1938 at the initiative of the then minister of labour and social protection, the leftist sociologist Mihai Ralea (Popovici, 2017, b). The best-known Yiddish theatre director, Iacob Sternberg, experiments with working-class non-professional actresses in the Bukarester Idiše Teater Studie shows (Bercovici, 1982). Surrealist artist Max Hermann (Maxy) collaborates with Sternberg on the scenography of his political shows (Crăciun, 2016). Bernard Lebli assembles, again with non-professional actors, with workers, *The Lower Depths* by Maxim Gorki. An Alba-Iulia leader of the (illegal) Communist Party, Dumitru Ciumbrudean, writes and publishes (of course, illegally) the play *The Bourgeois of the Time – A Social Satire in XI Frames*. Director Izo Șapira, originally from Cernăuți, leads a theatre Agit-prop brigade on the front, him being enlisted in the Republican troops of the Spanish Civil War. Immediately after August 23, 1944, Scarlat Calimachi published a document-play, probably written during the war, about the pogrom in Bucharest. And

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<sup>4</sup> Iulia Popovici's texts (in particular the chapters "Gianina Cărbunariu – The long way to a theatre of the present" and "How David Schwartz «invented» an independent theatre", in Cintec, 2019) make a consistent analysis of the aesthetic proposals of certain political theatre approaches. Because there is this precedent, but especially because my intrinsic subjectivity prevents me from a formal fertile (self) analysis, the present text will only marginally deal with the varied aesthetics of the local political theatre, proposing rather a historical-political perspective.



the list can go on. Although some of these authors become important public figures after the installation of the socialist regime, there is no structured and complete recovery of the history of the interwar theatre. As Iulia Popovici (2017, b) observes very well in what is, as far as I know, the only article on the interwar proletarian theatre published after 1989, it is possible that the most complete source for the history of this theatre is the State's Siguranța – the political police who was diligently pursuing the illegal activity of people such as Ciumbrudean or Lebli. In this context, and given the total lack of interest, in the theatre criticism of the years 1990-2000, for the subject, it is natural that the first to notice the existence of a workers', left-wing, local theatre are historians studying the period (Mihai Burcea or Marius Rotar – so far, they have not published studies and research on the subject, only documents on Facebook).

In the socialist period, the situation changes, as expected, by 180 degrees. From an eccentric exception and experiment of the socialist militants, who risked their freedom by practicing it, the proletarian theatre is now spreading all over the country: in factories, agricultural cooperatives, educational institutions and cultural centres, thousands of amateur theatre groups, of artistic Agit-prop brigades or vaudeville theatres are set up, according to the Soviet model. But the history of this enormous mass movement, its internal contradictions and differences, its nuances and complexities, have also remained completely unexplored for the time being (Schwartz, 2016). From the personal, collateral research that we have undertaken in different working environments, the image of artistic brigades and propaganda shows is much more complex than in the usual anti-communist imaginary. Miners from the Jiu Valley told me not only that these activities were generating group cohesion, fun or relaxation, but also that they were pretexts to break the rigors of official politics – for example, within the artistic brigades they sang carols, including religious carols (Schwartz, 2016; Michailov et al., 2017). In countries such as the Soviet Union/Russia, Cuba or Nicaragua, popular theatre movements have been studied very seriously and their contribution to the artistic and political development is recognized and discussed in detail. Unfortunately, locally, the history of the largest workers' theatre experiment, on the left, addressed primarily to subaltern groups, uninteresting for much of the theatre criticism, has remained completely unknown.

Thus, although when following the texts, it is obvious that in the famous literary criticism polemic of the 1880s, between the “art for art's sake” and “art with a tendency” (engaged art), Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, a follower of the latter, won the match with his opponent, Titu Maiorescu (Gherea, 1956), one hundred years later it proves that Maiorescu actually won the victory “at the green table”. In the first years after the defeat of the socialist system, the

theory of art for art's sake, of the supremacy of aesthetics in front of the political or the social, was undoubtedly hegemonic. This leads to a contradiction that is as blatant as it is convenient: in the 1990s, society was restructured, the resources, the means of production, the public goods and spaces were privatized, the economic and social situation of workers and peasants deteriorated, the economy contracted, social and inter-ethnic conflicts erupt violently (Florian, 1997; Pasti, 2006; Ban, 2014). But all this time, the theatre directors, especially the most important and the most successful ones, are almost exclusively concerned with formal experiments. And the theatre criticism values and validates performances first of all according to a formalist, anti-materialist aesthetic, in which the subject, the content and the message are at best secondary, and the conditions of production completely devoid of interest. In the same direction, the contemporary Romanian plays (which in the socialist period occupied an important place in the repertoires of theatres) are now almost completely evacuated, the young playwrights are few and marginal, and the social and political subjects find their place with difficulty (Iancu, 2019). When, in the texts of some playwrights of the period, there are references to the problems of the post-socialist "transition", they are generally treated in a miserabilist key, underlining the material and moral degradation of the society, degradation closely linked to the "communist heritage" – it is the case of plays by otherwise very stylistically different authors such as Matei Vişniec, Radu Macrinici, Valentin Nicolau or Alina Nelega. A vision somewhat similar to the paradigm conveyed in cinema by Lucian Pintilie or Mircea Daneliuc and in literature by a writer otherwise interesting for his social radiography of the period, Radu Aldulescu (not accidentally, a screenwriter for Pintilie's film, *Terminus Paradis*). Aldulescu states it clearly: "Communism was an evil that left behind a greater evil" (Aldulescu, 2012, 4<sup>th</sup> cover). In other words, guilty for the degradation of life and the destruction of social structures and relations is not the neoliberal "reform", it is not the new capitalist order, but, on the contrary, "the legacy of the old regime". I would not insist on this paradigm, if it were not important for two reasons: on the one hand, it is both the expression and the cornerstone for the lack of legitimacy of the left in the public sphere, including in the theatre; on the other hand, in direct connection and perhaps more importantly, it has left deep traces including in the vision and practice of the first social-political theatre authors after 2000. As in the sphere of critical theory, literary criticism or political commentary, in order to have relative credibility, assuming an even minimal social perspective, likely to be considered "from the left", had to come initially with the condemnation of real socialism as illegitimate and an exclusive generator of suffering.

### **Precursors. The return to realism and the germs of social criticism**

Historically speaking, before 1945, the leftist discourse and movements were in any case quite reduced in Romania, at least in comparison with the neighbouring countries (Hungary, Serbia, even Bulgaria and, of course, the Soviet Union). The reasons are diverse and most probably relate to a number of factors in which poor industrialization, land fragmentation and lack of collective management in agriculture, very low education level of the population (high illiteracy, small number of educational institutions, etc.) as well as the anti-communist/anti-socialist violence of repressive structures (army, gendarmerie, secret police) played essential roles. Local intellectuality and artistic intelligentsia, especially the more visible and connected to state's resources, was also at odds with the tradition of neighbouring countries. Even during the socialist period, after the short Stalinist/internationalist parenthesis, the intellectual and artistic elite returned, in large part, to the nationalist, conservative discourse, even with anti-communist valences (see for example the recuperation of the interwar political and cultural elites after 1970). Which explains, as I said previously, the determined reluctance to the social dimension of art and the lack of interest in the history of militant political theatre after 1989. Considering this course, how can one explain the decidedly left-wing, militant, turn that a good part of the independent theatre (and not exclusively) has taken, to which a number of the most relevant artists and artists for the post-2000 period have aligned?<sup>5</sup>

My hypothesis is that the explanation has an important material dimension – the historical and production conditions in the artistic field, of course conjugated with certain elements of contingency (first of all, the Western cultural and institutional influence) have largely determined the movement to the left (or at least the ambitions, disputes and controversies in relation to the social-political system) of many artists and collectives. From my point of view (somewhat in line with the approach in Iancu, 2019), the first local play that changes the paradigm from the miserabilist, anti-communist and self-colonizing vision, to a possible social critique of the present system is *When I Want to Whistle, I Whistle*, written by Andreea Vălean in 1997. The play fictionalizes the author's personal experience as a sociology student in practice in a juvenile penitentiary and has a classic structure and a simple premise: a young student comes to interview juvenile criminals, in order to “improve their conditions”;

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<sup>5</sup> See for example, the volume *Theatre.ro 30. New names*, edited by Oltița Cîntec (Timpul Publishing House, 2019), where at least half of the persons and groups discussed emphasize the social-political dimension of the theatre they practice.

she faces a harsh world, with very strict hierarchies, in which the strongest is the one who owns the most resources and does the best, and the poorest and most vulnerable is the others' slave. An x-ray of the capitalist "transition" society concentrated in the micro-universe of the penitentiary. Initially, the play leaves the impression that it doesn't lack anti-communist nuances – the guardian deplors the "order" in the socialist society, in which the militiaman had power and a monopoly on violence, in contrast to the "human rights" chaos for juvenile delinquents, which would make them take too many liberties. Until the end, however, we are forced to note that the rigidity and "iron hand" of the "school of correction" were replaced by a kind of "law of the jungle", in which a poor and neuro-atypical teenager of rural origins can be put behind bars for stealing a horse cart and no escape dream is actually possible. The play also captures the tension between the new NGO environment of "assistance for vulnerable categories", and the concrete realities in the field. Two features of the play are of particular interest to me, as they represent nodes for the subsequent direction of the socially engaged theatre. First of all, it is probably the first play about the post-socialist present that treats its oppressed characters with warmth, empathy and candour, explaining, with a careful analysis of the biographies and social structures they come from, the systemic logic that governs their situation and behaviour. This lesson of empathy, of the re-humanization of the various subaltern groups stigmatized in the post-socialist public discourse, will be a constant and important mark of the leftist political theatre efforts. Secondly, the play has a certain nihilism that will become even more prevalent in the theatre with social aims, at least until the moment of 2010, if not even later. Finally, the three young people, who had taken the student hostage and hoped that they could escape from the penitentiary and the country, die poisoned, after narrating each of their escape dreams.

This pessimism, specific to many forms of realism (not just in the theatre), according to which "there is no escape", "the situation is without exit", will be taken uncritically by the following generations, including in some productions by teams in which I was involved. After a first staging in Iași, Andreea Vălean's play was staged by Theodor Cristian Popescu at the National Theatre in Târgu-Mureș in 1998. This second production had a considerable success at the time – it was invited and acclaimed at theatre festivals in Sibiu and Bucharest, it launched at least two artists later renowned in the local public theatre – the actor Sorin Leoveanu and the musician Ada Milea. The entire staging in Târgu-Mureș marked a (probably) first experience of leaving the comfortable space of the theatre and the audience: it was performed, with post-show discussions, at the penitentiary in Târgu-Mureș for an audience consisting entirely of prisoners and security staff (Runcan, 2010). Thus, this text also produces the first attempt

to approach (and involve) the subaltern groups which much of the political theatre subsequently had the ambition to speak about. It is the first, timid sign of a return to the ideas and practices of a theatre that is aimed at other audiences as well as those from the educated middle class.<sup>6</sup>

The next turning point will be represented by the performances directed by Radu Apostol at the “Ion Creangă” theatre, *Home* (after a text by Liudmila Razumovskaia). Here, the political potential does not hold so much in the text itself as in the director’s choice to work with homeless children, who perform in the production, alongside two acting students. For the first time after 1989, on the stage of a state theatre, there are non-professional actors, from an ultra-oppressed group (teenagers living in the streets) who talk about the problems they are facing. The experience is transformative not only for the social-political theatre, but also for the director, who will constantly mention the production as a turning point in his career (Apostol, 2018; Cîntec, 2019), for the “official” sphere of the Romanian theatre (Apostol received the UNITER award for debut in 2002, for the directing of *Home*), but, very important, for the teenagers concerned. As Florian Voda, one of the homeless youths who performed in the show, says<sup>7</sup>:

I remember that emotion in *Home*, when I saw people in the first three rows with tears in their eyes and I felt that our story got somewhere, that we said: «Look, life is about this, about the children in the street next to that you pass by daily and seem to have no chance. See how things go?

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<sup>6</sup> It should be mentioned that the practice of involving in a performance, at least as an active spectator, the social group in question had already been experienced by Theodor Cristian Popescu also a year before, in the production of *Children of a Lesser God* (Company 777, Sounds of Progress and the Odeon Theatre, 1997), where people with hearing impairments participated in the rehearsals and the performance (see Theodor Cristian Popescu, *Surplus of People or Surplus of Ideas. The Pioneers of the Independent Movement in the Romanian Theatre After 1989*, Eikon Publishing House, 2012). But there the involvement of the community came from an artistic necessity – it was very difficult for a team of artists in which nobody had hearing impairments to understand, learn and assume the situations and experiences of such people, without directly documenting them. However, in the case of the performance with *When I Want to Whistle, I Whistle* in the penitentiary, the decision was strictly a political one, which aimed at the social impact of the production.

<sup>7</sup> However, from the interview with Florian Vodă, conducted by Mihaela Michailov in 2015, almost 15 years after the premiere, we can draw one of the hardest conclusions valid almost universally for the local contemporary political theatre: that taking part in a theatre performance, although transformative at the personal level, for intellectual and social development, and even, in the best cases, for the politicization of the oppressed group or persons, almost never leads to the concrete change of the material conditions – social and economic – in which people live. Thus, with rare exceptions, the stake remains primarily at the level of influencing the public sphere, at the level of transforming perceptions and ideas, in the hope of contributing to the creation of a politically conscious critical mass.

That's how they stay ... let's change a little! What do you say? You can't always ignore certain realities!»" (Vodă in Michailov, 2015).

Apostol's performance will remain a rather singular example of fruitful collaboration between artists and an oppressed group, with the aim of self-representation of the latter, until more than six years, in the projects of the Offensive of Generosity in Rahova-Uranus. Together with Vălean and two other generation colleagues, Alexandru Berceanu and Gianina Cărbunariu, supported by Nicolae Manda<sup>8</sup>, professor at U.N.A.T.C. Bucharest, Apostol founded in 2000 the dramAcum group, which aims to generate and promote contemporary Romanian dramaturgy. Within dramAcum, they discovered some of the playwrights who will play a central role in the development of the social-political theatre (firstly Bogdan Georgescu and Mihaela Michailov, but also Peca Ștefan or Vera Ion). The most incisive social approach remains that of Gianina Cărbunariu, preoccupied from her very first texts with the criticism of the most serious problems of capitalist society. *Stop the Tempo!*, 2001, is about the anti-consumerist revolt of three middle-class young people, who do not find their place (sometimes not even a job) in a Bucharest of excessive consumption (drinking, music, drugs, "fun"). *mady-baby.edu*, 2003, talks about human trafficking, juvenile prostitution and the major difficulties of Romanian immigrants' integration in the West.

The performances, also directed by Cărbunariu, had a major impact on the generation of future directors and playwrights, a generation of which I was a part. *mady-baby.edu* surprised us both by the hyper-realistic, super-tough and very authentic critical analysis of the immigrant condition, and by the counterpoint to this realism of a poetic dimension. For those of us who were students then, it was a lesson on how to make theatre with minimal financial resources, with a strong social-political message, one that provokes emotion and invites to reflection and debate. Looking at the distance of almost 20 years of political theatre and political self-education, Cărbunariu's first two texts, as well as the texts of colleagues discovered in dramAcum competitions (for example *Vitamins* by Vera Ion, a deconstruction of the family dependent on television and the media, or *With a Little Help From My Friends* by Maria Manolescu, about teenagers' conflicts

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<sup>8</sup> Nicolae Manda will have a decisive role (from the point of view of clarifying the concepts, methodology and means of implementation) also in the emergence of the Offensive of Generosity, the initiative of social intervention through theatre in the Rahova-Uranus neighborhood described in detail below, as well as in the education, within the university, of many artists who assume a political discourse – Alexandra Badea, Gianina Cărbunariu, Bogdan Georgescu, Vera Ion, Ioana Păun, Catinca Drăgănescu. As far as I'm concerned, I owe him a great deal in the interest for the socially engaged theatre and the beginnings of my political education in a left-wing direction.

and issues), they propose a rather disarticulated revolt, without a specific target and without proposing any way out. Not so much a revolution for establishing a new social order, but rather the anger in the face of any order or attempt to order, to establish the society. A nihilistic approach (present only as an idea in Andreea Vălean's 1997 text), sceptical of any positive political project, critical of both the socialist past and the capitalist present, which could only put the society on the whole on fire. Something that Professor Nicolae Manda, the supporter and co-founder of dramAcum, called, in a post-show discussion, "anarchic theatre".

This position also came with an often explicit refusal to offer solutions or to get involved in a political project, a position that rather believed in Chekhov's idea that the theatre should "not give answers, but ask questions" than in Brecht's imperative that art should "not mirror the world, but transform it." This, after all, fundamental scepticism towards politics (not only in the strict sense of mistrust of parties, but even in the sense of mistrust in the validity of a certain political project, even assumed by the left), came very possible from the spirit of absolute mistrust with respect to any societal project, and especially to structures and institutions, characteristic of the 1990s<sup>9</sup>. Of course, from this heterogeneous group united by the anger and the anti-systemic, but not ideologically assumed, revolt, there were to later appear militant theatre projects (such as those initiated by Bogdan Georgescu, but also productions by the dramAcum founders themselves), but also assumed visions of the extreme right, like those of the poet Marius Ianuş (whose poems are used in *Stop the Tempo!*).

In summary, I would say that the germs of the constituent elements of the local leftist political theatre appeared between 1997-2002 and all these elements are related to people from the dramAcum team (especially Radu Apostol, Gianina Cărbunariu and Andreea Vălean). These would be: the reintroduction of realism, with documentary valences, as a legitimate, necessary and emergent method of constructing the dramatic text; the focusing on groups and categories oppressed in the new capitalist order, on the losers of the post-socialist "transition" and their active involvement as audience and participants/co-creators of the performance; a spirit of revolt and anger in equal measure to the structural injustices of society and to the inability of the "classical" (*id est*, conservative) theatre to react to these injustices.

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<sup>9</sup> Similar observations about this nihilism characteristic of the 1990s makes for example the writer Adrian Schiop, with reference to the ideological landmarks of the generation 2000 in literature. In a way, things inspire one another – Vera Ion, for example, a playwright launched by dramAcum, is also a generation 2000 poet (initially under the pseudonym Zvera Ion).

### **The birth of the leftist critique of the capitalist system, in three stages**

From my point of view, which largely coincides with Iulia Popovici's observations (2016, but also in Cîntec, 2019), the essential moments for the left-wing politicization of anti-system criticism in the local theatre would be three: the anti-gentrification community theatre projects in Rahova-Uranus (2006-2007); the performance against the Roşia Montană mining operation – *Roşia Montană On the Physical Line and On the Political Line* (2010); the documentation, production and touring in mining cities of the project *Under the Ground – Jiu Valley After 1989* (2011-2012). Not coincidentally, the three moments frame the transition from the triumphalist enthusiasm of entering the European Union to the anti-austerity protests in the post-global financial crisis of 2009-2010. And this period coincides with the local (re)birth of independent anti-capitalist leftist movements (see the appearance of *Indimedia* or *CritcAtac*, according to Țichindeleanu, 2016; Cistelecan, 2019). Let's take them one at a time.

The projects carried out by a multidisciplinary group of artists<sup>10</sup> (directors, playwrights, actors, visual artists, musicians, choreographers, etc.) in the perimeter of Rahova-Uranus-Sabinelor in Bucharest started in 2006 and had a rather sinuous trajectory that has culminated in the emancipation of some members of the neighbourhood community, who managed their own cultural association and collaborated with various artists in educational and artistic programs. I will not describe in detail this development that spans over at least a decade, not only because the space of the present text does not allow it, but especially because there are already at least two complementary perspectives from within, one of them belonging to me (Georgescu, 2013; Schwartz, 2016). In short, the projects included both artistic activities (theatre projects about the social issues of the neighbourhood community, concerts with the children in the neighbourhood, etc.) as well as civic and political activities (from social assistance for the people in the neighbourhood and mediation of their relationship with the mayor's office, to debates and public protests).

Although it did not intend to be neither (exclusively) theatre nor (explicitly) political, it was most likely the first left-wing, militant, political project after 1989. From the very beginning, after a first stage of research in the area and interaction with the people in the neighbourhood, it became obvious to many of the artists involved that the inhabitants (an ethnically diverse community –

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<sup>10</sup> Offensive of Generosity Initiative – co-founders: Miruna Dinu, Maria Drăghici, Irina Gâdiuță, Bogdan Georgescu, Vera Ion, Ioana Păun, David Schwartz.



Roma and non-Roma, but mostly from the working class and with limited access to education) are facing major social problems, on at least two levels: first, the imminence of evictions under the pretext of restitution of nationalized buildings<sup>11</sup> in the context of the gentrification of the area, located near the centre of Bucharest. Secondly, the systemic racism that hinders both their access to the labour market and the access to social services, however precarious. Thus, from the first theatre projects in the neighbourhood park (held in 2006), the artistic endeavour was subsumed to a political purpose – to facilitate the community’s access to self-representation, with the explicit task of supporting their fight against largely illegal evictions. The project was a fundamental one for the evolution of the political theatre from many points of view.

First of all, it was a real school for a good part of the artists who will do later critical-political theatre – from the co-founding director, Bogdan Georgescu, to the director and scenographer Irina Gâdiuță, the playwright Mihaela Michailov and to the actresses and actors, some of whom will also start political theatre projects, such as Alexandru Fifea, Alice Monica Marinescu, Andrei Șerban. From my personal point of view, my left-wing politicization is primarily related to the direct confrontation with this textbook about the functioning of capitalism in its neoliberal version. In *Rahova-Uranus*, under the pretext of legality and restoration of “historical justice”, class oppression and widespread racism were complemented to facilitate the privatization of public housing. The unfolding of this process, the acquaintance and friendship with the people who suffer directly and severely from these actions, worked for me (but not only) as a process of consciousness awakening, which made me increasingly interested in leftist theory and understanding the world from this perspective, but also looking differently at the stakes and potential of the theatrical act. Secondly, at the level of the themes addressed in the theatre performances, at least the production *Outside!*<sup>12</sup> brought a new, I would say, perspective in the local theatrical space: not only a critical transposition of the concrete social issue (the eviction from a public dwelling of poor working class family, who does not afford housing at the market price), but the questioning itself of the morality and justice that the concept of *restitutio in integrum* implies regarding the properties nationalized during the socialist period. The moment is important because it marks the emergence in the theatrical field of a thinking gap that

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<sup>11</sup> There is a rich literature on *restitutio in integrum* as a pretext for the privatization of the public housing fund, both in Romania and in other countries in Eastern Europe (for example Poland). I described in detail the process in my PhD thesis (Schwartz, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Text: Mihaela Michailov; scenography: Andrada Chiriac; with: Florina Gleznea, Alice Monica Marinescu, Maria Obretin, Sorin Poamă, Alec Secăreanu, Andrei Șerban. Premiere: September 2007, part of the production “Build Your Community!”.

had barely emerged in other theoretical or artistic fields locally: the courage to step out of the compulsory anti-communist paradigm and to question the justice of the mechanisms of diminishing public property and concentration of private property. Finally, thirdly, the Rahova-Uranus experience marks the first example (and so far one of only two, together with the *4<sup>th</sup>Age*<sup>13</sup> program at "Moses Rosen" residential home) of involving non-professional artists to participate in political theatre projects for longer periods; and the only one in which a group of women from the neighbourhood, directly affected by the social-political issues they presented on stage, has long assumed the coordination of artistic-political-educational activities (theatre performances, workshops for children, public protests, etc.).

The second important project for the genesis of the anti-capitalist political theatre is the performance of the dramAcum group from 2010, *Roşia Montana*, on the physical and political lines<sup>14</sup>. If, from the point of view of the work process, the show consolidates the direction started by dramAcum members (the period of documentation as a mandatory first stage, followed by a process of fictionalization, and the development of the text in rehearsals with the acting team), the show comes with positioning a more radical policy - not just a deafening rebellion against the system, as in the early 2000s, but a project already undertaken "against Gold Corporation" and "against a state that is abandoning its citizens." Thus, the group of artists and actors express themselves explicitly anti-corporate politically and against a complicit state with international mining companies. The show has important aesthetic-political merits as well - scenes that perfectly portray the dimension of social destruction that the aggressive and invasive corporation produces in a village dominated by poverty and family relations, however dysfunctional (see also Michailov, 2013). But perhaps the most significant contribution to the history of local political theatre is another: this show, more than any other, shows the limits of the much-touted "freedom of expression" in the peripheral capitalist system. Although it has had undeniable critical success (it was selected at national and international festivals; it received the prize for best performance at the Romanian Drama Festival in Timișoara, etc.), the show will be sabotaged

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<sup>13</sup> *4<sup>th</sup>Age* - community art program for the elderly, started in 2009, which continues today at the "Amalia and chief rabbi Dr. Moses Rosen" residential home in Bucharest, coordinated by Paul Dunca, Alice Monica Marinescu, Katia Pascariu, Mihaela Michailov, David Schwartz.

<sup>14</sup> Directed by: Gianina Cărbunariu, Andreea Vălean, Radu Apostol; text: Peca Ștefan, Gianina Cărbunariu, Andreea Vălean; with: Csilla Albert, András Buzási, Loránd Farkas, Csongor Kölö, Levente Molnár, Cristina Toma; scenography, video, light design: Andu Dumitrescu; choreography: Florin Fieroiu; soundtrack: Bogdan Burlăcianu; translation: Péter Demény; co-production: Hungarian State Theatre Cluj-Napoca, dramAcum.

and finally buried by its own producer - the Hungarian State Theater in Cluj. The sabotage took place on multiple levels: from the refusal of the producer theatre, under different minor pretexts, to participate in international festivals, but also to the Fân-Fest protest festival in Roşia-Montana (where the artistic team eventually made a show-reading, read by the directors themselves); up to the refusal to schedule the show and even the refusal to sell tickets at the scheduled performances (Cărbunariu et al., 2011). In short, the show was censored and eventually cancelled. Thus, the merit of the whole project is that of devouring, in all their splendour, the mechanisms of censorship in capitalism and of relativizing and putting in a new perspective, once again, the socialist experience. Given that one of the most commonly used arguments against real socialism is that it has undermined freedom of expression and freedom of opinion, the public sphere is now facing the first scandal of a theatrical show produced in full "democracy", *de facto* banned, because it criticized and disturbed an exponent of international capital.

Finally, the third and last artistic-political endeavour that I consider representative for this stage is, again, one in which I was directly involved. *Under the Ground – Jiu Valley After 1989*<sup>15</sup>, from the start, set out to document the life and problems of the mining communities, decisively affected by privatization, and to restore the dignity of a social category stigmatized in the post-socialist period. The project consisted of conducting a series of documentary interviews, interdisciplinary workshops for children and adolescents in the Jiu Valley and a theatre production about the life and work of miners. The resulting performance had its premiere in Bucharest in May 2012 and had performances in 11 (former) mining locations in Hunedoara and Maramureş. Again, more interesting than designing and making the show itself was the tour experience. The idea was not necessarily new – in 2009, Bogdan Georgescu coordinated the project *Touring in the Countryside*, which aimed to contribute to the recovery and reconversion of cultural houses in the rural area into socio-cultural spaces for the local audience. But in the case of *Under the Ground*, being a performance with an important historical dimension, which discusses the rise and fall of a professional category and of a whole geographical space, the approach gained different valences and led to another forming experience. First of all, it was extremely difficult to ensure the participation of miners or former miners in the production. On the one hand, because many had already left the area (they had returned to the countryside or had gone abroad). On the other hand,

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<sup>15</sup> Concept: Mihaela Michailov and David Schwartz; with: Alice Monica Marinescu, Katia Pascariu, Alexandru Potocean, Andrei Şerban; music: Bobo Burlăcianu; scenography: Adrian Cristea; video documentary: Vlad Petri. This project will also be briefly described in this article. A full exposition of the whole approach can be found in Schwartz, 2016, Part II, Chapter 3.

because people were particularly sceptical of an invitation to the theatre. In most of the localities of the Jiu Valley or the Baia Mare mining basin, areas with extraordinary cultural effervescence during the socialist period, when theatres in the country toured constantly, in 2012 the younger people had never seen a drama theatre performance, and the elderly hadn't seen theatre since before 1989. Thus, it was no surprise that an 80-year-old spectator from the village of Tăuții Măgherăuș exclaimed at the end of a performance: "Since 1989 there has been no such great truth!". The lack of familiarity with theatrical performances led, when the spectators allowed themselves to enter the room, to a kind of spontaneous interaction – people were talking during the performance, talking with the actors and actresses, who had to interrupt their preset course, to answer them and to integrate public interventions. The participation of the audience in the performance took place naturally, without programming, beyond the "participatory" pretensions of the contemporary theatre, in a dialogue in which the spectators felt really empowered to ask, question, criticize or sing miners' songs together with the actors. Thus, we recovered a form of popular theatre performance, in which people felt not only that their stories and perspectives were transmitted, but that they were entitled to intervene and change the course of events on the stage (for a more detailed description see also Michailov, 2014).

The experience of working on *Under the Ground*, from the documentation process to the touring, was also a kind of artistic, but especially political, maturity exam, of what would become the core of the future political theatre projects started by our collective. A landmark of fair reporting to the recent past, to the stories of the people we interact with and to the consistency of political stakes, to which we return whenever we feel in difficulty in one way or another<sup>16</sup>. For the ordinary theatre audience, from Bucharest but also from other cities where we performed in (Cluj, Iași, Galați, Timișoara, etc.), the

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<sup>16</sup> The team of actresses and actors from *Under the Ground*, joined by Alexandru Fifea, has formed in the last 8 years a group in which we share relatively common ideas about theatre and politics, whose origins are found in working on a few projects that have shaped our conceptions (first of all, the Rahova-Uranus projects, the *4<sup>th</sup>Age* program and *Under the Ground*). These experiences have welded a team that is working together and trying to undermine ordinary hierarchies in theatre projects – not in the sense that "everyone does everything", but in the idea that everyone is equally responsible and equally conscious and assumed in the message transmitted by the performance. This collective takeover of the show, which is an important part of our artistic program, is not necessarily common even in the local leftist political theatre. The only political theatre team that works similarly, in an even more radical and exclusivist manner, is from the Republic of Moldova – the one coagulated around Nicoleta Esinencu, Nora Dorogan and Doriana Talmazan at the Kishinev Laundry-Theatre.

production marked one of the first meetings with a different representation of the socialist period. This is not an idealized representation – there is in the performance a monologue of a dissident miner, describing the hardness of the mine work and the extremely difficult situation of the miners before 1989, a miner who also protested and was investigated by Securitate in 1977. It is about a balanced perspective, able to evaluate the problems and the solutions of both systems, from the point of view of some of the great losers of capitalism everywhere – mine workers and their families<sup>17</sup>. A perspective that turns over the mirror and re-focuses on the worker as a subject of history. The 2007-2013 period was, at least for some of the artists interested in various forms of socially-aware theatre (called in different, successive formulas – community theatre, active art, documentary theatre, political theatre, etc.), a period of discovery and consolidation of the political direction, against the background of the significant change in the material conditions<sup>18</sup> (the austerity program implemented by the Băsescu-Boc government brought, in the logic of the social disaster from all the areas that depended on public resources, the drastic decrease of the funds for the independent culture), a period in which most of the artists survived from non-artistic work or with family support and worked almost for free. Only a few years after joining the European Union, which should have marked the terminus of the “triumphal march towards capitalism”, the economic situation became almost as difficult as during the 1990s. However, this direct confrontation with the logic and consequences of the economic crisis awakened and developed the political consciousness of a significant part of the leftist intellectual field. This process created an intellectual and activist effervescence among artists concerned with socially-aware theatre and was to

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<sup>17</sup> Not coincidentally, miners are the favorite subject of many leftist artists, locally and internationally – from paintings by Lazăr Zin or Mina Bick Wepper to Emile Zola's novel, *Germinal*, and from documentary film such as *Harlan Country U.S.A.* to Herbert Biberman or Ken Loach's films.

<sup>18</sup> It would be interesting to make a parallel study on the evolution of the social-political theatre in the Republic of Moldova. On the one hand, the evolution of the playwright and director Nicoleta Esinencu, who belongs to the same generation as the dramAcum members and whose path somehow condenses the evolution of the Romanian political theatre - from the nihilistic and anti-establishment (dis)articulation, to an explicit criticism of capitalism and neoliberalism from queer-feminist intersectional positions. On the other hand, the evolution of other artists of her generation (for example, Luminița Tâcu), who make performances with social ambitions almost exclusively at the request of international NGOs, on the topics on their agenda. Both because of a relatively common history (that of the dismantling of public resources and goods in post-socialism), as well as, probably, of certain coincidences (Ovidiu Tichindeleanu's activity in Kishinev or the collaboration between the Laundry-Theatre and Romanian artists – Bogdan Georgescu, Alice Monica Marinescu, myself), it would seem that the turning point for the direct criticism of capitalism also comes with regard to Esinencu's team in 2012-2013.

inspire the emergence, in 2013, of the *Political Art Gazette* and the consolidation of an annual *Political Theatre Season* (which really took place every year, starting with 2013, even when resources were very limited).

### **The explosion of the social theatre**

The development of the theatre with social stakes or aspirations after 2012 is so diverse and branched that it could hardly be properly covered even in a volume. Of course, much of the resulting projects, artistic venues, collectives and performances assume a social role – to draw attention to various social issues, not necessarily politically defined and not necessarily critical to the capitalist order. However, the criticism of the system is evident through the accumulation, through the multitude of revolted performances, on subjects of the most diverse, both with a more general character and with very specific issues: structuring gender roles, sexual identity and oppression of LGBT + people, Roma status and systemic racism, the Romanian-Hungarian inter-ethnic relations, the persecution of the Jews and the Roma during the fascist period, slavery, bullying, body-shaming, the situation of refugees, the condition of the immigrant workers in Romania, the denunciation of the anti-abortion counselling, the exploitation of the multinational corporations, shows performed with and for incarcerated persons, elders who recount their experiences on stage and critically analyse the recent history, the condition of migrant women and the lives of children left at home, the situation of construction workers or the situation of independent artists. And the list can go on. In this effervescence of the theatre with social-political aspirations, we distinguish a series of artists and collectives who frontally and directly criticize the structural problems of capitalism, generally from two complementary angles: one focused on labour and ownership relations specific of the new economic and social system; the other from an intersectional, identity-cantered approach, which explains how the mechanisms of oppression of different subaltern groups are articulated.

Of the first category, the most consistent is again Gianina Cărbunariu, who has written and directed several performances in recent years discussing the development dynamics of the capitalist city, with the inherent social and ethnic class segregation (*Sibiu Tiger*, a dramAcum production, 2012), the land grabbing practiced by Western multinationals in Romania (*For Sale*, Odeon Theatre, 2014) or the exploitation of Romanian workers in Germany (*Do You Speak Silence?*, "Radu Stanca" National Theatre, 2017). Cărbunariu is probably the local director and playwright most concerned with the critical analysis of

the devastating effects of capitalist mechanisms and of the centre-periphery dynamics in post-socialism (an opinion also shared by Iulia Popovici, who makes a detailed study of Cărbunariu's performances from this perspective - in Cîntec, 2019). Further, other projects of artists and collectives who worked in dramAcum or Rahova-Uranus should be mentioned in the same direction. The projects generated by the evicted women from Rahova-Uranus (Gabriela Dumitru, Cristina Eremia, Cornelia Ioniță), in collaboration with various artists, are all focused on the problems of precarious housing and real estate speculation, but with references to racism, the dysfunctionality of social services and the condition of the poorest workers (*Without Support*, coordinator Bogdan Georgescu, 2012, *La Harneală*, directed by Mihai Lukács, 2014, *The Subjective Museum of Housing*, directed by Andrei Șerban, 2016). Bogdan Georgescu's performance *ForTheWin* (O2G, 2012) discusses the condition of workers exploited in corporations, starting from the real case of a young woman who worked until she died of burnout. Mihaela Michailov and Radu Apostol's performance, *Offline Family* (2013), made with children from a district school in Bucharest, speaks about the economic migration and the situation of children and elderly people left at home. Finally, a new generation of artists occasionally addresses similar topics – degradation of living conditions, labour relations and the situation of workers in post-socialism – for example, Raul Coldea and Petro Ionescu in *Provisional* (Reactor Cluj, 2015) and *Refugees* (Reactor Cluj, 2016) or Catinca Drăgănescu in *Rovegan* (2016).

A sub-category of the approaches to the change (perceived in all these examples as negative) of labour, property and housing relations, which emerged a little more recently, is represented by performances that try an historical approach, inevitably oriented more towards a political criticism of the post-socialist “transition” as a system. I worked directly in two of them: *'90*, (Macaz Theatre-Coop, 2017, written with the actors Alex Fifea, Alice Monica Marinescu, Katia Pascariu, Alexandru Potocean and Andrei Șerban), which starts from our family histories in order to perform an x-ray of the traumatic effects of social transformations after 1990; and *The Cluj Miracle* (Reactor, 2017, text by Petro Ionescu), in which, starting with the documentation of the Caritas Ponzi scheme from the '90s, we follow the polarization and financialization of the post-socialist society. In the same subcategory can be integrated two productions that work with non-professionals performing their own story: *Tzuhaus* (Macaz Theater Coop & Reciproca, 2017), a show directed by Lorand Maxim, in which Vlad-Florin Bălțeanu, a former inmate, restores his personal route, from easy-to-earn entrepreneurial dreams to the condition of a person with a criminal record; and *The Ballads of Memory* (Reactor, 2019), coordinated by the Moldovan

playwright Nicoleta Esinencu, with whom Raul Coldea also collaborates, in which Ionela Pop, a pensioner from Cluj, tells the history of herself and her friends, the history of the social destruction and economic decline of the last 30 years.

In the second category, of performances centered on how the capitalist society oppresses or marginalizes different bodies and identities, the representative productions, although at first glance numerous, are significantly reduced if we apply somewhat stricter intersectional criteria, which also includes the dimension of class. Thus, the most relevant examples are, in my opinion, the performances of the Roma feminist theatre collective Giuvlipen (set up by the actresses Mihaela Drăgan and Zita Moldovan together with the director Mihai Lukács in 2014). Of their productions, *Who killed Szomna Granca?* (2017, directed by Mihai Lukács) most precisely articulates a systemic criticism, from a Roma feminist perspective, which includes racism in the educational system, poverty and precariousness of the rural environment, patriarchal prejudices both in the Roma community and among the majority and the criticism of mass-media sensationalism. Another show with remarkable success in revealing the overlaps and intersections of various forms of violence – against queer people, against poor people, against women, against those who have bodies that do not comply with binary gender norms – is *Bold (Negreșită)*, initiated by Carolina Vozian (Macaz Theatre Coop, 2018). Finally, two, somewhat complementary, theatrical examples on the condition of emigrants and refugees from the global south, which aim to underline the direct links between the consequences of the unstoppable race for capital accumulation (war, climate crisis) and dislocation of non-European populations, as well as the racism subsumed by these processes, are *We Were Not Born in the Right Place* (by Alice Monica Marinescu and David Schwartz, 2013), and *Guilty* (respectively) (Bezna collective, 2018).

Finally, there is a special performance in this whole landscape, one that I worked on, in a large and multi-disciplinary team – actors, playwrights, choreographers, historians, journalists. It is *What We Would Be If We Knew – A Protesting Political Fairy*<sup>19</sup>. Made in 2015, at the end of a year of documentation, the performance is probably the most ambitious political project of the leftist theatre – it aims to illustrate a condensed history of workers' protests covering a long time, practically the whole XXth century – and counterpointed by elements of political utopia inspired by Neagu-Negulescu's *Arimania*<sup>20</sup>. Probably the result,

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<sup>19</sup> The team: Mădălina Brândușe, Paul Dunca, Adela Iacoban, Alice Monica Marinescu, Mihaela Michailov, Katia Pascariu, Alexandru Potocean, Cătălin Rulea, David Schwartz, Andrei Șerban, Ionuț Sociu, Marius-Bogdan Tudor. Production: O2G Association, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Utopia written by the union activist Iuliu Neagu-Negulescu in 1921, while in prison for political activity, republished, after the premiere of *What We Would Be If We Knew*, by the Free Pages Publishing House (2018).



in terms of artistic force at least, did not rise to the level of the premises, sinning through an approach maybe too didactic or too austere and cumbersome.<sup>21</sup> But the show marked a unique moment for now: a project undertaken collectively by a group of cultural workers who openly and unhesitatingly reveal their adherence to leftist ideas and the claim of the history of protests and political struggles won by the working class.

The performances listed are quite different from all points of view – verbatim-style documentary approaches and Brechtian stylistics, classical realism and various forms of poetic realism; working with the personal stories of the creative team and projects that include oppressed people who tell their perspectives and even initiate some performances; performances initiated by the authors-playwrights and collective projects in which the director is not mentioned; independent productions with zero budget and projects with consistent international financing. All these approaches express the diversity and internal plurivalences that the critical political theatre has acquired in the capitalist order in the last ten years. All the more so as I operated a severe selection, on the one hand refusing to mention similar projects going in the same direction, on the other hand on the objective criterion of articulating at least an implicit criticism of the functioning of local and/or global capitalism (and not just punctual criticism of various norms or social dysfunctions), but also on the subjective, inevitable criterion of the performances that are known to me. Although in the local theatrical and cultural context the assumed social-political theatre still occupies a subordinate position, within which the theatre critical of capitalism hardly represents a niche, its extent and degree of visibility in the last 20 years have increased exponentially. Under these conditions, in order to formulate at least a hypothesis about the conditions of production and reproduction of this theatre, we must lean, at least synthetically, on the history of resources and means of production – financing and producing institutions, international partners and collaborators, publications and cultural supporters, etc.

### **The apparatus and the conditions of production – where does the money come from and how does the discourse spread?**

As mentioned above, interactions with Western culture (and certain policies) were a decisive factor, at least for the emergence of the first elements of critical social theatre. Andreea Vălean, Gianina Cărbunariu, Mihaela Michailov

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<sup>21</sup> For the controversies, both aesthetical and political, and for a wider discussion about the history and politics in theatre at that time, see Popovici 2015, Iancu 2015, Lazăr 2015.

had playwriting residencies at the Royal Court in London, Radu Apostol and Bogdan Georgescu had fellowships at the Cornerstone Community Theatre Institute in Los Angeles, dramAcum was initially funded by the Rațiu Foundation in London, and The Open Society Institute and the Foundation for an Open Society also funded projects to support contemporary Romanian dramaturgy. Although it is obvious that the texts, performances and social media projects of the respective artists and collectives started from personal, deeply subjective, emotional and intellectual responses to the violent objective realities in which they lived, the aesthetic articulation and a certain political direction were certainly influenced by meeting with the theatrical culture and also with a certain set of values and perceptions about the world of Western "progressive" institutions. In the absence of any landmarks about the tradition and history of the local social-political theatre, it was natural for inspiration and influences, both aesthetically and ideologically, to come from international projects within reach. The use of formulas such as community theatre (performed with a community affected by and/or constituted around a specific problem) or the verbatim technique (word-for-word transcription and reproduction of pre-existing materials, usually interviews) should not be put on account of any self-colonization or "cultural imperialism," as Western theatre critics have occasionally accused hastily (Haydon, 2013). They must be understood as syncretic responses to the structural political problems that the periphery of the global capitalist system faces, one of the main problems being precisely the erasure of the history of their own movements and actions of political resistance. If, in an effective process of self-colonization, the history of the local left and the history of proletarian art are minimized and forgotten<sup>22</sup>, the political theatre has two solutions: to take it again from scratch or to draw inspiration from the accessible models – obviously largely Western, in a world dominated culturally, financially and politically by Western countries.

Beyond the aesthetic dimension, speaking about material conditions, the Western funding structures (the ones mentioned above, but also ProHelvetia, for example) have played an important role in the survival of the initial socially-engaged theatre projects, especially in the dimensions that are not related to the production per se (drama competitions, text development workshops, drama and community theatre workshops, etc.). Local state theatres have been involved occasionally and usually for very short periods. The only notable exception is the Small Theatre in Bucharest, which dedicated a hall (the Very Small Theatre) to "experimental" projects, but especially to contemporary theatre performances

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<sup>22</sup> See also Țichindeleanu's (2016) theory of anti-communism as a typical form of articulation of self-colonization in the local context.

of Romanian drama (here were performed some of the most important productions with social-political stakes - of the dramAcum members, such as *mady-baby.edu*, *Vitamins* or *Offline Family*).

Things have changed substantially from two directions, starting with 2006-2007. First, a functional financing structure for independent projects appeared – the Administration of the National Cultural Fund (AFCN; see also Iulia Popovici's opinion in Ernu, 2017), a structure that supported, through assumed directions and priorities, cultural projects with social stakes. This process led to the multiplication and serious development of social-political theatre projects, and the shift of priorities towards some more focused on social-political-educational contributions (in particular the support for production, the support for the involvement of the culturally disadvantaged categories of audience and the support for contemporary Romanian dramaturgy) gave a new boost to the leftist political theatre after 2014. Secondly, one of the most involved artists in the critical political theatre, Gianina Cărbunariu, gained notoriety and a remarkable success at international level (her texts were translated and staged in many languages on three continents; she was invited to important festivals such as Avignon, etc.). This international success has attracted, as it is always the case in peripheral areas, the recognition of the local theatre community, recognition that has materialized in two UNITER awards and a third nomination, as well as in the multiplication of Cărbunariu's collaborations with state theatres. Once the breach was opened, shows with very sensitive political topics, with a consistent critical dimension, took place - of course rather occasionally - in public theatres. In parallel, the increase of the AFCN budget and the professionalization of some artists and artistic collectives in project management and the writing of applications for grants have led to the development of long-term program strategies (including by attracting European funds). The increase of public funds for projects with a critical political direction coincided with the partial withdrawal of international funding (less funds for the culture of EU countries). This phenomenon also coincided with the radicalization of political discourse in a more critical direction towards Western capital and structures of domination. If in the state theatres there are still serious limits regarding acceptable radicalism (as the example of the *Roșia Montană...* performance has shown), the non-reimbursable financing only orients the general direction by establishing the objectives and priorities of the programs, but it does not involve, until this moment, absolutely no form of artistic or political censorship.

After 2014, the social-political theatre has become a constant in spaces such as Replika Educational Theatre Centre in Bucharest or the Paintbrush Factory and Reactor in Cluj, and in 2016 a group of artists and activists of which I was a part of established MACAZ Bar Coop Theatre, the first local venue since 1989

dedicated to political theatre, a theatre cooperative and bar, organized on non-hierarchical, intersectional and anti-capitalist principles.<sup>23</sup> MACAZ has been operating for three years and has been closed for a reason typical for the political context (the owner's refusal to extend the contract for the venue). During this period, it (co)produced over 20 performances, many of which are mentioned in this article, and co-organized/hosted an annual season of political theatre, political theatre workshops, public debates and discussions on the role of political art or the situation of the workers from the independent cultural sector.

Beyond the relative openness of the state theatres, the self-support through non-reimbursable financing mechanisms and the appearance of specific venues and festivals (in the first place, Temps d'Images in Cluj, which also held for 10 years, until 2018), the left-wing political theatre projects were supported by few critics, but who wrote (write) in some of the most respected local publications – Iulia Popovici in *Observator Cultural*, Oana Stoica in *Dilema Veche* and *Scena9*. The performances, of course, attracted the attention of the rather small community of the independent intellectual left, and the important artists were constantly invited on radio shows or they gave written interviews. But I would say that an important means of spreading and developing the local political theatre, which has led to the popularization of left ideas among artists, was the formal and non-formal education of the artists themselves. At least since 2007, some of the artists involved in political theatre (Cărbunariu, Georgescu, Michailov, Schwartz, Marinescu, Pascariu, Șerban) have held relatively constant workshops, courses and seminars for students or young graduates of performing arts, on multiple forms of social theatre, in different contexts (academic, festivals, independent initiatives): at the theatre faculties in Bucharest (UNATC), Cluj and Sibiu; within the festivals such as Temps d'Images Cluj, the Romanian Playwriting Festival Timișoara, the Alexandria Festival, the Telciu Summer School; in independent projects such as Focus Atelier, Fresh Start, the School of Political Theatre.

### **Present and future: between the need for institutionalization and the delimitation of the "militant" theatre on the right**

All the structural and institutional factors listed above have contributed, in one measure or another, to the development of local political theatre, in particular, but not exclusively, in Bucharest and Cluj. However, at least for some of us, especially in the case of our political theatre team (the one consolidated

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<sup>23</sup> For a broad description of the history of the project, see Dana Andrei, "The measure of our political identity lies in our actions", in *IDEA. Art + society*, no. 54, 2019.

from common experiences in projects such as Under the Ground and responsible for the theatre component at MACAZ), the prospects are not so sure. The precariousness of independent artists, which has been written about in recent years (see Popovici in Ernu, 2017), makes some of them live from project to project, accept jobs that they do not want or work on artistic projects that do not represent them.

In our case, we tried to build a relatively stable group, of people working together, even if in different and complementary formulas, and who share not only an artistic direction, but also a political belief; however, the lack of financial and institutional stability has the potential to undermine the unity of the group. Another problem is the chronic lack of professionals in the fields related to the artistic act – especially management, production, technicians and PR. All these needs, felt by the majority of artists and collectives working independently, underline the growing need for institutionalization. Without institutions with constant and secure resources, all the effervescence of the leftist political theatre risks being consumed in less than a generation (I think the same is true for the production of critical theory, visual arts or anything else). In the context in which professional, material or symbolic recognition for the militant theatre does not come often or easily, no matter how powerful the dedication for the cause, the decisive factor becomes safety and predictability – the guarantee of long-term continuity and development.

At the same time, in recent years, the paradoxical, but not quite surprising, phenomenon that I wrote about in the first part of the present material is also noted: the political, militant theatre is again interesting and attractive for the establishment. Former PSD leader Liviu Dragnea's speech pastiches (or the fetishization of *#resist* protests, obviously political elements) are appearing on stage at Bulandra Theatre or the National Theatre in Bucharest. They should point out that the conservative intelligentsia, at least the one from the theatre, came out of the "ivory tower" and threw itself into the political arena. In a way this is the case – the right-wing radicalization of the middle class in recent years, a radicalization that culminated in the virulent anti-poor, anti-elderly, against the "socially-assisted" attitudes, codified in anti-PSD activism and essentialized in slogans such as "Down with the Red Plague", "Down with Corruption!", "F\*\*\* PSD", got, with little delay, into the world of theatre. Which, in a way, is good news: the conflict between social classes is no longer overshadowed and sublimated in aestheticizing discourses on "art for art's sake" and "general human problems", but is expressed directly, in the confrontation between the leftist political theatre and the one newly engaged to the right.

So, at the moment, the leftist militant theatre is somehow facing a new attempt – to compete directly not with a speech that disqualifies militant art as bad or even non-art, but with a militant alternative discourse, in fact the opposite, which has infinitely richer financial and institutional resources. In this context, the only chance remains the struggle to conquer new resources (institutions, financing mechanisms, means of promotion). A very important stake in this direction is to win new categories of audiences, especially since the polls show that in fact the number of spectators attending theatre is actually very small in relation to the total number of the population, even in the big cities.

However, in 2019 some steps have been taken in this regard. For our group, one possible direction is to initiate collaboration with the trade union movement. The unions have been traditional collaborators of the political theatre since the experiences of Brecht or Piscator (Brecht, 1988; Piscator, 1966). And in the local context, the trade union movement is also in the process of reinventing itself. The unions still have an important network of members at national level, but they need means of promotion and alternative education. Thus, they can ensure an audience with high potential to be receptive to the values of the left. A first step in this direction was the *Universal Worker*<sup>24</sup> project, which included documentation, participatory theatre workshops and a performance about the lives and labour of workers in retail multinationals. Another very important direction, which actually develops the direction started by *Touring in the Countryside* or *Under the Ground*, is the production of theatre performances in small towns and rural areas. And in this regard, the year 2019 was an interesting one – the County Museum of History and Arts in Zalău co-produced, with the important contribution of the historical researcher Valer Simion Cosma, two political theatre performances (given that Zalău is one of the county residences in Romania without a municipal theatre). The two performances, both critical of neoliberal policies, address complementary issues: *Factories and Plants*<sup>25</sup> documents the lives of the families of workers at the Armătura Factory and how they were affected by the closing of the factory;

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<sup>24</sup> With: Alice Monica Marinescu, Katia Pascariu, Alexandru Potocean, Andrei Șerban; music and text: Maria Sgârcitu; set design: Irina Gădiuță; choreography: Carmen Coțofană; dramaturgy and direction: David Schwartz; produced: O2G Association in partnership with Retail Unions Federation.

<sup>25</sup> Directed by: Adina Lazăr; dramaturgy: Alexandra Felseghi; set design: Silviu Medeșan; grafica: Paul Muresan; cu: Ioana Chitu, Emanuel Cifor, Lucian Teodor Rus, Simina Seliștean; documentation: Bianca Felseghi, Valer Simion Cosma; assistants: Turian Mihai, Denisa Gordan, Reka Domokos, Catalin Ilies; project manager: Andrei Herța; production: Centre for the Study of Modernity and the Rural World in partnership with the Zalău County Museum of History and Arts.

*I Am One of the Lucky Ones*<sup>26</sup> tells the story of the economic migration from the villages in the county of Sălaj. The two shows have already toured in other cities and performed several times in Zalău. The approach of Zalău Museum represents, I think, a model for the political theatre of the left in the future: institutional support; turning to culturally marginalized areas (cities without a state theatre and their surrounding rural localities); winning an audience that has very limited access to the theatre and who can see themselves in the ideas and experiences presented in the shows. In short, expanding the battlefield.

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<sup>26</sup> Directed by: Lorand Maxim; with: Oana Hodade, Dániel Láng, Doru Talos; documentation: Ágota Ábrán, Corina Bejinariu, Valer Simion Cosma, Iulia Hossu, Lorand Maxim, Vlad Petri, Anda Pop, Alexandra Voivozeanu; music: Panna Adorjányi, Zsolt Bodoki-Halmen, Dániel Láng; text: Alexandra Voivozeanu; set design: Anda Pop; produced by: County Museum of History and Arts, Zalău.

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## TORTUOUSLY TURNING REALITY INTO THEATRE: THE CASE OF NICOLETA ESINENCU

IULIA POPOVICI<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT.** How do the professionals of the theatre of the real deal with the dilemmas raised by the techniques and ethics of representation that lie at the heart of this particular drama genre? There is little in the available scholarship to provide much guidance in this regard. This article addresses the question and the gap encased within it by examining the critical case of Nicoleta Esinencu, one of the most high profile contemporary drama directors of this kind in Eastern and Central Europe. Focused on the work done by Esinencu at the avant-garde Laundry-Theatre in Kishinev, the analysis dwells on the ethics of documentary work and of representing real life people, the information-gathering process, the choice of topics and the societal implications of the performance. Furthermore, the article captures the bespoke interdisciplinarity of ethnographic research and drama studies while unearthing unsuspected tensions between the claims about representing authentic experiences made by the theatre of the real and the actual perceptions of the professionals.

**Keywords:** documentary theatre, ethics of representation, performative practices, Laundry-Theatre, Nicoleta Esinencu

A generic term under which very different practices of stage or drama approach of events, situations, real issues and working with materials pre-existing the creative process are brought together, documentary theatre is an extremely wide umbrella, to which alternative concepts are often preferred, such as “verbatim”, “docu-drama”, “ethnotheatre”, etc<sup>2</sup>. From an even broader perspective, which takes into account less the “how” (the use of documentary research tools) these plays or theatrical texts are constructed and more the “what” they cry out for (a privileged relationship – of fidelity and authenticity – with the reality outside the scene).

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<sup>1</sup> *Performing arts critic and curator, iuliapopovici@gmail.com.*

<sup>2</sup> For recent examples of rejection of the “documentary” label, see Jules Odendahl-James, “A History of U.S. Documentary Theatre in Three Stages”, *American Theatre*, 22 August 2017.

Theatre of the real, the formula preferred by researcher Carol Martin, covers “a wide range of theatre practices and styles that recycle reality, whether that reality is personal, social, political, or historical” (Martin, 2013: 5), whether factual theatre, theatre of witnesses, non-fictional or tribunal theatre, war and battle reenactments, or autobiographical theatre, with a long history – dating from the beginning of the 20th century<sup>3</sup> –, but taking on an increasingly important role with the democratization of access to information.

The formal, thematic and aesthetic diversity of the theatre of the real/of the documentary theatre makes it the most versatile “genre” and, at the same time, the most fertile on practically every scene of the world (quotation marks are meant to mark the fact that, regardless of the term used, we never talk about a genre, but about the intersection of idiosyncratic practices, methods and tools, the common denominator of which is the claiming of a direct relation to reality – and, of course, the belief that reality does exist). The fact that the documentary toolkit serves, as Carol Martin insists, for the representation of social or political realities (and “the personal is political” anyway), and this representation is animated by a specific ethos – but also motivated by the historical relation of the documentary practices with the left-wing movement –, the tendency to overlay, above the already mentioned terminology, the labels of “social theatre” and/or “political theatre” is almost impossible to suppress. This, although, if one can really say that the theatre of the real is political and/or social through its themes, it may very well happen that what it aims at to be the politics of the theatre itself<sup>4</sup>, not all cases of social or political theatre are necessarily documentary-based, and the ambiguities of the definition, conventions, strategies and forms of the theatre of the real, in the context of the ubiquity of information, lead to the increasing relativization of the borders between documentary and fiction.

In the end, however, it is precisely this versatile character – together with the very rapid evolution of new technologies<sup>5</sup>, including archiving, and forms of audience interaction (through which it exercises its social-political functions) – that makes the theatre of the real impossible to discuss otherwise than in its extremely individual – and for this very reason, exemplary – iterations.

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<sup>3</sup> For an introduction to the history of documentary theatre, see Magris and Picon-Vallin, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Two of the six functions of the theatre of the real as identified by Carol Martin (in Martin, 2006) are “to critique the operations of both documentary and fiction” and “to elaborate the oral culture of theatre in which gestures, mannerisms, and attitudes are passed and replicated via technology”.

<sup>5</sup> Although the rise of the documentary is intimately linked to the evolution of the access to information, its storage, reproduction and multiplication, it should be noted that the theatre of the real is not formally conditioned by the stage use of new technologies, and their role is central first and foremost in the documentation process itself: “Theatre of the real is born from a sea change in archiving brought on by digitization and the Internet” (Martin, 2013: 5).

Starting from and using mainly an interview conducted by me, in November 2019, with an artist highly relevant for the theatre of the real in Eastern Europe, whose connections with the documentary scene in Romania and influence over it are recognized<sup>6</sup>, the following analysis questions, using the concrete example of Nicoleta Esinencu's artistic practice, some of the central elements of the modes working in the theatre of the real – the ethics of the documentary approach and the ethics of representation of real people, the documentation processes, the themes and the stakes of its privileged relationship with reality.

Born in 1978, Nicoleta Esinencu is, probably, the best known name, at European level, in the contemporary theatre in the Republic of Moldova and one of the notable influences on the small (independent) stage of the documentary in Romania. Becoming known in 2004-2005 with the play *Fuck you, Eu.Ro.pa!*, and constantly involved in international collaborations (especially in Germany and France), Esinencu has been, since 2010, part of an artistic collective, Laundry-Theatre, whose name comes from the space (both independent theatre and venue for artistic events) that they managed and in which their productions were performed for seven years (the basement of a public laundry in the centre of Kishinev). For the most part, Nicoleta Esinencu's texts/performances, before opening the Laundry-Theatre and after – among the few exceptions are *Life* (2016; about the war in Ukraine) and *Ballads of memory*, created in Cluj –, document the social life and politics in the Republic of Moldova, from the historiography of the Holocaust, the war in Transnistria, the protests in Kishinev, the linguistic mix (the performances freely mix Romanian and Russian) and the Soviet inheritance to the social pressure on the gay community, the educational system or the condition of workers, from the perspective of power relations in the contemporary society and the effects of the post-Soviet transition on human relations.

In its almost ten years of existence, the Laundry-Theatre had a variable composition, at the beginning including, for a good period, predominantly actors, along with Esinencu, actress Doriana Talmazan and producer Nora Dorogan, and an equally good period consisting only in the three founders. In November 2019, two long-term employees of the Laundry-Theatre (Artiom Zavadovsky and Kira Semionov) were invited to join the collective.

Specific to the theatrical productions of certain collectives and to their adherence to a non-hierarchical organization of the creative process, the shows of the Laundry-Theatre are sometimes signed in alphabetical order by the entire

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<sup>6</sup> See, among others, the considerations of director David Schwartz in his interview with Maria Cernat, published by the online magazine *Baricada.org*, "David Schwartz: Theatre Performances Must Target Systemic Oppression", Part II, 9 January 2018, <https://ro.baricada.org/david-schwartz-interviu-end/>.

team, their authorship being assumed collaboratively. “What keeps the Laundry together is not the theatre production, it is a concept that we all build, it is not a pre-existing doctrine. These are processes that we all learn and still have to learn. Feminism is also a process, with a long journey ahead of it,” says Nicoleta Esinencu, finally referring to the main theme that currently infuses the creative work of the Laundry-Theatre:

There are things that come together at a given time in society, in life, in politics, in each one’s personal stories. The feminist perspective added to the critique of capitalism from one point to another; from the theme, it became a construction framework. I think that the condition of women is a sub-theme that is found in many (other) topics and it is difficult to avoid it, to not mention it. So is the LGBT theme, which appears over many years in the Laundry shows.

Although the themes in question are a constant in Nicoleta Esinencu’s work, the social condition of femininity and the confrontation of patriarchy, from a feminist perspective, have become dominant in the last about five years – in a radical and explicit forms in productions such as *Requiem for Europe* (2018), *The Gospel According to Maria* (2018), *Ballads of Memory* (2019), *The Abolition of Family* (2019) – in an extremely personal context, her mother’s stroke and subsequent death:

*Mothers Without Cunt* was talking just about it (*i.e.*: about feminism), but it was 12 years ago<sup>7</sup>. I personally choose the topics as much as I can personally. The fact that I had this experience with my mother who was ill influenced me a lot, and her death, as well. I talk a lot about it and maybe even obsessively, because my mother was not able to speak about it, to speak in general, and I try to do it for her, as much as I can.

The most recent production of the (deterritorialized) Laundry-Theatre, *The Abolition of Family*, is the meeting point on the one hand of Nicoleta Esinencu’ long-running themes – gender identity and sexual orientation, racism and discrimination, the influence of economic conditions on the social structure –, in a synthesis that marks the moment of historicization (therefore, analysis) of the transition in the Republic of Moldova. On the other hand, it is the culmination of the forming and development of an artistic practice in close

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<sup>7</sup> The monodrama *Mothers Without Cunt* was commissioned by and had its premiere at the Swiss Cultural Centre in Paris, in 2007. It was not presented in the Republic of Moldova until the end of 2009, following the April 2009 political protests in Kishinev, whose repression by the authorities included gender-based violence.

connection with personal events and subjective transformations exemplary for the type of involvement and individual commitment implied by the theatre of the real. A relating mode that includes not only the concept of the political relevance of the personal, but also the constant treatment of the autobiographical experience as socially relevant (hence replicable):

In *The Abolition of Family*, the idolising of the father, especially of a father who is a writer, is very present, dominant. Once the awareness process has surfaced, we will face it a lot. I will face it first of all; how the public will do it is the next step. *Abolition...* is a show about families, not just mine, with the common point being the destruction of the Soviet Union and the coming of a new world that destroyed them: through economic migration, poverty, the collapse of the medical and social protection systems...

In her early days as a playwright, especially after the European success of the play *Fuck you, Eu.ro.pa!* (2004), the Nicoleta Esinencu's relationship with her own father, one of the most well-known authors of the Republic of Moldova ("whose name, in the feminine version, she has", a recurring mention in press materials), has been the object of interest to practically all those who interviewed her.<sup>8</sup> It is quite possible that part of the journalists' interest was generated by the fact that *Fuck you ...*, a passionate and poetic denunciation of the condition of Moldova, between the refusal of the Soviet past and the hypocritical European aspirations, is structured as a monologue addressed to a generic father, hypothesizing a metaphorical intergenerational conflict (and between gender roles – the monodrama addresses the sub-topic of sexuality and gender normativity in Soviet/post-Soviet Moldova). Conflict that, in fact, Esinencu has always expressed ambiguously in interviews, in which the need for public fictionalization of a relationship felt as deeply private leads to various dissimulation strategies<sup>9</sup>, the constant being the reference to the freedom she felt in her family<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> See Mihail Vakulovski, "«For A Theatre Text, It Is More Important To See It Staged Than Published In A Book», Interview With Nicoleta Esinencu", <http://www.tiuk.reea.net/8/esinencu.html>: "There was still no interview in which I was not asked about my father."

<sup>9</sup> An example, in the M. Vakulovski's quoted interview: "Just last week I was talking about this with a Swedish artist, Lene Berg. She says the most appropriate answer to this question is – I love my father. Society loves answers like that. Yes, I say, but in my country no one misses an opportunity to say that they loves their parents. Then, she says, you have to say that you are in conflict with him, a conflict of generations. (...) I am in conflict with my father and for this reason I cannot answer how being his daughter influenced me."

<sup>10</sup> See "«Dad, I Have To Tell You Something». Interview With Nicoleta Esinencu, A Young Playwright, The Daughter of Writer Nicolae Esinencu", *Ziarul de Gardă*, Kishinev, 12 August. 2004; "Nicoleta ESINENCU. Esinencu's Enfant Terrible", *VIP Magazine*, Kishinev, no. 17, September 2005.

The context, as Nicoleta Esinencu says, is important, and this discussion about her family is not, it should be specified, an amateur exercise in Freudian (or Jungian) psychology, slipped on the back door in the analysis of a theatrical practice. This theatrical practice itself has from the beginning been marked by Esinencu's public hyperexposure, in her quality as the daughter of a literary star in a small country, where the local gossip plays the role of public space, empowering even the light of a flashlight to the power of a stage limelight. The context is equally important when it directly concerns the artistic practices – in this case, the hybridized forms of documentary theatre/theatre of the real experimented at the Laundry, which replace the argument of legitimacy of the stage-exposed documents and the stage representation of the real persons/characters, identifiable by their own idiosyncrasies, either with the choral multiplication of the assumed personal testimonies, or with the denial of the function of representing the real character, in favour of the strict representation of the story.

The terminological laxity in the field of the theatre of the real makes it possible to extend the conceptual area of the autobiographical performance beyond the precisely delimited area of productions in which the authors perform their own life story, towards hybrid formulas of collaboration as presented here. In performances like *Dear Moldova, Can We Kiss a Little Bit?* (2013), *Ballads of Memory* (2019, produced by Reactor of Creation and Experiment from Cluj) or *The Abolition of Family* (2019), the performative condition does not imply that the actors “perform simultaneously as themselves and as the real characters they represent” (Martin, 2006:10), for the good reason that they themselves are the real characters represented (we will return to the practice of expert performers in the theatre of the real and the differences from the “outsourcing of authenticity” in the delegate performance, theorized by researcher Claire Bishop).

At the same time that this public visibility offered Nicoleta Esinencu's artistic ventures an increased potential for attention, it imposed ethical limits on artistic practices increasingly based on personal realities – the limit to which the universe of everyone touched by these realities becomes inevitably involved in these performances (the first autobiographical production of the Laundry-Theatre – which, however, do not include Esinencu directly – date from around 2013, the year of *Dear Moldova, Can We Kiss a Little Bit?*, whose theme was the condition of the gay community in Moldova).

It is one of the fundamental deontological aspects for Nicoleta Esinencu even today – considering the recurrence, in the Laundry-Theatre performances, of performers' autobiographical representations: “What are the ethical limits of representing one's story, when it concerns and touches other people? This is a very difficult question, since there is no pre-set process.”

The question is difficult enough that, in general, the answer not only varies from artist to artist, but the question itself is often avoided. In her analysis of a legendary autobiographical performance, *Rumstick Road* (The Wooster Group, 1977), the result of Spalding Gray's collaboration with Elizabeth LeCompte in the theatrical investigation of Gray's mother's suicide, Carol Martin does not discuss at any moment the ethical dimension of some decisions such as reproduction on stage of recorded conversations with Gray's father, still alive, or with his mother's (also very much alive) psychiatrist (Martin, 2013: 45-58). Likewise, the question of the impact of this performance on Gray's larger family circle remains unchallenged – certainly, at the time when *Rumstick Road* was produced, any concern for the ethical consequences of the show was non-existent.<sup>11</sup>

Most likely, on the other hand, the ethical problem of how an autobiographical approach reflects uncontrollably (in the Moldovan context, especially) over one's own family, from the point of view of spectatorship, is the reason why the first such performance, where Esinencu is appearing on stage for the first time as a performer of her own family story, dates from 2019, after the death of both her parents – it being *The Abolition of Family*, whose premiere took place in Hebbel am Ufer (Berlin) and not Kishinev. An important detail: in full coherence with her own ethical system, even in *The Abolition of Family*, the references to collateral persons/characters in Esinencu's autobiographical story are vague and indirect, hence not allowing their (precise) identification.

A collateral effect of these inaccuracy options is the erosion of the "impression of the real" in the performance, a role that, however, is intentionally relegated to the physical presence of the performers and not to the dramatic construction itself – *The Abolition of Family* is a choral score made up of the autobiographical testimonies of performers (of which only Doriana Talmazan, the constant collaborator of Nicoleta Esinencu and one of the co-founders of the Laundry-Theatre, is a professional actress), who present themselves as witnesses, confessors and experts of their own lives<sup>12</sup>, but also representatives of their communities (ethnic, linguistic, racial ...) of origin.

Despite the fact that the public interest for the filial relationship has diminished as Nicoleta Esinencu's artistic identity has strengthened distinctly from that of her father, not at all paradoxically, the most recent interview in which Nicoleta's relationship with Nicolae Esinencu is addressed dates from 2017<sup>13</sup>, a

<sup>11</sup> Moreover, even the more concrete subject of the ethics of representation in the theatre of the real continues to be little analysed in the academic literature. See Young, 2017: 22-23.

<sup>12</sup> Position related, but not identical to that of "experts in everyday life", put into practice and theorized by the German collective Rimini Protokoll.

<sup>13</sup> Oana Stoica, "«Ăștia care fac spectacole pe scăunele» – portret – Nicoleta Esinencu" ["«Those who make performances on little chairs» – portrait – Nicoleta Esinencu"], *Dilema veche* no. 699, 13-19 July 2017, <https://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/arte-performative/articol/astia-care-fac-spectacole-pe-scaunele-portret-nicoleta-esinencu>.



year after her father's death. The loss of both her parents changed her perspective on reporting to this filial legacy, for one obvious reason: the trauma gives rise to a reconsideration of their role in her own formation (and the bricks are coherently laid in Esinencu's view of the world as marked by inequities and randomly distributed social imbalances: her childhood was privileged), of family memory, of family itself and, above all, of the way in which her mother's assumed role shaped her relationship with her father:

I grew up like that, I grew up and I still live in a deeply patriarchal world. I grew up like millions of women in this world have. Obviously, we are marked and we realize certain things in certain periods of life. As about identifying with either the father or the mother, who wants to see herself as a tormented woman for the next 20 years? Of course you imagine yourself as the father, why would I imagine myself as my mother, carrying nets all day? Logically, it's simple. For me, it is important to understand my mother's choices, to discuss what family means, what love means, the responsibilities of a family, who, what they dream about, who, what is left with. I might even not have been on stage, it's my story anyway. And I come from a family that, in the context of the Republic of Moldova, is quite well known, an important enough aspect for me.

At the same time, the death of her parents brings with it a modification of the ethical burden – the moral responsibility towards the memory of people is different and with far more imprecise limits than that towards people whose life can be directly influenced by artistic decisions. In one of the few theoretical texts on the ethics of representation in documentary performances, Stuart Young draws upon Emmanuel Levinas to assert the “unlimited”, “irreducible” and “infinite” responsibility towards the Other, under the conditions of a theatre – of the real – which states to be speaking for/on behalf of the Other, those who cannot represent themselves (from the legendary authors of tribunal theatre in the UK to the Romanian artists involved in the documentary, this “being the voice of the voiceless” is a recurring and fundamental principle, especially in motivational terms). This assertion (or “claim”) being usually attacked, Young explains, as arrogant and politically illegitimate (Young, 2017: 23).

What Young does not discuss, however – probably because the terrain is uncertain and with too many variables – is the ethical dimension of the autobiographical theatre, in which the narrator-performer participates fully consciously and in full control in representing their own life story, with their own body and personal memory serving as a living archive – in the absence of mediation of other instances, such as the actor, playwright or director (the title of Carol Martin's quoted article, “Bodies of Evidence”, is in itself a metaphor for the vocation of stage documentary to embody a memory, an archive).

For the most part, the process of direct documentation, of “story collection”, follows, in the Nicoleta Esinencu’s case, the dynamics charted by Young (who, in his article, synthesizes a consistent bibliography of working practices): building a trusting relationship, partly personal, partly based on the presumption of the documentary artistic approach as morally superior and dedicated to the cause of its own “subjects”. Despite the fact that a whole line (the verbatim one) of the theatre of the real states its privileged relationship with its sources through the fidelity of the representation, this seems to count less than the fidelity to the cause of the source.

This trusting relationship, in the case of the theatre that investigates contemporary realities, is essential and, often, ethically charged, by highlighting the artist’s long-term emotional involvement:

I don’t know if I can really answer the question of how you do the documentation without betraying the story, says Nicoleta Esinencu. There are practitioners of documentary theatre who do not connect in any way with people, they take the stories, they make the performances, and the relationships are strictly professional. I am not a fan of this system, it seems to me like a factory model. I’m alive, I am sensitive and emotional enough that I can’t work like that. I cannot say that I have built close relationships and friendships with everyone I worked with, but I have always tried to maintain a long-term mutual communication and understanding.

The pact that the documentary theatremaker concludes with their source, closely linked to the commitment to give “a voice to the voiceless”, is one less related to the accuracy of the details and more to respecting the point of view of the source – the trust is based on the source’s expectation of being represented as they see themselves. The distance from this expectation makes the difference between a documentary and a fictional performance inspired by real events.<sup>14</sup>

And for Nicoleta Esinencu, the representation of the real is a matter first of trust and then not of fidelity to an objective truth, but of loyalty to the sources’ subjectivity:

If we are to speak about how we do so that we do not betray the trust of those who give us their stories, it is a very complex process and we do not always succeed. I don’t think I have had any negative experiences, in which to

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<sup>14</sup> This is the case of *Triple Point* by Bogdan Georgescu (National Theatre Tîrgu-Mureş/Colectiv A, Cluj, 2013), based on the case of a father who committed suicide by throwing himself in a lake together with his two young children. The show does not follow the mother’s point of view and did not have her consent.

have negative reactions from those whose stories I represented. I think it's a process developed over time, in which one tries to be faithful to the purpose – the reason why one does a certain performance, how one brings the story on stage.

Although the term “purpose” may seem vague, it is central to the performative approach in the theatre of the real: the purpose is never the representation itself, as it is neither entering into a dialogue with a certain representational tradition, nor the hermeneutic competition (the latter being the engine of restaging of the classical repertory). In the theatre of the real, the general purpose is “to persuade spectators to understand specific events in particular ways”, which makes this theatre to be seen as a “political affiliation in and of itself” (Martin, 2006: 11). “The particular ways” in which the artist seeks to present situations or events constitute the individual purpose of the process of working with the documentary material.

The experiences in the field (the practice of the theatre of the real) show how different are the documentation tools used in the case of the theatre of the real (Hammond and Steward, 2008; Cantrell, 2013; Martin, 2013; Popovici, 2016: 115-142; Young, 2017) and how little are they subject to rules, norms, standards, even when their repertoire is borrowed from deontologically codified fields (qualitative sociological research, oral history/life history, journalism, etc.). The theatre of the real may use pre-existing archive materials, produced by state institutions (court files and criminal investigations, in the case of the tribunal theatre, surveillance files of the communist political police, in shows such as *X mm of Y km* and *Typographic Majuscule* by Gianina Cărbunariu<sup>15</sup>), other types of historical documents (news articles, brochures, correspondence, books published at the moment of the events – an example from Romania is *Trilogy 2018*, produced by a team animated by director David Schwartz<sup>16</sup>), pre-existing films and audio or video materials (the reenactment of the Ceausescu's process in *In the Last Days of Ceausescu's Life* – directed by Milo Rau, International Institute for Political Crimes, Berlin<sup>17</sup>; *ROGVAIV*, created by Bogdan Georgescu at the Laundry-Theatre in 2011, a succession of reenactments of TV shows), contemporary press materials (news, interviews, reports, investigations),

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<sup>15</sup> The first, a Colectiv A production, Cluj, 2011, the second, a dramAcum and Odeon Theatre co-production, Bucharest, 2014. Both are made exclusively out of surveillance file documents, for which Cărbunariu uses the term “ready-made”.

<sup>16</sup> Unlike the aforementioned performances by Gianina Cărbunariu, the three productions in this series also include fictional dramatic reenactments.

<sup>17</sup> Translation of the German title. In Romanian, also known as *The Last Hours of Ceausescu's life*. In the performance, Milo Rau reenacts, in fact, the video recording of the trial, as it was broadcast by the Romanian Television in December 1989.

blog posts, Facebook and/or sociological research materials, statistics, reports, surveys, speeches, historiography, etc. (a performance like *Frontal* by Gianina Cărbunariu<sup>18</sup> uses press materials and statistics, dramatizing them without exposing the direct source; *Because You Deserve It* by Bogdan Georgescu<sup>19</sup> reproduces two press articles and a series of Facebook posts, with the partial stage disclosure of the sources), direct interviews with “persons of interest”, carried out by the artistic team and (audio/video) recorded or not, with attention paid to the paralinguistic elements or not (the overwhelming majority of verbatim shows, including a whole series of productions by the team animated by David Schwartz – *Hot Heads*, 2010, *Under the Ground*, *Jiu Valley after 1989*, 2012, etc.), self-documentation (personal stories of the artistic team – of the playwright or performers, professionals or not: *I Declare On My Own Responsibility* by Alina Șerban and David Schwartz<sup>20</sup>, the autobiographical monodrama *Good for Export* by Alex Tocilescu, directed by Catinca Drăgănescu<sup>21</sup>).

At the limit of ethics, there are also situations of using so-called involuntary recordings – materials recorded without the participants’ knowledge and reproduced without their agreement: in the already mentioned *Because You Deserve It*, the artistic team made the secret recording of a pre-abortion counselling session, held at a clinic affiliated with the pro-life movement (in fact, the press articles, and Facebook posts in this performance were used without the consent of the authors, which led to negative reactions from at least one of them and to threats with taking the artists to the courts for copyright infringement<sup>22</sup>). Given that, in general, in the theatre of the real, the use agreement is rarely required when it comes to living public persons (politicians, civil servants, journalists ...), although I am not aware of examples of non-agreed use of (not already public) materials, when it comes to other categories of people, the uninformed use of such involuntary recordings is absolutely exceptional. It is also quite clear that the possibility of doing it deeply depends on the local legal framework (in

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<sup>18</sup> The Youth Theatre, Piatra Neamț, 2019. The theme of the performance is the marginalization of the poor by identifying their precariousness as being the result of the lack of desire to work.

<sup>19</sup> Produced by O2G, Bucharest, 2015; a performance about abortion and social control over the female body.

<sup>20</sup> Monday Theatre at Green Hours, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Point Theatre, Bucharest, 2017. Tocilescu dramatizes a family history, which gains documentary character through the fact that both Tocilescu and his father (a character in the show) are recognizable public persons, whose existential path is familiar to the audience, leading to the identification of the dramatic elements as real-documentary.

<sup>22</sup> See the online comment of the respective author in my review of the performance, <https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/teatru-corpul-femeii-ca-teren-de-ocupatie/>; also, the author in question sent a whole series of private messages addressed to me, at least, about his right to image and the breaching of intellectual rights by the artists involved in the theatre production.

Romania, it is perfectly legal to record conversations in which one has participated and there are no legal precedents regarding the prohibition or conditioning of public communication of such recordings, but things are quite different in the United States, for example).

With few exceptions (the staging of materials from the Securitatea surveillance files, made by Gianina Cărbunariu, are such an example, as are some of the verbatim shows animated by David Schwartz, based entirely on direct interviews, and, in an international context, the tribunal plays created by Trycicle Theatre<sup>23</sup>, reenactments of official criminal investigations), the texts and the individual productions of the theatre of the real use free combinations of sources and documentary materials. Although there are intrinsically artistic reasons (avoiding monotony and predictability, formal challenges related to the representation of various sources), the reason is, first of all, that most events or realities represented by this theatre are declined, in terms of information, in various environments, and the theatre of the real is constantly concerned with the multiplication of arguments and “evidence” that it brings forward.

The way the documentation operates may, of course, be different depending on the chosen theme (one thing is a performance about the Securitate, and another thing a performance about the daily life of LGBT people in Moldova), and most of the documentation never reaches the final product: Gianina Cărbunariu spent several months in the archives of the National Council for the Study of Security Archives (CNSAS), using, in the end, for both the *X mm s of Y km* and *Typographic Majuscule* performances, exclusively already public materials, which she did not consult at CNSAS and which she knew beforehand. In the case of Gianina Cărbunariu, her research at CNSAS initially focused on the documentation for another performance, *Sold Out*<sup>24</sup>, on the sale of the Romanian Germans to Federal Germany, not the topics addressed in the next two productions.

The CNSAS experience had strictly the role to make her familiar with the working mode of the Securitate and the structure of the files<sup>25</sup>, a role of internal archiving, which adds information in a subjective process of observing the outside world. Most of this process does not have an immediate artistic objective and, as Nicoleta Esinencu openly says, it is not specific exclusively to the theatre of the real, but a constant of the art that tackles contemporary subjects:

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<sup>23</sup> For example, *The Colour of Justice*, 1999, the theatrical reenactment of the investigation into the racism of the British Police in investigating the death of the young black man Stephen Lawrence.

<sup>24</sup> Produced by Kammerspiele Munich, 2010.

<sup>25</sup> See Gianina Cărbunariu, “*X mm din Y km – Despre o posibilă arhivă performativă*” [“*X mm din Y km – About a Possible Performative Archive*”], February 2018, *Scena.ro*, <https://revistascena.ro/artef/x-mm-din-y-km-despre-o-posibila-arhiva-performativa/>.

I am always connected to the world around me, and if I were to do fiction, I would bring the themes around me, from television, from the street, from the online, from the speeches of politicians or the daily lives of people. The documentary process also exists in fiction, not just in the documentary approach. But it's not like one wakes up in the morning with the idea of «what I'm documenting today.» In this whole process, one simply has an external archive, with folders of interviews, videos, audio material, etc., but one also builds an internal archive, a very living one, which needs to be completed. It gives rise to questions and causes one to look for something else, to read something else, to clarify things. The inner living archive raises constant questions, it is confronted with my inner changes, because obviously I saw things quite differently 20 years ago and even five years ago. Memory is a hard disk that must always be charged.

Given that the objective documentary material (the one that does not constitute personal testimony) tends to be pretextual, given the allergy of the theatre (not only the theatre of the real, but especially it) to the impersonal and abstract, the demonstration staged by the documentary performance is selective and intensively edited (Martin, 2006), from the diversity of available sources, in a type of process that is never objective:

This inner archive, the conscious and the affective memory, on the one hand, is very well structured, and on the other hand, it contains many themes and sub-themes. What happens when I access all this information (of which part is, of course, personal) is related to intersectionality. To the intersection of the stories of many people. And that helps me work on performances.

The hybrid character of the documentary sources in the theatre of the real is perfectly illustrated in the way Nicoleta Esinencu describes the working process for *Requiem for Europe* (Laundry-Theatre/Schauspielhaus Graz, 2018), a performance about the exploitation of work, especially of women (who make up, as everywhere, the bulk of the workforce in this industry), in the Moldavian garment factories:

We didn't have a clearly defined theme when we started working. We got to the table and made a drawing of all the topics we would be interested in, a scheme, and in discussions, which took quite a long time, this theme of the exploitation of the work emerged. Documentation was a complicated process, it's not like factories would wait for you with open doors to show you how they exploit people. We used a lot of pre-existing materials, since

there is this Clean Clothes Campaign<sup>26</sup>, which had already done many interviews with workers from Romania and Moldova. We also talked to people who, in general, had worked in these textile factories and had already left. Only they were willing to talk, those still employed refused, out of fear. We also used quite complex studies and materials of some journalists from Moldova. And personal stories and migration stories already documented (by us or in the press).

In a previous interview, Esinencu described the sources in similar terms, but emphasizing the collaborative nature of the work process:

It's a written text, but based on a thorough and rigorous documentation. As I said, we worked as a team – each of us researched, some talked to workers, made interviews, others read materials. We also worked with existing materials – such as Corina Ajder's article, «Women of Moldova – cheap and convenient work for Europe's billionaires»<sup>27</sup> (...), then other materials taken from the Clean Clothes Campaign. We gathered the materials, put them together, worked with personal stories.<sup>28</sup>

How important is personal experience, the direct knowledge of the (social and political) context in which the documentary artist works (but also the attachment to the concept of continuous documentation) is also obvious in the challenges that Esinencu had in the case of *Ballads of Memory*, the only text-performance (investigating the 1990s transition, in Cluj, from a women's perspective) for which she delegated part of the documentary decision:

Women will always come out from my archives. As long as the time allowed, I think I connected to the realities of *Ballads of Memory*. The Reactor experience was unique, from many points of view, because it is very difficult not to live in the city you working, to not have the necessary connections, to not know the place (in my case, in Cluj, to not know neither the city nor the country). It was, however, a super team that was involved in documenting, in workshops, in choosing people. I would come and leave, they would stay in place and continue working. Besides, the performance is showing without me. I have

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<sup>26</sup> CCC is not a campaign in itself, but the largest international collaborative network of unions and NGOs active in combating labor exploitation in the garment industry. The research (the report) on the clothing industry in post-socialist countries, including Moldova, was published in 2014, under the title "Stitched Up" – <https://www.cleanclothes.org/resources/publications/stitched-up-1>.

<sup>27</sup> Corina Ajder is an expert for Clean Clothes Campaign.

<sup>28</sup> Vitalie Sprânceană, "Requiem for Europe, A Show About Work, Exploitation and Lack of Hope on the Outskirts of Europe, interview with Nicoleta Esinencu", *Platzforma*, 13 March 2018, <http://www.platzforma.md/archive/37886>.

the experience of my texts being performed without me, but not of the performances themselves. I am part of the team at all my performances, I am involved technically and so I can see the production process and we can always make small changes.

In *Ballads of Memory*, but also before, in *Dear Moldova, Can We Kiss a Little Bit?* (for which Esinencu worked with German artist Jessica Glause) and, more recently, in *The Abolition of Family*, the performance is autobiographical – even the professional actors in the show (Oana Hodade and Doru Talos, in *Ballads...*, Doriana Talmazan, in *The Abolition...*) represent their own personal histories, as do the non-professional performers themselves.

In performance art, delegation involves „the act of hiring non-professionals or specialists in other fields to undertake the job of being present and performing at a particular time and a particular place on behalf of the artist, and following his or her instructions” (Bishop, 2012) – the purpose being to mediate the performance artist's speech (originally, performance art being an author-based art per se, as opposed to theatre, which intrinsically implies mediation and collaboration) by amplifying the impression of authenticity offered by „civilian” performers representing various social groups. The emergence of the delegate performance, which Claire Bishop places in the 1990s, is linked, Bishop says, to three performative traditions: body art, Judson Dance (responsible for introducing the everyday movement into contemporary dance and known for working with non-trained performers) and Fluxus (Fluxus events recurrently involved the audience), and docudrama (through docudrama, she understands reality TV, a television genre, and not necessarily a performative documentary tradition).

Unlike performance art, including non-professionals in the documentary performance does not imply that they act on stage in the name of the playwright/director, but, on the contrary, to give a more authentic and immediate evidence on reality, representing themselves and their own exemplary experience, not an artistic discourse, alien to them (of course, authenticity itself is a convention). The practice of working with non-professionals is, in fact, as old as the documentary tradition, and the childhood (and first glorious period) of the theatre of the real, in the 1920s (until 1932), is marked by this practice, integral to denouncing artistic professionalism as artificial, false, disconnected from the truths of life, a common anti-theatrical philosophy common to both the documentary movement in post-October Revolution Russia, and to Erwin Piscator etc. Moreover, reminiscences of this anti-theatricality – manifested not through the denial of stage naturalism and the performative insistence on the faithful representation of



real people's paralinguism (as in the case of David Schwartz's performances<sup>29</sup>), but especially through the denial of this type of mimetism, through the denial of interpretive realism – found in Nicoleta Esinencu's words when she says that „I am not interested in telling the actor how to move on stage. I want to work with people who want to live their own experience.”

The authenticity claimed by the theatre of the real by including non-professionals is translated in different ways by practitioners. The term „experts” became known through its use by the German collective Rimini Protokoll: these performers are „experts with particular experiences, knowledge and skills. A concept that consciously opposed amateur theatre; those on stage should not be judged on what they do (*i.e.* act), but rather on the reason for their presence on stage” (Malzacher, 2008: 22). In the case of Rimini Protokoll, which never works with professional actors, this reason does not necessarily mean belonging to a community or having a distinct expertise (for example, being a muezzin or a Marx specialist), but sometimes extends to more superficial aspects, such as reproducing the age and gender structure of the German Parliament or simply having a distinct corporality (Malzacher, 2008). As for Nicoleta Esinencu, however, in whose performances non-actor performers are always the bearers of a marginal or specific identity experience, the reason for their presence is intimately linked to an authenticity of emotion as a form of social manifestation:

There are emotions that we are taught as children not to show. When you make documentaries, you talk to people who sometimes tell their story out loud for the first time. Emotion plays an important role not in the theatre, but in life. If we understood this at the level of society, the emotion would be normal in the theatre. Emotion is not perceived as something common in everyday life. And it works differently in traditional societies than in contemporary capitalism. That is why, for me, both the intimacy and the emotion are deeply political, because we are not allowed to have them, it is not OK to talk about them. We live in societies where we do not talk about ourselves and what we feel or what society tells us to feel.

The question of representation (of people, situations, real communities) is thorny in the theatre of the real because, in essence, the history of the theatre is itself a succession of conflicting traditions animated by different conceptions, often antagonistic, regarding representation, many of which coexist in time and space in a creative tension (Stanislavski and Brecht, psychological realism and the distancing practice, are the most notorious examples)<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> See Popovici, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> The bibliography is extensive, considering the multiple sides of the concept of “representation” (“what” is represented, “how” is represented, “who” represents it and for whom they do it, etc.). Among other sources, for representation as acting, see Alison Hodge (Eds.), (2000), *Twentieth Century Actor Training* (New York: Routledge).

The Nicoleta Esinencu' theoretical option, in those productions of the Laundry-Theatre that discuss identity issues (commonly a marginal cultural identity, as opposed to the political majority, being the factor of defining and coagulating gender, LGBT or ethnic communities), goes towards self-representation – which is, however, conditioned by external factors:

It is also complicated who represents us on stage. As much as we wish, we cannot always have the communities directly represented in the performance. *The Abolition of Family* is not the absolute exception (we had the communities directly represented in *Dear Moldova, can we kiss a little bit?*), but when we talk about the Laundry-Theatre, we must also talk about the context in which we worked and work.

Far from being, nowadays, a dominant one in the theatre of the real (among other reasons, also because, at the opposite to delegated performance, the presence of the non-professionals in the theatre limits their circulation and life span), the non-professional performers often indicate (and always does it in the case of Nicoleta Esinencu) the affinity of the performances in which they are present with the community theatre (which, like the social or political theatre, may be documentary or may not be).<sup>31</sup>

Paradoxically, somehow, although the act of using actors in the representation of real people depends on the nature of the theatrical art, in the theatre of the real there may be situations of delegation – generated, at least in the cases we discuss, by ethical imperatives in the specific contexts mentioned by Esinencu. In *Dear Moldova, can we kiss a little bit?*, the vast majority of performers are non-professionals called to testify about the social effects of the public and institutional attitude in the Republic of Moldova towards LGBT people and their families: parents of a gay person, an elderly gay man, a lesbian woman and an 18-year-old boy, son of a lesbian mother.

One performer is, however, an actor whose stage part combines elements of personal history belonging to several LGBT people – similar to the delegated performance, the actor in question does not represent himself nor does he mediate, as in theatre, the representation of recognizable real people, for whose (real) existence the show guarantees. His role in the show is precisely to anonymize the real people whose stories he mediates and to speak for them and on their

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<sup>31</sup> Community theatre is the one created by, with or for a community, with or without the direct participation, theatrically speaking, of the community members – and which, unlike the amateur theatre, assumes a professional character (irrespective of the formation, professional or otherwise, of the performers). V. McGrath, John (1981), *A Good Night Out: Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form* (London: Nick Hern Books); Van Erven, Eugene (2001), *Community Theatre: Global Perspectives* (New York: Routledge).

behalf. There is no fictional character, nor a documentary one, he was delegated the function of representing real people who, in the aggressive homophobic context of the Republic of Moldova, cannot be exposed, for ethical reasons, to the control of authenticity and real.

Fundamental for the documentary theatrical approach and in response to journalistic, sociological or legal practices, for which the subjective perspective of the person must be corroborated, and may often be contradicted, with data and facts (aspect discussed in multiple theoretical analyses on documentary – Young, 2017; Feldman, 2018), the individual testimony is almost always, in the theatre of the real, supremely credible – and the alternative sources are not allowed to contradict the subjective narrative. Their role is one of strict confirmation – first of all, of the character’s extra-scenic reality: in Carol Martin’s terms, which represents the actor on stage as being “not a fictional character, but a person who actually existed or exists”, “(t)he proof of this existence, whether past or present, is verified by documents, audiotape, film, videotape, and general public knowledge” (Martin, 2013: 10).

As a matter of principle, even the individual witnesses are not allowed to undermine the truth value of the testimonies of others, although there are exceptions, some generated by the nature of the documentary approach (the tribunal plays contain contradictory statements due to their own procedural structure), others by the artistic option of subjective multiplication of perspectives (in *Who killed Szomna Granca?*<sup>32</sup>, a show about the suicide of a Roma teenager whom the parents did not allow to attend school, the contradictions between the explanations and the narratives of the characters lead to a calculated *Rashomon* effect<sup>33</sup>).

In the absence of a “neutrality pact” and an obligation of the artist’s objectivity (in other words, given the absence of ethical standards similar to the ones in research), what the documentation in the theatre of the real seeks is neither “finding out the truth” nor a discovery or the epistemic demonstration itself. The thesis pre-exists the theatrical product, and the documentation process focuses on the confirmation of the thesis (a demonstration by avoiding or eliminating the factors that can counteract or alter it) – by getting as familiar as possible with its circuits of argumentation. The work process and the show itself are epistemic experiences, but strictly within an already established, politically engaged framework, as Carol Martin puts it – “As staged politics, specific instances of documentary theatre construct the past in service of a future the authors would like to create” (Martin, 2006: 10), and as Nicoleta Esinencu explains:

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<sup>32</sup> A Giuvlipen production, 2017, directed by Mihai Lukacs.

<sup>33</sup> Different interpretations of the same event, made by different, equally credible eyewitnesses; a kaleidoscope effect. See Stephen Prince, “The *Rashomon* Effect”, *The Criterion Collection*, 6 November 2012, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/195-the-rashomon-effect>.

One will always find new things during the documentation, issues that one did not expect, but that does not change the direction, it does not change one's perspective. It's not that one doesn't discover aspects that might contradict one's starting point. It's about doing a show *for* that starting point. Which is also the point of arrival. The theatre doesn't deal with the truth, it is not objective nor does it deal with changing the world. The important part is the process, in which a team faces, learns and challenges the people around, not just the audience. It is a process of learning in a certain social and political context.

From here comes also the continuous subjective nature of the documentation as an epistemic process, in which the artist invests himself, personally, in an existential way, something about which the Moldovan artist also speaks:

When one documents something, such as the Holocaust, it's not like one worked once, did the performance and that's where it ended. Documentation becomes part of my ongoing process of working, collecting, talking to people, carrying on things even after I made the performance. The documentation does not end with the premiere. The same thing happens with all the topics I tackle (LGBT, feminism, exploitation of work ...).

In the only one Laundry-Theatre performance that she considers "pure documentary" and which she refers to, in the quoted above, mentioning the Holocaust – *Clear History*<sup>34</sup> (2012), the public exposure of the Romanian Army's contribution to the pogroms in Bessarabia during the of the Second World War, completely hidden in the history books of present-day Moldova –, Esinencu uses, in a fluid continuum where the actors expose the documented materials without assuming identity roles, using testimonies of participants and survivors (dating from different periods) and war orders – among them, a well-known order-speech of Marshal Ion Antonescu. For the first part of this speech (unidentified, at that time, as belonging to Antonescu), which takes the form of a "pledge to the country," the actors asked the spectators to repeat the words, the speech slowly transforming into a deeply anti-Semitic message of elimination of Jews from the country's fibre.

When she says, however, that:

The ethical limits of representation are a very delicate subject. Ten years ago (or less), there was a practice, in the documentary theatre, of reproducing extremist, racist discourses, to denounce them as dangerous or ridiculous.

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<sup>34</sup> The title refers, metaphorically, to the operation of clearing the browsing data on a computer.

In time, there has been a mutation, related to the ethical appreciation of the types of discourse that the artist gives space to for scenic representation, and personally I wouldn't do it anymore. I would no longer give space to an already over-represented discourse, especially a dangerous one. What used to be OK before or still is for some theatre authors, for many people it is no longer OK. And this is part of the decisions we make in time,

Esinencu does not refer to Marshal Antonescu's speech (she would make the same option now, for the simple reason that from that speech only the first part is always publicly quoted), but to other performances of her, such as *radical.md* (2008), her only verbatim text, made out of chat conversations of blatant racism and xenophobia (exposing racist discourse was previously present also in *A (II) Rh +*, 2007).

In fact, for those (documentary) theatre artists in Romania<sup>35</sup> who choose not to offer space for the representation not so much of extremist, racist, oppressive discourses, etc., as of the bearers of such discourses, the motivation has two components: the (already mentioned) function of exclusive representation of groups or categories lacking the possibility of self-representation and the general ethical obligation towards the represented character, which would place the actors in the uncomfortable position of finding, in essence, moral justifications for negative characters. In addition, there are situations in which the representation of the speech of such characters, under similar conditions of fidelity and epistemic crediting of their testimony, would lead to contradictory perspectives (which, as we have already discussed, the theatre of the real often seeks to avoid).

Alex Fifea, performer and co-author of *You Have Not Seen Anything*<sup>36</sup> – formally, a production that integrates a criminal investigation and a court trial:

At the post-performance discussions, I was asked if I had interviews with the cops. And I said no, I didn't want to. We wanted to deconstruct the system, and, in short, the human behaviour. And from the beginning we have assumed that we are the voice of the troubled (Popovici, 2016: 132).

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<sup>35</sup> In the available (especially linguistically) research on the theatre of the real from other cultural areas (mainly Anglo-Saxon or French, but from personal theatrical experience, from Hungary, Poland or Bulgaria), there are no indications of practical, programmatic and explicit exclusion of such types of discourse. Also, there is no analysis on the effect of normalizing them through theatrical representation, although it is perfectly possible that such effect does exist.

<sup>36</sup> Documentary performance for which Alex Fifea worked with director David Schwartz and musician Cătălin Rulea; produced by the Project Salon, Bucharest, 2015. The subject is the story of the suspicious death, in the arrest of a police station, probably following the beatings administered by the police, of a Roma man.

Actress Katia Pascariu, participant in numerous documentary productions, most of them being of verbatim theatre:

(...) with the negative characters, the villains, it is really difficult, because that person gave you the interview. I could play a «bad» character if it serves the show, but I couldn't use against them what they agreed to tell me in an interview. I can't make them look bad (*ibid.*).

In response, somehow, with this position of Katia Pascariu is the fact that (it is true, after the quoted interview was made) she played, in the performance *Yiddish?* by Peca Ștefan, directed by Andreea Vălean<sup>37</sup>, one of the most hated female real characters in Romanian history, the communist leader Ana Pauker. The key seems to consist, on the one hand, of the fact that Ana Pauker is presented in her old age (so, as a demoted victim, not an omnipotent evil figure), and on the other, in the political decision to ignore the standard representations of Pauker in the Romanian public imaginary. Of course, as a former politician, Pauker is not in a position to express negative discursive positions, but the scenic boycott of discriminatory discourses is far from unanimous in the Romanian theatre (the latest example: the reenactment of a TV show aggressive towards social workers, in *Frontal* by Gianina Cărbunariu).

“Everyone has their own way of talking about the world in which they live,” summarizes Nicoleta Esinencu the infinite variations of the theatre of the real and, in the same sentence, the similarities and oppositions between this theatre and sociology, journalism or activism. The profound idiosyncrasy of documentary theatrical practices – which I have tried to exemplify in this comparative analysis – shows the theatre of the real as, apparently, incompatible with the main codification, in unanimously accepted sets of methodological and deontological standards, in which other fields of the social work – those with whom the documentary shares its sources and instrumentation. Which does not mean, by far, that their worlds are different, but that the efficiency of the theatre is an artistic one, depending on the individuality of each practitioner.

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## TRANSFORMING NARRATIVES: REACTION, CONTEXT AND THE EMERGING (IM)-POSSIBILITIES OF SOCIAL DISCOURSE ON ART IN CLUJ-NAPOCA<sup>1</sup>

MIKI BRANIȘTE<sup>2</sup>

**ABSTRACT.** The aim of this article is to comprehend the register of existence and the developing of social art practices and discourses in Cluj-Napoca, citing the example of the contemporary art space The Paintbrush Factory, established in 2009. Analysing the operation mode/modus operandi of artists, curators, and cultural agents of Cluj-Napoca, I study the creative pattern based on reaction as a response to the undergoing changes within the socio-political environment of the city as well as those on a global scale. The wider expansion of the urban regeneration theory, that attributes an economic growth factor to culture (based on the existence of creative industries), persuades the local authorities to create a new narrative of a Cluj-Napoca based on the image of a creative city. The Paintbrush Factory is precisely the success story – with a grassroots background, and international standing – that Cluj-Napoca Town Hall needed to legitimise its new development project that sought to put the city on Europe’s map. This ambition of the authorities is reflected in the application for the title of European Cultural Capital 2021. The story of the Paintbrush Factory mirrors this precise transformation of the city, which sees the industrial production being replaced by symbolic production. During this process factories are literally replaced by IT firms and adjacent services, while The Paintbrush Factory that had benefited from a long-term rental of a factory space is eventually displaced in this massive gentrification course of the city.

**Keywords:** social art and discourse, reaction, Paintbrush Factory, creative city, gentrification

### Introduction<sup>3</sup>

This paper came to being due to my attempt - as a cultural worker and a young researcher - to comprehend the fundamentals of the structural framework I have been experiencing through my work along with my colleagues of the

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from Romanian by Árpád Czirják.

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Theatre and Film, Babeş-Bolyai University. Cultural manager and curator for performing arts at ColectivA Association and The Paintbrush Factory Cluj-Napoca, miki@colectiva.ro.

<sup>3</sup> I wish to thank Oana Mateescu and Árpád Czirjak for their helpful discussions and comments.



Paintbrush Factory Federation, in our endeavour to disseminate (and to multiply) a vision on art and culture as vectors of social development in Cluj-Napoca. The article reflects on the conditions that rendered artistic grassroots practices achievable [of the Federation], and the liaison that later ensued with the local authorities in a bid to institutionalize a practiced artistic discourse, that of socially conscious or socially engaged art. My aim is to analyse this very dynamic in relation with the urban regeneration approach that Cluj-Napoca has recently been seeing. Through the lenses of this approach, The Paintbrush Factory has been considered an active participant in the developmental roadmap of the city, but has been displaced in the outcome of this very development, namely the gentrification of Cluj-Napoca.

By way of contextualizing the driven by culture-led development narrative, I seek to identify the ways through which social art creators and cultural workers can retain their relevance on a cultural landscape marked by a profound shift, that of the transition from drawing value from the social dimension of art and culture to that of exploiting the economic gains that derive from them.

In this sense, I will make use of auto-ethnographic research tools, linking them up with theoretical references on par with interpreting documents, reports and strategy pieces, interviews and personal discussions to inform my inquiry. The article will aim to analyse the conditions of existence and development of the social artistic discourse in Cluj-Napoca. I will then place this discourse in the broader context of the progressive aspirations of the local administration pressured to sustain the impression of the magnet city<sup>4</sup>, that looks competitive and attractive both nationwide and internationally.

The period I am discussing in this article spans from 2009 to 2019, and it reflects the political-economic factors that have created a favourable landscape in Cluj-Napoca to galvanize several cultural and art groups with freelance artists and cultural workers. These people have laid the foundations of the Paintbrush Factory Federation, a relatively large organization in comparison with similar independently run art projects throughout the country. The creation of a federation type mega-structure represented those involved and fostered a particular image of the independent culture-scene in Cluj-Napoca. The Paintbrush Factory Federation had even succeeded at a certain point to instil an accurately conceived direction upon the dimension of social art and culture in the development-plans of the city. This cultural platform had managed to raise a critical mass, and to temporarily impose a social discourse on art in the city's public awareness. I am using the verb "to impose" fully foursquare, because at that time Cluj-Napoca public

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<sup>4</sup> <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/448771499322731333/pdf/116400-Romanian-Revised-Public-Magnet-Cities-Migration-and-Commuting-in-Romania-ro.pdf>  
last accessed on 28.11.2019.

opinion was reluctant to question social issues, and was largely neutral towards counterbalancing the “cultural” themes with those deemed “social” in the public discourse.

### **Crystalizing by com-pos(ition)ing the social art discourse**

With this chapter title in mind I suggest the apparition of several actors, who each on their own or by converging in groups have contributed at the com-pos(ition)ing of the social discourse on art in Cluj-Napoca. Up until 2009 this path has been paved by the representatives of organisations such as the likes of Tranzit House (formed in 1997), Idea. art+society Magazine (established in 1999 and initially printed under the name Balkon), Protokoll Gallery (2000-2007), Mindbomb Group (2000-2009), AltArt Foundation (formed in 1998), Duo van der Mixt (2003-2006) etc. Picturing art through its social and emancipatory dimensions is often likened to left-wing politics, although some of the groups mentioned earlier have had closer affinities to the centre-right (Mindbomb, Duo van der Mixt). All these initiatives had commonly sought to foster critical thinking, to spark public reaction to what was happening locally and nationwide, to grow awareness around citizens’ rights, to re-claiming public space, or voicing the need for tolerance etc. The social vision on art and culture had not been reclaimed earlier than 2009 by the cultural actors associated with left-wing intellectual groups exclusively. It has gathered actors who all shared an interest in the civic emancipation of the people of Cluj-Napoca, Romanians and Hungarians alike, who may not have had an articulate ideological conception at that time. However, these groups had an aversion towards a social discourse, that was constantly submerged to the clichés of the public space attributed to the communist era.

To have a better grasp of the context these independent initiatives surfaced, we need to observe the political scene of those years overshadowed by a nationalist agenda epitomized by the persona of the mayor Gheorghe Funar (1992-2004<sup>5</sup>) and also by the socio-economic environment scarred by a difficult passage to the free market<sup>6</sup>. Most of the manifestos and actions of those mentioned above were thus meant to express the disagreement with the policies of Gheorghe Funar. They also constituted a vivid reaction to the local nationalism, the prospect of ethnic segregation, the privatization of public

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<sup>5</sup> Ghe. Funar was a member of the National Unity Party of Romanians and after having being expelled he joined The Greater Romania Party.

<sup>6</sup> The privatization of factories was followed by layoffs, and a rough process of professional reintegration.

space, at isolating the city in tune with the local nationalist politics, or at the inability of the Art and Design University at the time to intervene and cater to students' needs (Laura Panait, 2012)<sup>7</sup>.

Moreover, some of them (the publishing house Idea and the Idea. art+society Magazine) have felt the need to position themselves as Eastern-European artists and theorists and to define themselves through a balanced intellectual relationship with Western-Europe. They were creating artistic, reflexive and theoretical content, and were familiar with new artistic networks, with diverse cultural contexts. They wished to contribute to a local perception on the national and Cluj-Napoca art-scene, that could also be available for the West to see<sup>8</sup>. Being aware of the prospect of self-colonization of the local artistic discourse with that of the Western discourse, they have attempted to endorse the local discourse production that was connected to current debates, while evidently including the Western ones as well.

Consequently, the driving force behind the actions of these artist groups, critical thinkers and cultural figures seems to be the reaction towards the local and European contexts. The access to the broader European realm was largely mediated by the presence of very vibrant foreign cultural centres for the cited period in Cluj-Napoca<sup>9</sup>. These in turn have encouraged the networking of Cluj-Napoca-based artists and provided a source of recognition to the cultural scenery in the absence of other public valid means of recognition from local or national authorities.

These initiatives have managed to rally around them youths that have perceived the emancipatory stakes of the projects they had attended. It is safe to say that they have achieved to shape a generation of artists, curators, theorists, cultural workers, anthropologists, architects etc. that emerged through the contact with the artistic and discursive content created in Cluj-Napoca and elsewhere. I am personally representative of that generation, the very first events I have seen as a student being accommodated by the Tranzit House. In retrospect, I can tell that I have been inspired by ideas and concerns of those that have shaped the course of my informal intellectual formation, without being aware at the time of the political stances this formation implied, but fully resonating with the need to spur critical thinking. A significant part that was to be the artistic community of the Paintbrush Factory had encountered a reference point, if not their mentors among these cultural and social figures.

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<sup>7</sup> [http://www.e-cart.ro/longapril/3/ro/3/08\\_laura%20panait/Laura-Panait-LA3-ro.pdf](http://www.e-cart.ro/longapril/3/ro/3/08_laura%20panait/Laura-Panait-LA3-ro.pdf), last accessed on 6.09.2019.

<sup>8</sup> The Journal *Idea. art+society* has pages with content translated in English.

<sup>9</sup> French Cultural Centre, renamed French Institute and German Cultural Centre also renamed Goethe Zentrum.

Influenced by the working style of those first actors of the artistic and civic independent scene, the emergence of the Paintbrush Factory demonstrates the revival of a reactive creation-pattern. As such these artistic actions are highlighted by the expressions: protest, transformation, cultural diversity, anti-nationalism, reclaiming public space etc., all these strongly tied to the socio-political and economical background of the city. One of the examples that portrays this mood was the performance 'Construction site – Union Square' by the group Mindbomb in 2005, made prior to a public debate that the Town Hall organized over the fate of Union Square, which is the main square of the city. The press-release/manifesto of the group<sup>10</sup> tells us that the members of Mindbomb have placed a billboard in front of the Union Square that has seen in 1994 the re-initiation of an archaeological dig with ancient roman artefacts, that lasted until 2008. During this time the Union Square was partially used, and the archaeological dig has been transformed into a symbol of decaying Romanian-Hungarian community relations, (the artefacts served to legitimate the local nationalist politics aimed at the Hungarian community). The site was used as a means for weakening the attachment locals had towards their city that now had a partially maimed historical centre. Moreover, preserving the archaeological dig throughout that period had made the Union Square unusable for public gatherings, rallies, or cultural events. Here we have a conclusive quote from their manifesto:

The last fifteen years has seen the public space of Cluj-Napoca subjected to outrageous interventions. The changing administrations have treated it is a site of power display, and have reshaped it [the public space] to resemble this power-game. Street names have been arbitrarily changed, often for the sake of an exclusionary nationalist agenda, urban traditions and collective memory has been ignored, statues have been randomly relocated and replaced - often distastefully - by new ones. Almost every possible site has been 'painted in a Romanian style' - trash bins, benches, poles, and sidewalks. Holes have been dug that never were filled up again. By and large parts of our space that belongs to all of us have been taken away inch by inch.

Consequently, we see that forms and artistic, grassroots, and social practices are in a strong connection with the local environment. They pop up as a mode of reaction at social, economic or political causes. The relation of context and socially committed artistic work implies a causality relation among them. The topics of the local environment will end up curating even the local artistic production: the group Duo van der Mixt for example appears as a reaction to

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<sup>10</sup> <https://nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-ro-0502/msg00037.html>,  
last accessed on 20.11.2019.

the nationalist politics of the mayor. Their project called “tricolor extravaganza” (Mihnea Mircan) reflects on the outrageous interruptions to symbolically mark the urban space through the excessive use of Romanian flags and by painting urban furniture or the trash bins using the three colours of the Romanian flag<sup>11</sup>.

In the Romanian decades of transition and post-transition artistic forms seem to substitute civic grassroots expressions in the absence of a dynamic civil society. The examples mentioned earlier demonstrate that one of the major resources to draw inspiration from remained the local environment, and for that generation, reaction as such morphed into a work method.

### **The Great Recession – the trigger for solidarity building**

The generation of artists, cultural workers and curators that were to follow found new affirmation prospects in a different Cluj-Napoca that was being laxer, but most of all craving for development with the arrival of Emil Boc at the Town Hall in 2004<sup>12</sup>. By this time Traian Băsescu is elected president, and during the pre-EU integration process major funds are soaked up bringing an upgrade in the living standards and a shift in the consumption behaviour of Romanians<sup>13</sup>. 2007 sees Romania adhere to the European Union, that began a massive wave of migration to other member states, due to the unique market, and the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people. Between 2004-2009 real estate prices soared in Bucharest and Cluj-Napoca, the square meter reaching 1.280 EUR in Cluj-Napoca, with the average wage at 290 EUR/month<sup>14</sup>.

The effects of the Great Recession started to bite by 2009, and the lack of cash hit a major part of the Romanian economy, that will result in a downturn of real estate value. This downturn enables a large group of artists, gallery owners and cultural workers to take over the spaces of the emptied Paintbrush Factory that ran under the name Perom S.A. The buildings are located in the dormant Mărăști neighbourhood, on the semi-periphery, among apartment buildings, houses and abandoned light-industrial areas. The factory had ceased production

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.2020.ro/resources/files/dvdm.htm> last accessed on 15.11.2019.

<sup>12</sup> The mayor represented the Liberal Democratic Party situated on the centre-right of the political spectrum.

<sup>13</sup> Many citizens manage to obtain a bank loan to buy housing property meaning that the financial terms have eased and the incomes had stabilized compared to the previous years of transition.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.zf.ro/infografice/evolutia-salariului-mediu-net-din-1990-pana-in-prezent-sursa-ins-8881950>, last accessed on 6.09.2019.

in 2006, after China extended on the Romanian market selling significantly cheaper paintbrushes. The present manager of Perom S.A., Mircea Filip, had planned to invest in the refurbishing of post-industrial<sup>15</sup> spaces to convert them into offices aiming the corporate clients that began to settle in Cluj-Napoca. The ascent of the crisis however stops him short of his plan and he agrees to sublet the remainder spaces of the building totalling 2500 m<sup>2</sup> square meters to this group that was to establish the future Federation of Paintbrush Factory<sup>16</sup>.

Some of us were aware of the fact that through our sheer presence, the physical space that we now inhabited went through a transformation because of the socio-economic changes. The industrial production at the factory was replaced with that of art production after four years of shutting down (Hurducaș, 2016).<sup>17</sup> We also had our sensibilities with regards to the laid-off workers of this factory – and towards other workers with the same fate – in our attempt to understand how the varied stages of the political and economic transition had affected their lives<sup>18</sup>. At that time, we couldn't have imagined that our symbolic production will eventually be replaced by the IT industry in the same way. Lately this industry had usurped the rhetoric of the public realm, while emerging as the new pillar of local economic development.

The period of the Great Recession provided a fertile ground for the occurrence of dis-regarded topics by the political environment and the local, national or international media. These are topics that could have not been prevented from being addressed, as they spurred the highly visible Occupy movement, or the rally protests taking place in the United States and several countries in Europe. The new topics represented a plethora of social inequalities with abundant aspects such as: the issue of housing, the access to free university education, the privatization of medical services, the position of the citizen pressed to 'make ends meet', and generally the loss of access and deprivation of some basic social services. While all this was happening to regular citizens, the banks and financial institutions causing this crisis received aid from the states. This fuelled social indignation and oriented the interest of youths and citizens of all ages towards the increased deprivation of some social categories.

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<sup>15</sup> The building was finalized in 1982, and the paintbrush production lasted until 2005.

<sup>16</sup> The founding organizations were: AltArt Foundation, GroundFloor Group Association, Arta Capoiera Association, Sabot Association, Artlink Association/Colectiv A, Grupa Mică Association, and Art-hoc Association.

<sup>17</sup> <https://fabricadepensule.ro/hotspotart/media/publicatii/iulia-hurducas-reconstructia-fabricii-de-pensule-in-fabrica-de-pensule/>, last accessed on 10.09.2019.

<sup>18</sup> Alt Art Foundation produced a performance in 2009 that showed the workers of the Paintbrush Factory on a video recording. The performance was presented during the Temps D'Images Festival.

## Reaction! And what's next?

Following 2009 the core themes of artists and active organizations in the cultural environment of Cluj-Napoca draw from the un-mediated grip on the local realities, but are doubled by topics that have grown globally familiar. This was made possible by the information access mediated by the Internet, as well as the belonging to international cultural networks. An assembling factor for a part of the Paintbrush Factory community was the engagement for social art and civic involvement. This artistic approach had brought us in the forefront of reclaiming public spaces, warning on the effects of economic migration, campaigning for social change through art, warning on cyanide mining in Roșia Montană, and later supporting the rights of LGBTQ communities. For those preoccupied with the aforementioned issues, togetherness and solidarity were paramount to bolster their message in the most varied and far-reaching mediums as possible. The group was fragmented and not everybody was eager to act on the topics we have mentioned. Moreover, there was no unanimous orientation in the broader community in addressing them. Nonetheless, the messages that rolled out were coherent and systematic in their nature, and this made them become the distinctive brand<sup>19</sup> of the Paintbrush Factory and to indirectly bolster the visibility for the social artistic discourse. Another reason why this discourse was considered identical with the image of the Factory could be that some members of the federation did not have a public discourse (in any artistic direction), but instead hesitated between staying neutral and focusing on their private artistic needs. For those who were in the executive board and have been setting up the artistic course of this space it was paramount that this project positioned itself critically versus the social, economic and political environment in the country. Individually, there wasn't anything compulsory and each co-habitant artist had the right to their own vision or ideas. Yet as a visible group in the cultural landscape we have decided to adopt a critical tone against abuse and social inequalities<sup>20</sup> generated as a consequence of state or corporate representatives' actions.

Coming back to reaction as a constitutive element of the *modus operandi* for social art in Cluj-Napoca, I aim further on to interpret the conceptual genealogy of the term and to connect it to the local art scene. Jean Starobinski,

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<sup>19</sup> The internal documents of the Paintbrush Factory reveal that the federation aimed to become an open space for debate on the relevant themes for Romanian society and for the city and to get involved in the strategic projects of the city and in (re)phrasing public policies.

<sup>20</sup> On 15 December 2010 the inhabitants of the Coastei street were evicted, and more than 200 persons were forcibly relocated next to the landfill of the city - Pata Rât. A number of members of the federation have joined the group of intellectuals in the academia to condemn the abuse of the local authorities. Pata Rât has 1500 inhabitants, 70 % of them being of ethnic Roma origin.

in *Action and reaction. The life and adventure of a couple* (1999) identifies in irritation a preparedness for reaction. Citing authors such as Jaspers, Starobinski sees reaction as a conceptual instrument of the intelligentsia facing the unknown of the human condition. Jaspers binds reaction to action, the first element representing the object of action itself:

It would be mistaken to set in opposition the active and the reactive element, to imagine the possibility of a perfect creativity that would express itself without an object, and likewise it is a misconception to assume that "reactivity is the fundamental feature of life" (Jaspers *apud* Starobinski, 1999: 208).

Benjamin Constant via Starobinski (1999) defines reaction as a universal law reigning over the institutions, and institutions often require major transformations, sometimes achievable only through revolutions. A separate definition comes from Nietzsche (Nietzsche *apud* Starobinski, 1999), who asserts that reaction is a basic condition to the existence of artistic criticism as it creates an opposition with a prior element.

The prior element in the scope of my study is represented by the troubling themes of the local environment that contribute to the inception of artworks. Considering this relationship with that which is prior, we see reaction not as an isolated element but always secondary depending on something else. This occurred opposition – in the absence of a critical mass of artists and social art creators – will marginalize such an attitude in relation to the larger cultural scene. Staying in the underground will define a limited access to resources and this will have a major impact on the way in which social art and its discursive shapes would be visible in the public space. This pattern of creation that has as its underlying element the reaction to the environment will inevitably position itself as being dependent of its cause, in an ongoing struggle that fuels creativity. We might even contend that we are captives of the cause as constraints, and "helplessness makes people push for a change" (Dia Da Costa, 2016).

Reaction is used by the local art environment as a working tool that calls on the need to grow awareness and implement civic action for social change. I would give as an example the artistic programme and column of the 2012 edition Temps d'Images<sup>21</sup> festival that ran under the catch phrase "A(r)tivate yourself!" (*Artivează-te!*). It taunted the audience to aim their attention at the changes in society and to act in the available framework for them as citizens. In hindsight of the ten editions of the Temps d'Images festival – that I have collectively conceived and organized with the Colectiv A group at the Paintbrush Factory and beyond – I have noticed that the programme and the themes

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<sup>21</sup> <http://tempsdimages.ro/editions/t di-2012/despre/editorial/> (Accessed on 20.11.2019).



addressed were based on the very same reactivity pattern. It exposed us as organizers, artists and the audience to a permanent overdrive when faced with decisions and changes that eventually affected us directly or indirectly, locally or globally. Reaction as such tends to harbour a defensive feature, the preparation for self-defence or, as Starobinski would put it, we position by opposing (1999). Reaction as such is a signal of a beginning, the expression itself has a transitive aspect that positions it in relation to that which predates it (Starobinski, 1999). Could this transitive element be paralleled to a promise of change that the reaction has as its final intent? The promise will fulfil itself only through action, where the latter requires a pro-active approach. Reactivity is an inevitable mode but yet insufficient for social art to evolve and become a reference to the cultural scene and expand to the public space. The timeliness of reaction makes it useful in a *hic et nunc* context. Here it may advance temporary solutions, but the mantra of this *modus operandi* leads us to the operational limits and fewer battles won, although our expectations are to secure the symbolic war in the discursive public space. The conditions of work and existence in the independent cultural space are subject to temporariness and short-term planning: “the temporariness of financing facilitates and even encourages the *ad hoc* reaction as a form of intervention” (Mateescu, 2019<sup>22</sup>). However, for the sake of a broader visibility and the adherence of the audience it is required that social art and the discourse it disseminates surpasses the stage of reactivity and moves on from action to the stage of projection and anticipation.

A projective moment was precisely the founding of the Paintbrush Factory Federation, although we may well observe that we took the path of our predecessors and the methodology is identical to theirs: the reaction to the social-political environment. This pattern of creation based on reaction is a thread of the presence of the Paintbrush Factory in the consciousness of its audience and of the attempt to solidify the appearance it wished to deliver. Nevertheless, an intuitive attempt to get past this method was precisely to amass more representatives of social artistic practices, artists and cultural workers alike. Being together in large numbers, sharing the same spaces, and initiating a mutual program has created what we call a critical mass. Our projects were intrinsically reactions to the glocal socio-political circumstances; however, they have garnered a new symbolic dimension. This had rendered our actions robust and visible in the public space (compared to the individual actions of our separate organizations) and propelled us towards becoming a unignorable force. This federalization of the organizations and artists of Cluj-Napoca had clearly amounted in my view to the transition from reaction to action through tactics of solidarity.

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<sup>22</sup> Extracts from private talks with the anthropologist Oana Mateescu.

The outcomes of the projects by federation members, brought together, have instituted a new work-logic, which was to become the programme logic. The programme is not merely a juxtaposition of projects but aims to convey a single message replicated under varied forms of artistic expression. As time passed the social dimension of art had seamlessly become the vector of the Paintbrush Factory Federation programme. This was so unique that it raised the attention of many national and international visual and performative art curators. Taking the ownership of this artistic direction by some of the more outspoken members of the federation had unlocked novel networking opportunities with art spaces that had a similar platform and views on artistic development. Slowly the national and international media gains interest in exploring the creativity of these artists and cultural workers. With the co-habitation of art forms and the way in which the Paintbrush Factory got organized it became a trailblazer for contemporary arts in Romania. The ability to run a federative community had drawn admiration from afar as other artistic groups in the country had related themselves to us as a model of solidarity.

In 2011 a new project is initiated, The People's School of Contemporary Art<sup>23</sup>, and 2013 sees the release of the contemporary art platform "tranzit.ro" in Romania with an office in Cluj-Napoca ran by Attila Tordai, an experienced curator and contributor to the *Idea. art+society Magazine*, as well as the originator of the Protokoll Gallery. These two projects had assumed a left-leaning artistic and intellectual ideology in their platforms. Taking advantage of the national and international appraisals over the combined efforts to create such a space, the socially engaged discourse becomes a blueprint of the Paintbrush Factory. This influences the audience and other young cultural actors such as the Varoterem Project, Reciproca Association, or the Reactor for Creation and Experimentation Association. The dominant artistic discourse between 2009 and 2015 in the independent scene seemed to point to an art and culture that can contribute to the emancipation of the local citizens, in the sense in which J. Rancière sees "the dislocation of the contact line between those who act and those who look, between individuals and members of one collective body" (2008: 27). The cultural dynamics of Cluj-Napoca has been profoundly influenced by the agents mentioned earlier on. Together with others they got involved individually and collectively in the creation of a vision on the social role of art. They have taken responsibility of a shared mission: that of contributing to the understanding of the contemporary world and to foster an engaged and reactive audience.

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<sup>23</sup> The People's School of Contemporary Art had functioned as an artistic educational programme between 2011-2012.

## Tactical schemes for institutionalization

The success that we have mentioned had contributed to a new prospect of the Paintbrush Factory: although legally an NGO, the outside world has seen us as an institution outright. From within we knew well that we were not a proper institution although many had wished we became one, for different reasons. Looking at the variety of the activities and the diversity of artistic approaches, their frequency in numbers and the quality of the work they sustained, we could even compare ourselves to international institutions. But when it came to the financial background and that of human resources that effectively contributes to the evolution of the federation we could not even come close due to the lack of funding. Fully dependent on the annual AFCN<sup>24</sup> grants, local and Norwegian grants, the Federation has had one full time employee, and following the public success two more persons were hired as part-timers. Everybody else who contributed to the project and vision of the Factory, such as the Directors Board of Council (5 to 7 persons) and the president were/are all volunteers. The extensive programme running during the entire existence of the Paintbrush Factory up to the present had been achieved (through self-exploitation) with the energy and engagement of people who had been underpaid. The space had managed to exist due to the internal motivation of those who worked for the collective project. This was the life-line of the federation with artistic activities, professional training, advocacy, cultural mediation and lots of emotional work to preserve the ties with all members.

We were performing the role of a strong institution but we were neither financially secure nor could we claim the safety of benefiting from an infrastructure where we could carry out our future activities. In 2013 there was an art auction in Paris<sup>25</sup> with works donated by some of the artists of the Paintbrush Factory that had a surprizing result. The purpose of the auction was to keep our activities going and for us to grow as an independent art space in a time when public funding was seriously affected by the economic crises. There were lengthy negotiations on the ways in which the earnings should be used. Some of the members wanted the stability of the collective project and organisational robustness that implied the provision of financial support to the employees/co-workers of the federation who could raise more funding in the future. Another part of the community proposed dividing up

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<sup>24</sup> The Administration of National Cultural Fund, the main financial supporter of the independent scene in Romania.

<sup>25</sup> We are referring here at the second auction that followed the success of the first one (2012), that had served to address the basic needs of the members and the completion of the lobby-bar-library project on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor of the Paintbrush Factory.

these earnings among the members with pressing private problems (paying up overdue rent, setting up production costs for new work etc.) We have strived to find a consensus concerning the imperative of financial stability that would have been the run-up to the institutionalization of the project. However, the broader community of the Paintbrush Factory had decided by vote that the collective stability of the umbrella organization is less important than the individual well-being. The ones that were committed to a long-term outlook on the evolution of the Paintbrush Factory had not managed to defend the case for choosing the project sustainability. Having applied the principle of participative democracy and that of horizontality as a federative model, the majority of votes eventually prevailed.

This marks the end of the romantic era at the Paintbrush Factory. The members whose interior drive was the accomplishment of a representative project for an extended group of artists, organizations and a lively cultural vitality of the city had now been disenchanted. Through the existence of this space they have visualized an endeavour to create a community based on the principles of solidarity and redistribution of resources and not a launchpad for their own professional achievements while participating in the project.

### **A success story – a tool to legitimate the new urban politics**

The international media had contributed to the myth-like perception: The Paintbrush Factory is depicted as one of the reasons that Cluj-Napoca is designated as one of the future cities featured in the publication *Art Cities of the Future 21st-Century Avant-Gardes*<sup>26</sup>. This is the defining moment that raises the interest of Cluj-Napoca Town Hall towards our activities and invites some members of the federation to join varied projects that they had initiated. At that time, the local administration was in the quest for a new identity for Cluj-Napoca to eventually deliver a city brand. The AltArt Foundation (member of Paintbrush Factory) proposes in 2010<sup>27</sup> to the Town Hall the prospect to apply for the title of European Cultural Capital for 2021. They accepted and later, with the return of the mayor Emil Boc<sup>28</sup>, they had assembled a team in charge of the application project, made up of professionals of the independent cultural

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<sup>26</sup> I cite here an article related to the publication: [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/art-cities-of-the-future\\_n\\_3949998](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/art-cities-of-the-future_n_3949998) (Accessed on 22.09.2019).

<sup>27</sup> The mayor at that time was Sorin Apostu (2008-2012), later prosecuted for corruption in office in 2014, and freed in 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Emil Boc has been Romania's PM between 2008-2012, and his government collapsed due to anti-austerity protests during January-February 2012.

sector and members of the local administration. They were backed by most local cultural institutions (public, independent, and private), the university, businesses and the political environment. The project was endorsed politically as well, resulting in a cross-party consensus rarely seen before. Cluj-Napoca Town Hall was convinced that this project was an adequate way to transform the image of the city. The administration was eager to solidify the image of an attractive and competitive city eyeing the business environment by scoring titles that had European recognition (and rejoiced later with the title of European Youth Capital in 2015). Cluj-Napoca joins the pattern of the post-industrial town that is eager to establish a new narrative to rid itself from a haunting past failure of economical anonymity and cultural provincialism. As the majority of industrial platforms shut down, the production will need to be relocated<sup>29</sup>. Cluj-Napoca gradually moves on from industrial production to symbolic production, in our case that of artistic production, as Sharon Zukin points out articulately:

...from factory towns to postmodern cities, as both material and symbolic constructions. As I continued to think about cities, I began to think of their economies as based increasingly on symbolic production (1996: ix).

The Paintbrush Factory turns into the local success story that the Town Hall needed in order to deploy the image of the new Cluj-Napoca<sup>30</sup>. The international high profile of our project and the professional attitude of two of our important members of the Board, Rarița Zbranca and István Szakáts, got them invited to carry out two strategic projects for the city. Consequently, the name of the Paintbrush Factory will be correlated with these initiatives: the preparation of the project Cluj-Napoca - European Cultural Capital in 2021 and the Cultural Strategy of the city. The two bore with them the commitment to art and culture as agents of social development and have suggested programmes to improve the artistic environment by stimulating inter and trans-sectoral cooperation among independent cultural actors and public institutions; they have promoted formats and frameworks that would enable the co-creation of artistic events by the audience and the artists. The pair have also been interested to develop the active participation of the audience during the cultural act and in the idea of embracing the city's social development through culture<sup>31</sup>. The

<sup>29</sup> Cluj-Napoca is defined in the local strategy as a city based on services: <https://primariaCluj-Napocanapoca.ro/strategia-de-dezvoltare-a-municipiului-Cluj-Napoca-napoca-2014-2020/> (Accessed on 10.10.2019).

<sup>30</sup> Starting with 2015 it becomes a primary project for of the local funds (among other beneficiaries).

<sup>31</sup> [https://www.capitalaculturala2021.ro/Files/dosare/Cluj-Napoca%20napoca/Cluj-Napoca-Napoca%202021\\_Application%20form%20ECoC\\_english%20version.pdf](https://www.capitalaculturala2021.ro/Files/dosare/Cluj-Napoca%20napoca/Cluj-Napoca-Napoca%202021_Application%20form%20ECoC_english%20version.pdf) (Accessed on 10.10.2019).

needs of the private, public and independent cultural scene (financial stability, the inclusion in a planned strategy and thus long-term thinking) and the municipality's need of affirmation on the national and international scene had given momentum for the opening of a new stage of the cultural and social life of Cluj-Napoca.

The Town Hall has approved this vision on art following lengthy negotiations. In the run-up preparations for the application, the project contributors were cautioned that the word 'social' had too frequently appeared in the texts in the detriment of the word 'culture'. They were asked to rephrase the wording to soften the left-wing ideological stance that sticks out in the discourse<sup>32</sup>. Thus the first differences appear in the approaches: the recipient applicant - the Town Hall - has a centre-right political orientation but the discourse of those who formulated the concept for the application was anchored in the social vision on art, revealing their left-leaning orientation.

The pair had feverishly worked to draft the local cultural strategy of the city for the period 2014-2020, this being a compulsory phase in submitting the candidacy application to the authorities of the European Union (2015). The strategy aims to establish sustainable development for the independent and public cultural environment with the objective to support the completion of the candidacy application. To underline this, the strategy names a range of priorities like: "the necessity of a new approach to culture, as a facilitator of social transformation".<sup>33</sup> This priority registers itself in the generic concept of the city's strategy - that of the *quality of life*.

### **The seductiveness of the creative city**

In the strategy plan of the city, the concept of progress is marked by the presence of culture:

Cluj-Napoca will be a reference in itself for Europe due to its dynamic, vibrant cultural life, that fosters initiatives and experimenting. Culture will represent a cross-sectoral factor in assembling the community, by acting as a vehicle of social transformation and urban regeneration.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Interview with István Szakáts, one of the advocates and thinkers of the concept for Cluj-Napoca - European Capital of culture 2021.

<sup>33</sup> The Development Strategy of Cluj-Napoca, pp. 214, Cultural Strategy, <https://storage.primariaCluj-Napocanapoca.ro/userfiles/files/strategia2015.pdf>, (Accessed on 28.11.2019).

<sup>34</sup> <https://storage.primariacluj-napoca.ro/userfiles/files/strategia2015.pdf>, (Accessed on 28.11.2019).

Influenced by some experts who have embraced the theories of Richard Florida on urban regeneration, Cluj-Napoca Town Hall adopts the idea that culture and creativity have the potential to contribute to urban development and economic upturn (2012). Florida also introduces the term “creative class”, embodied by the young professionals who can contribute to local economic progress through their presence. The creative class is the new middle-class made up of artists, creatives, accountants, professors, hairstylists etc, people who usually don’t do manual work. Luring and retaining them in the cities, as well as creating the context for their growth seem to be the main success of urban regeneration policies (Florida, 2012).

Entrepreneurship, and the level of partnership creation, is displayed in this city’s strategy as a local resource that contributes to the quality of local democracy. Putting this to value could boost the creative and innovative profile of the city as unparalleled throughout the region. Two new distinct features of the strategy are highlighted: on one hand the innovative, creative, competitive city (local economic development, competitiveness, tourism, IT), and on the other hand the local culture and identity (revealed by the historical identity, culture, European values). I want to signal here the pairing of entrepreneurship, as an expression of economic development, with democracy, a political concept. Entrepreneurship represents a pillar for the local administration, endorsing it under varied forms, and naming it as a necessity for the progress of our urban laboratory. The cultural strategy itself foresees the creation of tax-related facilities for cultural entrepreneurship and the creative industries.

Creativity and entrepreneurship are cited as the new strengths of Cluj-Napoca compared with the competitors:

We are speaking of a sophisticated city, with economy and services based on intelligence, entrepreneurship, and creativity, with high ranking prosperity, with a vibrant university community and a variety of choices for inhabitants regarding their living standards. In a nutshell we are talking about a community that draws by prosperity and high living standards a sophisticated and entrepreneurial human resource, a creative city.<sup>35</sup>

For whom did the authorities want Cluj-Napoca to appeal? Who are the recipients of the new city brand? Investors, tourists, future inhabitants, the local political elite? The developing direction of the city approved by the Town Hall - included in the development strategy - is that of raising the living standards of the inhabitants of a “smart” and creative city with an emphasis on urban and cultural innovation. The municipality designates the type of inhabitants it desires, and provides aid and amenities for those who drive the ‘magnetism’ of the

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<sup>35</sup> Idem, 33.

city: IT companies, banking services etc., and cultural entrepreneurs also, as long as they set up high-profile events to cater for citizens' need of entertainment. Interpreting this preference, we see how the appearance and the cultural menu of the city reflect what and who should be visible in the city (Zukin, 1996).

With the exclusive attention channelled on the significance of the creative class of Cluj-Napoca, the city tends to become representative for this privileged category of inhabitants. In other terms we are witnessing in Cluj-Napoca the phenomenon of "the Creative Class becoming the dominant class in society", as Florida puts it (2012: xxi). Examining the outcomes of strategies on urban regeneration politics that spawned from Florida's theory, Angela McRobbie concludes: "More ordinary workers whose ambitions do not coincide with this ideal are as faded out of the picture as those who are vulnerable or 'truly disadvantaged'" (2016: 140). Cluj-Napoca matches this insight, while the city is known for the inefficiencies of its social inclusion politics. Among the examples that demonstrate it is a 2017 decision (following the petition of the Desire Foundation) of the College Board of the National Council to Combat Discrimination, that the local public administration has discriminative criteria regarding the allotment of social housing<sup>36</sup>. Another author, Jamie Peck, denounces the "formula of Doctor Richard Florida" revealing that:

entrenched problems like structural unemployment, residential inequality, working poverty, and racialized exclusion are barely even addressed by this form of cappuccino urban politics (Peck, 2007)<sup>37</sup>.

In his reading, creative strategies are artificially crafted to co-exist with these problems, but not to solve them (Peck, 2007). One of the consequences of the creative cities' strategies is the rise in social inequalities, Florida himself acknowledging the shortcomings of his theory: "It's not just a vicious cycle but an unsustainable one — economically, politically, and morally" (2013)<sup>38</sup>.

This city's strategy destined to support the new brand built around the success of cultural engagement and the IT industry adds to the new perceptions of Cluj-Napoca that blends in the trends of the optimist narrative of urban poles driven by the creative economy. The application for the title of European Cultural Capital was the midterm project that implemented and reasserted the new profile of Cluj-Napoca as a creative and socially inclusive city. The Paintbrush Factory was one of the pillars of this project at the time of the application.

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<sup>36</sup> <http://casisocialeacum.ro/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/CARAMIDA-Nr1-web.pdf>, (Accessed on 29.11.2019).

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.eurozine.com/the-creativity-fix/>, (Accessed on 29.11.2019).

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.citylab.com/life/2013/01/more-losers-winners-americas-new-economic-geography/4465/>, (Accessed on 29.11.2019).



Looking back with the needed disengagement and accepting the painful fact that I was also part of the dynamic, I will assert that the Paintbrush Factory has embodied the transformation of the City. It incarnates the expression of the way in which a new type of production replaces an older one. The new narrative was meant to lure investments that would regenerate the urban industrial areas, by making space for those who are seen as the new industrialists, the creatives (Oana Năsui, 2017). By using the example of the local success story of the Factory, as it gained the trust of a larger public for creativity etc., the Town Hall managed to rally the acceptance of the new city profile by the city's inhabitants.

A tense moment ensued between the local authorities and István Szakáts – who was member of the team that conceptualized the application – when the Cluj-Napoca *feuille de route* for the visit of the European jury was mapped before they ruled if Cluj-Napoca or Timișoara would win the European title<sup>39</sup>. Szakáts had created a cultural programme called Jivipen within the application that would bring more visibility to the Roma community from Pata Rât, and would open up the Cluj-Napoca community towards our fellow Roma neighbours. The Town Hall had taken Pata Rât off the list of locations that were supposed to be visited. It had difficulties to accept that the area and its inhabitants are a meaningful part of the life of the city that the jury was about to assess. After lengthy and tough negotiations, the authorities gave in and the jury made a short visit. This approach demonstrates that accepting social inclusion as a matter of the city's strategy<sup>40</sup> and that of the candidacy application too, was integrated more in written form (specific requirements for the application from the EU) than being embraced in reality. The cited situation reminds us of how Matt Lassiter via Peck describes these attitudes: “ignoring social problems of segregation and poverty, and instead try to transform the image rather than the reality ...” (2007).

## Conclusions

The two mentioned documents that received contributions from Paintbrush Factory's members<sup>41</sup> outline their effort to instil a social vision of art in the city's strategic documents and as such to exert an influence on the

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with István Szakáts.

<sup>40</sup> Excerpt from the Strategy: “Cluj-Napoca will be a city that fosters the principles of inclusion and socio-territorial cohesion securing the participation of vulnerable groups on the decision-making process related to priorities of development.”

<sup>41</sup> Amongst other colleagues who were mentioned, the following persons contributed also: Corina Bucea (Cultural Strategy), Diana Marincu and Miki Braniște (Cluj-Napoca - European Capital of Culture).

cultural policies, as well as to institutionalize the social discourse on art in Cluj-Napoca. Although this vision was embraced by the Local Council as it approved the documents, it was to be performed merely in discourse but not in practice. Their contribution at the attempt to impose in strategic documents culture/art as a trigger for creating social context (István Szakáts, 2019) is gradually watered down by the global-scale imposition of the vision of the “creative economy”. Culture is glorified for the ability to generate income and to participate in the economical race of cities (through creative industries, especially IT) whereas the social dimension comes secondary at best (depending on the cultural policies that are implemented). Art and culture are transformed in pretences to create economical contexts or to put this in Peck’s words: “art and culture are discursively commodified, as productive assets and positive externalities of creative capitalism...” (2007).

This ability of culture to generate income was tested out by the Cluj-Napoca Town Hall with the occurrence of sizeable events and festivals like the European Youth Capital (2015), and later the Untold Festival, or with the Cluj-Napoca Days, organized by the local authorities etc. Starting with 2015 there is a strong growth of cultural events that alters the city vibe, and changes also the profile of the visible organizations and the promoted cultural content on display. The investment in the communication and marketing of these events outweighs the importance of the artistic and social content, whereas events with a tighter communication budget are virtually invisible. The interest towards entertainment grows more and more evident, and large events begin to use public spaces to attract increasing numbers of audiences. A few examples of new festivals and fairs that use culture as a vehicle to stimulate consumption are Untold Festival<sup>42</sup>, Street Food Festival, the Christmas Fair etc.

The initiative to institutionalize both the Paintbrush Factory and the social art discourse had failed, and in the meantime other actors have emerged as important cultural players. The Paintbrush Factory loses ground also because an internal conflict broke out leading to the split of the federation in 2016. This led to the establishment of a second federation that assembled exclusively visual artists and gallery owners. They have eventually relocated to another industrial space in 2017. Taking advantage of the split, the manager of Perom S.A. begins to remodel the factory spaces implementing his initial plan to develop office spaces for IT companies. Once the redeveloping plan begins at the Factory, a second wave of fragmentation will follow suit, and the critical mass that converged before began to fade considerably. The transformation of the Paintbrush Factory spaces in offices to let for IT firms blends in the generic trend of massive real-estate developments with city’s gentrification. H. Barbusse street

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<sup>42</sup> <https://untold.com/>.

itself, where the original Paintbrush Factory is located, is going through a constant transformation, that will soon have three major office buildings leading to spiking prices and hindered traffic in that area. Our rent and expenses used to cost 5.8 Euros/sqr. meter all taxes included, but the new tenants - the IT firms - pay 10 Euros/sqr. meter for the rent only. These sums surpass the budget of an NGO or a midsize institution in Cluj-Napoca. In 2018 when several firms moved in the new building on H. Barbusse, the Town Hall has introduced a new bus line to the area. Our requests for a bus service during cultural events have been refused repeatedly. The phenomenon of gentrification that has started out in the city's centre has now extended to areas which ten years ago we would have called "peripheries". As a result, it is impossible in the present to rent a similar sized post-industrial building, as the majority are sold and are being refurbished as offices or apartment buildings.

I would conclude that a series of circumstances led to the dissipation of the social art discourse in Cluj-Napoca: the inability to achieve the institutionalisation of the Paintbrush Factory Federation, its diminishing influence as a powerhouse of the local and national artistic discourse, the closure of the Temps D'Images festival due to lack of resources that would enable its growth, the disengagement and abandonment of the measures that were indicated in the strategy, the ideological ambiguity as well as the entrepreneurial stance on the programme of the Cluj-Napoca - European Cultural Capital (project inherited now by Cluj-Napoca Cultural Centre<sup>43</sup>). The present cultural environment pushes this discourse back to an insular condition rife only in some micro-communities of Cluj-Napoca that overlap each other, and accordingly it remains isolated as a public discourse. It needs a fertile environment to multiply and revive itself, but most of all it needs to be embraced and developed by a new generation of artists, producers, cultural managers, curators. A new fertile environment will certainly not emerge from a project-base financing, as these too are shrouded in uncertainty<sup>44</sup>; and neither will it be welcome with arms wide open by the authorities.

Fulfilling the strategy of the creative city that is ceaselessly competitive (Peck, 2007) squeezes out fresh defensive reactions though (Mateescu, 2019)<sup>45</sup>. I believe that the quest needs to be accomplished by the emerging artists, curators and cultural workers. The critical mass needs to be rebuilt

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<sup>43</sup> The Cultural Centre is a new cultural agency meant to pursue the plans of the Cluj-Napoca - European Capital of Culture 2021 Association, which had set itself the goal to accomplish a significant share of the ECOC candidacy application project.

<sup>44</sup> Note the downsizing of the number of projects that had been selected for funding by AFCN in June, due to national budget cuts.

<sup>45</sup> Extracts from private talks with the anthropologist Oana Mateescu.

with new and old agents, taking notice of the prior experiences of the Paintbrush Factory, while looking out for the current changes and the anticipation of future shifts in circumstances. This background of collective problems that local cultural agents experience could create the opening-up needed to reassemble communities that embrace the social artistic discourse, and to eventually reinstate it in the public space of Cluj-Napoca.

Facing the gentrification of the city, the Town Hall's imposition of temporariness on the use of cultural spaces when a long-time use is needed<sup>46</sup>, as well as the transformation of culture into a political and economic instrument – the cultural actors find themselves in a one way out situation, that is to fight or flight.

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## CULTURAL WORKERS FROM THE PAINTBRUSH FACTORY. BETWEEN INSTITUTION-BUILDING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES

MARINA MIRONICĂ<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT.** The paper is an ethnography of cultural workers from the contemporary art centre from Cluj-Napoca, Romania – The Paintbrush Factory. The one-decade existence of the alternative space contributed to a range of changes in the local cultural scene and evolved from a physical space into a resource for the city’s culture-led development strategy. It also became affected and reshaped by wider changes in terms of applied cultural policies. Cultural workers’ perspective, their precarity and their involvement in the local art scene influenced the current commodification and entrepreneurialisation of the cultural offer. The Paintbrush Factory’s expansion and contraction are vividly presented through the reflexive lenses of the cultural workers and managers, whose case-study could easily be regarded as a signal and a symbol of the deficient cultural policies mostly oriented to profit and lacking any local and long term-vision.

**Keywords:** cultural workers, culture-led development, independent art, gentrification, Cluj-Napoca

### Introduction and background<sup>2</sup>

For a former industrial city such as Cluj-Napoca, where the majority of the population worked in factories during state communism, active urban restructuring has become a very popular measure after the global economic crisis. A cultural rebranding shapes the city’s occupational structure since more artistic initiatives and cultural workers are active on the local canvas. In tight relation to this economic and spatial reality, local production of art and the

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<sup>1</sup> *Independent sociologist and researcher, e-mail: marinamironica@yahoo.com.*

<sup>2</sup> I want to thank everyone with whom I discussed about the topic of this article – professors, as well as friends. Also, I’m grateful to my colleagues and co-workers from the cultural field from Cluj-Napoca, with whom I worked or shared time and thoughts about this development, while working on this paper and beyond.

interpretations given to culture have become important resources and reference points in city development. In the last two years, I have witnessed and participated in countless academic and street-level discussions about the commodification of culture, economic growth and the necessity of densification of the inner city through the conversion of former industrial sites (Mironica, 2017)<sup>3</sup>. As a result, I came to the idea that artists who are active in participatory, social and alternative art may be able to tell something interesting about culture's role in urban development. More than this, they may have an influence, if not a word in how it's planned and brought into action. Therefore, I turned my attention to *Fabrica de Pensule*<sup>4</sup> (The Paintbrush Factory), a contemporary art centre from Cluj-Napoca, a former actual paintbrush factory, that became an important place for the local art scene in the last decade. The often-circulated term *independent space* in the self-description of *Fabrica de Pensule (FdP)* implies the intention of standing outside the state system, being independent of its constraints, values, and altered structures.<sup>5</sup>

The history of the future internationally known art space *Fabrica de Pensule* starts in early 2009 amid the global financial crisis, which also hit the city of Cluj-Napoca. At that point, in Cluj-Napoca, there already existed some artistic initiatives, but they were literally underground and the lack of space inside the old city walls was a pressing problem. Emptied of its original purpose, *Fabrica's* building was offered for lease and a few visual, conceptual and performative artists found it fitting for their purposes. Their initial need was modest – cheap workspaces - but it did spark a necessity for collective organization as more and more individuals and organizations gathered and filled the four floors of the factory.

Several art auctions later, which meant money donated by artist members and several months of conceptualization and physical work to renovate the building, *Fabrica de Pensule* was opened to the public in the summer of 2009. Thanks to previous artists and cultural managers' connections, foreign media discovered this conglomerate of visual and performative artists and its fame grew apace until it became impossible to ignore, both for the artistic circles and for the local administration of the city. Starting with 2015, the local municipality

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<sup>3</sup> I did research for my bachelor and master theses in the last three years (2016-2019) while being an active member of the public and sometimes co-worker in cultural projects in Cluj-Napoca.

<sup>4</sup> The Paintbrush Factory is a contemporary art centre opened in 2009 in Cluj-Napoca, Romania and built around the building of a former paintbrush factory by a group of artists and cultural managers. More about it: <http://fabricadepensule.ro/en/> (Accessed on 15.09.2019).

<sup>5</sup> At the moment of writing and submitting this article, *Fabrica de Pensule's* fate is unsure and insecure. The change of the former space and the stringent need for a re-organisation and re-thinking of its activity is ongoing and the end result is still unknown. Hopefully, the ten years history and the current resources will continue to live in a form or another.

introduced *FdP* to a priority list of projects, which meant financial support, and consequently a recognized authority and power on the local art scene. Parallel to the increase in financial stability – due to the international Tajan auction (Paris) from 2014, internal animosities deepened too, and by 2016 the conflict between a few visual artists and the rest had reached the press. Now, three years later, it is becoming clear that 2016 meant the end of *FdP* as the large audience knew it. Even if some projects are still ongoing and the *Factory's* experience continues to mark the local scene, one can talk about a different contemporary art centre than the one from 2009 to 2016, and this is not only the conflict that had marked the *Fabrica's* history.

### **Methodological considerations**

*Fabrica de Pensule* as a long-established and recognized entity is an eloquent example of an art space which is created from scratch, articulated into a free contemporary art space for artists of all kinds and driven to an uncertain and unstable future by structural economic conditions and neoliberal public policies. The very purpose of the space and community – to become a pole of attraction for alternative arts - has turned out to be a curse when urban development knocked at their door and put pressure on their spatiality, consequently their activities. Therefore, the cultural workers and artists are exponents of the whole changing system with important consequences for the local art scene. This is why a closer look at their experiences is going to provide measures for a better understanding of the current state of affairs on the local art scene and the possible perspectives given by nowadays development projects.

This is a contribution to the knowledge about the recent development processes in Cluj-Napoca. The decision to analyse an independent contemporary art centre was motivated by my personal interest to understand the local art scene and its actors' role in it – cultural workers, institutions, structural processes. This may be a useful endeavour even for placing the Cluj-Napoca example in a regional and global context of cities competing for a more prestigious place on the high skill labour market, for a cultural consumption market and for investments in real estate and technology industries. I hope that by giving an insight into the *modus operandi* of creating an art centre in a rather small city I could get closer to the understanding of the role this kind of institution and its cultural workers have in the evolution of the city. Such an institution is not geographically or culturally isolated, therefore it was important to analyse it thoroughly in order to understand the factors which alter it and the kind of structures that are put at work in this kind of context.



This research is an ethnography of a contemporary art space from Cluj-Napoca which I came to know both from inside and from outside in the period of three years – 2017-2019. My attendance at public theatre shows and exhibitions was doubled by sporadic work with *Fabrica's* members and countless official and unofficial meetings. This kind of research is inevitably subjective and it reflects a multitude of personal positions - both from the subjects of research and from me - which I recognize and assume.

I conducted sixteen interviews with visual artists, conceptual artists, gallerists, producers, art historians, anthropologists, cultural managers, generally called cultural workers. They represent people who are active now or have been so in the past in the *FdP* Federation, with work-spaces in or outside *Fabrica de Pensule*. My interviewees' social and humanistic formal education and their working practice had an important role in the explanation process due to their reflexivity and introspective attitude. In addition, my research contains informal interviews with people who interacted with *Fabrica*.

The perspective from which *Fabrica de Pensule* is going to be presented will be consistently marked by my double identity, as a sociologist and an independent cultural worker. For this reason, I will also engage in systematic critical thinking, helped by the theoretical apparatus, when I will introduce information from various interviews with past and present representatives of the *Fabrica*. My approach could be described as reflexive ethnography, explained by Sköldbberg (2009). The auto-ethnography dimension of this research is very important because it provides a reading-key meant to contribute to the field of cultural workers and precarious workers in both sociological research and cultural scene.

Looking at the evolution of the last ten years of this contemporary art institution, a series of observations can be made and some conclusions can be drawn about the role of *Fabrica* on the Cluj-Napoca art scene, as well as the extent to which it influenced and marked the urban development of Cluj-Napoca. Through the research and writing process, it became clear that we talk about the expansion/evolution and contraction/devolution of the *Fabrica*. I will take a closer look at how it has evolved from an imagined community of artists to a contemporary art institution and what does this route mean in the context of a peripheral city in full urban and economic growth.

The present research is oriented toward the role of the *FdP* on the local art scene and wider social and political context in which it evolves, but it also looks at how *Fabrica's* members – the cultural workers - are contributing, getting involved, transform and get transformed by their work and their practices. There are certain processes, such as gentrification or commodification which determine some more individual or particular reactions. One must also remark that the socially-engaged art which is produced or mediated by the discussed

cultural workers is starker oriented to all types of disenfranchised groups but it bypasses often the internal dynamics of the community. The complex relationship between the external context and the organizational structures, personal values and history is reflected in the non-functioning models brought to the city's evolution.

### **Artists and art practices in capitalism**

Pierre Bourdieu's definition in *Distinction* (1984: 359) of the new petite bourgeoisie which

comes into its own in all the occupations involving presentation and representation (sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, decoration and so forth) and in all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services and in cultural production and organization

is recalled by Keith Negus (2002) in his attempt to make clear the essence of cultural intermediaries. Negus includes cultural intermediaries into this new petite bourgeoisie. Given the evolutions in the cultural field and economic reality, artists from the independent sector,

in both their working habits and routines of daily living, tend to blur a number of conventional distinctions. Most notable here is the division between high art/popular culture, and the divide between personal taste and professional judgment (or leisure and work).

The ambiguous role of cultural intermediaries is fully embraced by this notion because "it places an emphasis on those workers who come in-between creative artists and consumers (or, more generally, production and consumption)", a category more and more relevant for how we look at urbanized spaces with an ever more flexible working regime. Another very consistent dimension of this category is its representativeness for the

shift away from unidirectional or transmission models of cultural production towards an approach that conceives of workers as intermediaries continually engaged in forming a point of connection or articulation between production and consumption (Negus, 2002: 503).

Hereby, cultural workers and cultural managers are put into relevant and explanatory positions while analysing current culture-led development in urban contexts.

Considering Martha Rosler (2016) perspective on cultural class and its mission saying that “The art world as an imagined community, in Benedict Anderson terms – as a powerful type, a post-national community held ever closer in relation to new systems of publishing and communications”, I am doing a radiography of a cultural class’s *modus operandi* in its attempt to change the state of the local art scene. Even if somehow limited and dealing with restriction due to its geographical position – being located in an Eastern European city - *Fabrica de Pensule* is also a victim of this imaginary art world in which sources of ideas are validated on a global scale. Moreover, the imagined or fictional part comes from the need to believe in some kind of structure that would be able to bring meaning and basis for further actions. This aspect is recurrent in my interviewees’ discourses, so I think it deserves to be dealt with in the frame of institution-building and developing a community.

Undoubtedly, the artistic field is known for its

lack of a well-defined career hierarchy. Compared to most industrial and some white-collar work, many art-related occupations (like painting or dancing) don’t have a formal seniority system or a wage-labour situation like being hired or being fired (Sharon Zukin, 1982).

The fact drives working relations into productive, as well as destructive directions. Moreover, as Zukin (1982) astutely notes, “artists who enjoyed the direct and indirect support of the state could also be expected to show their gratitude during political campaigns.” This dependency is a blessing and, at the same time, a curse for the independent sector, since their political views should either be tempered or articulated out loud, ideally regardless of them having state’s financial support or not.

The profile of those cultural managers and artists who came up with the idea of associating in a communal space for the future *Fabrica* fits Markusen’s (2006) description:

They remain a powerful source of articulated opposition to the societal status quo and a major force for innovation. In the built environment of the city, they play multiple roles in stabilizing and upgrading neighbourhoods and are sometimes caught up in gentrification.

In addition to the objective needs projected on the new space of the city, such as space for work, low rent prices, and relative independence, the initiators hoped to be part of a movement that would give them space for thought and comrades for their leisure time or public projects to be created. The expectation of civil society is that artists will be in the vanguard of artistic and even political thought.

Zukin (2009) finds a relation between global urbanism and the crisis of rampant capitalism, which she calls a *crisis of authenticity* by invoking Lefebvre and Jane Jacobs who also considered that “upscaling has brought about undesirable change in the urban imaginary, an unsettling feeling that the city is *losing its soul* (*apud* Chan, 2007). This topic is omnipresent in any context which deals with the future and directions which should be taken by the artistic initiatives and alternative spaces. The financial crisis and/or lower support from the state’s institutions are making artistic practice more restrained and precarious, but as Zukin (2009) is pointing out, all this “should not prevent us from transforming the aesthetics of global urbanism into support for a just and diverse city.” She writes about the necessity to prevent up-scaling and displacement through the politicization of “the meaning of authenticity to include the right to put down roots, a moral right to live and work in a space, not just to consume it” (2009).

There is also the slot occupied by participatory art as described by Claire Bishop in her *Artificial Hells: participatory art and the politics of spectatorship* (2012). Bishop gives a short recount of participatory art which consists of an artist “conceived as a collaborator and producer of situations”, the work of art - which is now unlimited by time and space - and the audience, “now repositioned as a co-producer or participant”. Walter Benjamin (2015: 14) reflects on the importance of an art form and remarked a relatable aspect:

The greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public. The conventional is uncritically enjoyed, and the truly new is criticized with aversion.

Even if he said it with regard to the technologically reproduced art, it stands also for the contemporary and alternative art of our time.

### **Cultural workers and the cultural precariat**

Alexandra Oanca makes a splendid retrospective of the state of affairs in the cultural sphere in Spain in her Ph.D. thesis *Bidding wars* (in the Spanish competition for European Cultural Capital). Oancă (2017: 191) reminds us that the term *cultural operator* or *cultural entrepreneur* comes from cultural policies at the level of the European Union. As she underlines, the officials

do not prioritize the production dimension of culture but they privilege culture for the economic impacts of the arts, and the cultural sector (tourism and spectacle), individualized consumption, and EU soft diplomatic power promotion.

The etymology of cultural entrepreneurs in the era of commercial art production is described in the following way: “Through the combination of these two terms, *culture* and *operators*, culture is seen as an instrument, as a coherent, closed element; almost like an object” (Oancă, 2017: 191). In this framework, culture is easy to be instrumentalized for economic and urban growth purposes.

Artists and cultural managers are part of a wider city-ranged discourse about culture and how should it be involved in the development, sometimes without being aware of it. Kothari via Oancă (2017: 196) brings up the example of relations of power in the situation of someone who is invited to participate in a project, to contribute with ideas and to have the possibility to shape a strategy. Cooke and Kothari (2001) define as ‘political co-option’ what happens when someone’s ideas get incorporated in a project out of the initial context when some input is perverted by the general frame. *Adverse incorporation* (G. Wood, 1999; Kothari, 2005) is regarded as a negative experience of participation. Since the artists and public activists are anyway very fragile because, in most cases, political managers or project managers don’t mention them in the final version of work, it’s even more disagreeable when an idea is incorporated and conducts to totally different results.

In addition, with the institutionalization of culture and instrumentalization of artistic production “local artists are a pool of free or underpaid (im)material labour both for ideas and for implementing the imaginaries of the city, particularly for its festivalization and museification” (Oancă, 2017: 196). The intensification of cultural activity, whether it resulted out of competition with other near cities, tourism or local consumerism drives to „the rise of the *creative precariat* which is one of the contradictions intrinsic to inter-urban competition and to the pressure to instrumentalize everything (Arvidsson, Malossi, and Naro, 2010; Holt and Lapenta, 2010; de Peuter 2014; Bain and McLean 2012; Mclean 2014 *apud* Oancă, 2017: 199).

Nowadays the situation of artists might seem as old as the world, but it’s not: the precarity of artists is directly influenced by the neoliberal capitalism we live in. The idea that an artist should be flexible and always ready for self-exploitation in the name of art with the price of her present and future social security is a new shade on the labour market (Oancă, 2017: 199). Moreover, this unavoidability of precarity is used by the state and the local administration to produce more artistic resources for economic urban development.

The right to the city is denied to those who are creating it through their ideas and their community participation. “The selling culture and selling the city as a commodity” (Oancă, 2017: 199) constrain cultural workers to

widespread alienation and resentment because they experience first-hand the appropriation and exploitation of their creativity for the economic benefit of others, in much the same way that whole population can resent having their histories and cultures exploited through commodification (Harvey, 2013).

In this context, commodification refers to the usage of some previously non-profit resources in order to develop the economy and to reflect present entrepreneurial class interest. It is implemented with the contribution of urban strategies proposed and supported by the middle class and its representatives in municipal functions - and art is one of the main commodified instances inside culture-led development.

On the other side, this very precarity could enable artists to stage critical encounters in relation to the main discourse about cultural production. Their involvement in a culture already monopolized by competitiveness and consumerism could create “potentially subversive subjectivities and a potentially subversive discourse” (Oancă, 2017: 200). Even though this is an option, the possibility of reproducing the status quo should be considered as a contra-argument for this approach. The inevitability of alienation circle – as in the case of Donostia - San Sebastián, a project discussed by Oancă (2017: 218) - makes cultural actors wish at least to contaminate wider culture-led development strategies. This could be seen as the kind of cynicism Illouz invokes in saying that it is “a particular structure of feeling which emerges ... in late capitalist societies (...) cynicism is the tone one is likely to use when one sees through and yet feels compelled to the same thing over and over again” (Illouz, 2007: 89 *apud* Oancă, 2017).

### **Making a commodity out of the culture**

Walter Benjamin (1970) writes about the *aura* of the art object and how it is transformed into contemporary culture due to technological reproduction and changing cultural practices. The trading market of artistic products is facilitating exchanges while this creates the opportunity for translating immaterial capital into economic capital. As consumption of niche-, high-, mass-art extended and made way to more diverse social groups of the middle class interested also in commercialization and profit-making, it became harder to trace the line between engaged in the market and engaged in social change art (Bayly, 2004 *apud* O'Connor, 2010: 16). However,

this *creative field* allowed the emergence of a *restricted* economy of artistic products that explicitly rejected market success yet gained high prestige (cultural capital) – which, in turn, could translate into economic success (O'Connor, 2010, 17).

In the present capitalist market framing, it is difficult to limit yourself from engaging with the mainstream value system or to withdraw from the need to have material and financial demands, which brings even the most independent and critical artist to a state of confusion.

### ***Fabrica's very beginnings***

The history of *Fabrica de Pensule* - whether at its end or still in the process of articulation - is strongly related to the broader context of what is Cluj-Napoca and how its cultural economy worked after 1990. *Fabrica's* evolution took place in the biggest city of Transylvania, a city with a multi-ethnic background, but also with a history of cultural stagnation until the 2000s. The lack of cultural events on offer and the scarcity of affordable spaces at the end of 2000 made this collaborative project desirable and possible. From there on, a melange of factors contributed to its success and also to its impact on the city. Hereinafter, I'm going to discuss a few of them, namely the transformation of the community's relationships with local municipal and non-governmental institutions (I) and the cultural worker's status as it was shaped by the European cultural policies (II).

The initial building of the community and later of the institution was, to a large extent, grounded in personal imaginaries about what a place such as *Fabrica de Pensule* could be(come). The motivations and values became transparent for some of the members from the point when they decided how *Fabrica* was going to be organized and managed:

[Communitarianism] has always been a matter assumed by a few people who happened to be at the helm and to direct the speech, give the tone, the opinion-makers in the *Fabrica*, but it was never a major trend. (K1, m, cultural manager, Cluj-Napoca, 2019).

Moreover, the projection of their personal role and of their art on the common picture of what *Fabrica* was going to become is easy to see from the current standpoint when its members recollect their motivations:

You contribute to an institution whose agenda looks directly at you, with people of the same generation and with common views, I think this seemed to be an asset and it really was (K2, m, visual artist, Cluj-Napoca, 2019).

My interviewees, though, claim that at the beginning no one really knew or imagined what they were going to build and what role it would have in their lives, as artists and managers. Neither was it clear how it was going to change

the art scene and the future brand of the city of Cluj-Napoca. Maybe only the international media appearances<sup>6</sup> were predicting the future recognition and the increase of image and financial capital.

### ***Fabrica's* role – a view from inside**

Art experiments have been held inside *Fabrica's* walls, and a lot of cultural and organizational practices (collaborative working-spaces, horizontal collaborations, and common activities planning) have been imported from abroad and put to work in the institutionalization process. New contemporary dance and theatre shows have been brought to the Romanian and local art world through a variety of partnerships and Temps d'Image Festival. A cultural manager and producer responded to my question about *Fabrica's* impact as follows:

If we want to identify the role of the *Fabrica*, it was to break down [the monopoly] of some institutions, but it wasn't an assumed role. The people who started with us or succeeded within our walls also managed to break down some [other] institutions, which later became more open to this type of art manifestation (K3, w, producer, Cluj-Napoca, 2019).

The reality of the local art scene was indeed poorer in artistic practices while knowledge about non-governmental organisation just started to be practiced and embraced. *Fabrica's* institutionalisation served as an example of how to practice, organise, exhibit, coordinate artistic and cultural projects or not.

The progress made by visual arts during the *Fabrica's* activity is difficult to be measured. However, the appetite for alternative exhibition spaces has increased over the past ten years. Also, the galleries that have existed over time in the *Fabrica* are proof that there are possibilities for affirmation outside of state museums. An artist told me that he thinks

there are good artists who have walked around here, and I think this place has managed to gather the energy of the city, it had its role. Hence some artists have matured at the *Fabrica*. And some practices. And that's what you could see in exhibitions every year (K4, m, graphic artist, *FdP* member, Cluj-Napoca, 2019).

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<sup>6</sup> New York Times: <https://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/12/art-matters-a-medieval-romanian-city-with-major-art-talent/?smid=tw-share&r=4> [From 12.11.2013, accessed in May, 2019], and Huffington Post: [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/art-cities-of-the-future\\_n\\_3949998?guccounter=1](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/art-cities-of-the-future_n_3949998?guccounter=1) [From Huffpost 19/09/2013, accessed in May, 2019].



The international recognition that came with the discovery of the *Fabrica* in the West – articles in some of the most famous magazines as the New York Times and Huff Post – helped the artists gain higher credits from outside and gave them more confidence in their own work and their value as artists and cultural workers.

### **Relations with other actors and stakeholders**

In the aftermath of the 2016 conflict between the two groups of *Fabrica's* members, the completeness and integrity of the institution have suffered. A newly founded contemporary art centre - *Centrul de Interes* [Interest Centre] – the result of the break-away group which had a part in the conflict - became a competitor for *Fabrica*, both on the art scene/market and for the municipal financial funds. Although they have different approaches toward art and also their social (dis)engagement on the local scene, from the outside the purpose of the *Centrul de Interes* is understood as being similar to *Fabrica's* purpose. Therefore, *Fabrica's* financial support from the municipality has diminished, even though the price for the rent went higher. The political profile of *Fabrica* has also contributed to the unequal support from the public sector as well as from the art world. A subjective explanation to the diminishing level of praise is given by one of the former executives, who spots the political animosity towards the assumed civic role of the *Fabrica*:

If we were nice, we didn't say anything, we went to [private events of] public functionaries, had not been going to protests, *Fabrica* would have survived [perfectly] (K7, m, cultural manager, *FdP* member, Cluj-Napoca, 2019).

At the time when the Canadian company *Roşia Montană Gold Corporation* (RMGC) was in the process of getting from the Romanian state the right to exploit gold at the mine in Roşia Montană (located at 127 km from Cluj-Napoca)<sup>7</sup>, huge image washing campaigns were on roll. One of the events funded was also TIFF (Transylvania International Film Festival)<sup>8</sup>. *Fabrica*, while in the first years of its operation, launched a wider protest action against TIFF by rejecting the partnership between the two entities. One of the *Fabrica* members has given me this example of an internally widely-accepted civic activism:

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<sup>7</sup> More on Roşia Montană protests: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/sep/04/protest-rosia-montana-gold-mine-protest>, (Accessed on 16.09.2019).

<sup>8</sup> Local international film festival and one of the main events from Cluj-Napoca: <https://tiff.ro/>, (Accessed on 16.09.2019).

You cannot say “I paint and I have nothing with RMGC”, in the context in which the whole society has something to say and you are sitting in your workshop. We all agreed there (K3, w, cultural manager, *FdP* member, Cluj-Napoca, 2019),

remembering also the direct and serious consequences that their action had. The cultural community in Cluj-Napoca joined the protest, and the TIFFF rejected RMGC funding, but the relationship with *Fabrica* suffered. Such a case reflects perfectly the power an organized group has when it decides to act, but also the vulnerability it undergoes, given the possible conflicts that arise and which may derail the rest of the artistic activities.

### **‘Art for art’ and art for commodification**

Art and culture are immaterial resources easily available as subjects of construction, commodification, and emancipation. It is on those who produce and diffuse them if they will serve for profit-making only, or for emancipation and developing social awareness. The fact that “artists serve as the conscience of the society: the most likely source of merciless critique and support for unpopular issues such as peace, the environment, tolerance, and freedom of expression” (Markusen, 2006) is an affirmation I found telling for the Cluj-Napoca intellectual and artistic circles’ expectations from *FdP*. In fact, this description is true only partially because the initial *Fabrica*’s association of forces – both artists and organizations – were not philosophically discussed, so the political views differed on a quite wide spectrum. Hence, expectations have suffered disillusionment, while clashes of beliefs put more and more pressure on the horizontal organization.

Talking with the artists and cultural managers involved in the making of the *Fabrica de Pensule* program I could distinguish between those who, from the very beginning, wanted to produce a kind of participatory art, and those who were interested in *relational aesthetics*, as Nicolas Bourriaud (*apud* Bishop, 2012) sees it. Those who remained in the building and continued their work, after the conflict, are akin to the participatory art described by Bishop, as it is observed from their practice. The difference is also present in the *Fabrica*’s members discourse:

At the performative art you always have a public, you manage the public, community feelings; you have to give in general, it’s a collective redistribution, and there [in visual art] is accumulation in private (K1, m, conceptual artist, *FdP* member, Cluj-Napoca, 2019).

The awareness among *FdP* regarding distinctions in personal values was unequal, thus reactions to the difficulties and the interests that occurred over time were different. The story told to me by a cultural manager and current member about day-to-day divergences -

and then you have all sorts of conflicts on the corridor, “but it’s the [loud] audience” at the show, yeah, but that’s it, or “you left me beer caps on the hall when the art collector comes to me (K9, m, artist, *FdP* member, Cluj-Napoca, 2019) -

reflects both the logistical and the philosophical discrepancy between the members.

An example of the conflictual political views on the role of art shared by different members of the *Fabrica* is the case about the hosted activity of *PAC* (*Autonomous Market Cluj-Napoca*)<sup>9</sup>, a local group who militates for inclusion and gives help – food, hygiene, and first-use products – to poor and disadvantaged people from Cluj-Napoca. After a few editions organized by *PAC* which took place in the *Fabrica*, they stopped hosting *PAC* and, as someone told me,

there were voices who said that we should not join leftist directions, or whatever. Not all members agreed with the social component. There is no consensus about “we help the poor and we all accept them”. There are voices saying, “I do not want to deal with it, and it does not represent me.” (K3, w, cultural manager, *FdP* member, Cluj-Napoca, 2019).

The ambiguity in *Fabrica*’s public discourse was always present: the outside visitors chose what fits them and their views while ignoring the rest. However, for the insiders, it was harder to work and to build something together - an institution which was becoming more and more important - and not agreeing on how art should be financed; if it should convert public money into private profit, or whether it should take part into political and civic actions or not, and so on.

Szilárd Miklós, an active member of a different alternative art initiative from Cluj-Napoca, said in an interview for *Gazeta de Artă Politică*<sup>10</sup>:

While ephemeral practices and forms of self-organization that resist commodification abound even today at the edge of the great institutions of art, all forms of resistance are embedded in the hypermarket of the ongoing revolution of Western modernism. This dual state has been internalized by contemporary art institutions in our geographical area.

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<sup>9</sup> Organized by the local anarchist collective: <https://acasa.blackblogs.org/>, (Accessed on 16.09.2019).

<sup>10</sup> <http://artapolitica.ro/2018/06/10/dosar-scoala-populara-de-arta-contemporana/> (Accessed on 15.09.2019).

This thought is shared by other artists from the local scene. The awareness that their artistic product will get commodified and used for profit raising is often very pregnant among visual artists targeted here:

I prefer clean, non-capitalist bullshit areas, but I think you cannot escape. And non-profit foundations and galleries that make left-wing projects, in general, are funded by large banks. It's complicated to be really an outsider (sculptor, m, *FdP* member, Cluj-Napoca, 2019).

Yet the gallerists are usually more pragmatic and permissive with the interference of the market in their professional artistic life, a perspective that often clashed with other more radical visions.

The art market is pressuring on artists, and higher education institutions are embracing the commercial dimension of art, hence, *Fabrica* could not escape this pattern.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, there are artists and managers who are keen on commercial success and there are those who oppose it. They cohabitated in the same building and tried to build a common contemporary art centre which lasted for a while. Nevertheless, the discussion on whether art should oppose the market, or should undermine it, or should embrace and work within it, is still open. The lived experience proved, though, that while discussions were being held, the financial capital-driven reality became too harsh a challenge even for an institution of art that envisioned itself as “alternative”.

### **The perverted cultural workers' critical discourse**

The representatives of *FdP* are subject to the description given by Alexandra Oancă (2017: 191) to the European cultural policies and their profit-oriented purpose. The community articulation and establishing came with great expectations both from the inside and from the outside of the group. Due to global trends in culture economy and the entrepreneurial approach to it, culture is regarded as just another service operated by artists, preferably according to the free-market rules, thus expected to bring profit and symbolic capital for other

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<sup>11</sup> The pressure of the art market is more of a problem for visual arts, since there are auctions, and a selling market which influences the value and the dynamics across the field. In the context of the *FdP*, visual arts dealt and struggled more with financialization. The performative arts do not have such financial complications and they fight for their legitimacy and survival without the help of the market, relying only on the audience and public funds, as a rule. Therefore, it should be considered that the commercial dimension is more often related to the visual arts. Nevertheless, the massification of contemporary theatre and the development of the local art scene influenced the founding of the performative arts from *FdP* too.

economy branches. The local administration development strategies and the rule of the free market reshaped the underground, non-profit activity of the local artists and the local organisations into a branch working for city-image rebranding. The object of this process was not just *FdP*, but the whole local cultural sector which emerged and/or flourished in Cluj-Napoca from the moment of the candidacy for the title of European Capital of Culture, a process that lasted from 2011 to 2016. Moreover, as *FdP* became an important actor on the local art scene it started to be seen more as part of an industry, not of a scene, which in the public imagination has been translated into a professionalized and highly organized, desirable place for any emerging or already established artist or cultural worker. Moreover, the constant association with the creative industries, even if denied by *FdP* members, stuck to the independent cultural sector, a label which came with different expectations from the authorities and parts of the public and with struggles for identity if looked from inside of the group.

In this logic of considering the culture and *cultural operators* as assets and sources of a good image for the city, *FdP* has become a reservoir of cultural managers and artists eager to contribute to the development of Cluj-Napoca and to its bid to the title of European Cultural Capital for the year 2020. The developments associated with this bid worked, in fact, as an infusion of European cultural policy to the local scene. Using terms like *cultural operator* was met without any circumspection and quickly became unquestionable even for some of the cultural workers who are cultural managers and *culturepreneurs* now.

Nonetheless, there were attempts to analyse *Fabrica's* climate from a critical perspective in an in-house project called *Art hotspots*<sup>12</sup>. On this occasion, architects, sociologists, and art theorists have been invited to discuss in a theoretical framework what is the *Fabrica* and how its various aspects work. Norbert Petrovici (sociologist) wrote about the internal organization and division of labour in 2015-2016, Iulia Hurducaş (architect) analysed the process of building and articulation of the *Fabrica's* space and the meanings of that formula, and Alina Şerban (art theoretician) contextualized the aesthetic effort and artistic content that the *Fabrica* had at the time. Such critical approaches, even if occasionally implemented by *FdP* members, did not have a full impact on the community, for many reasons. Among them there is the acute lack of time to analyse and reflect, as cultural workers are in constant search for funds for their artistic projects, as well as the reluctance to give up already available and incorporated practices and beliefs about art and politics.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://fabricadepensule.ro/hotspotart/media/publicatii/>, (Accessed on 15.05.2019).

### ***Fabrica* in the times of city's gentrification**

Even though it may seem too dramatic, I will cite an interviewee who says:

Cluj-Napoca is in the post-*FdP* epoch. Because the *FdP* was a very cool utopia, people went on from a necessity that was real, and not one that was generated by marketing or the idea of art-town Cluj-Napoca; there was no such idea, nor in our heads, there was no brand, there were no collectors, and there was no IT city. We were just doing it (K5, m, gallerist, Cluj-Napoca, 2019).

This description looks back with nostalgia to the time when everything was simply spun out of enthusiasm, without any clear foreseeable cultural or financial capital. This idealised reality is also part of *Fabrica's* history and its imperative to analyse it toward a better understanding of alternative projects and their influence of the city development. There is already an awareness of the city standpoint among cultural workers and artists:

The pressure of financing and real estate development will be seen in the various artistic practices - performance, theatrical, visual arts; we will see a decrease in the intensity of the projects, their level (K6, m, visual artist, *FdP* member, Cluj-Napoca, 2019).

Considering the current phase of the local cultural and artistic production, characterized by the precarity of the alternative art and a fabulous momentum of fast-cultural events, festivals and the rampant entrepreneurialisation of public culture and space, there may be something to be weighed by the next generation.

The question of whether the Mărăști<sup>13</sup> neighbourhood's gentrification has been made by *Fabrica* has no answer in sight. Indeed,

the bus on Henri Barbusse Street [where the *Fabrica* building is located] appeared not due to *FdP*, but because of the IT buildings that are there and the growing area. (K3, w, producer, *FdP* member, Cluj-Napoca, 2019).

But these two entities - the *Fabrica* and the IT offices are part of the same urban development strategy and thinking direction, which was proposed and made possible by local officials and enthusiastic cultural workers, at the same time. Strategies that contain the commodification of *Fabrica's* initiative

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<sup>13</sup> One of the big neighbourhoods from Cluj-Napoca, built in the state-communism time for the workers, and defined by a high concentration of buildings, meant to serve the near-by factories' workers. *Fabrica* is located at the outskirts of this neighbourhood.

for image and capital advantages at the city level, whether the idea of building on culture came first or the possibility to develop cultural initiatives were made possible by urban development strategies. The commodification is implemented with the contribution of urban strategies developed and supported by the middle-class citizens in the creative branch and its representatives in municipal functions. This means that there is a class- compromise around the priorities and the interests of people living at this time in Cluj-Napoca, even though there are small islands of resistance.

Cluj-Napoca makes, therefore, an example of a late-stage gentrified city, with many shortcuts and with wider effects at the city level. The stakes here are rather for the business sector. The city has become a place for investors' tourism looking for economies still unmonopolized and open for their contribution to urban restructuring, real estate development and jobs paid with the minimum wage (a few times smaller than in their home countries). The global competitiveness of Cluj-Napoca resides in its not fully commodified culture and not yet converted industrial platforms. The accession of the city in the regional and global competition on the market of cultural products and the high-skilled labour market raises some questions concerning local reality when it comes to cultural necessities or authentic representation.

The questions arising here are (1) which segment of the population benefits from the recently created collective symbolic capital, (2) which segment is highlighted and (3) which aspects are not considered suitable for inclusion in the city image. The answers are (1) culture entrepreneurs, business and real estate owners, (2) the creative young middle class open to multiculturalism, (3) unskilled workers, poor and disadvantaged groups. This is problematic for the inclusive development of the city, but it also offers *space for hope*, as Harvey calls it (2008: 112), to mobilize this creative class to build a new kind of globalization and anti-commodification policy, which is basically possible for the case of Cluj-Napoca, taking into account the examples of protests, intellectual groups, and existing public actions. The power of cultural workers in this context is disputable, though, due to their advantages – being aware of the changes while contributing to them - and also due to their disadvantages – being in a constant state of precarity which limits not only the space for political manoeuvre but also for local and individual reflexivity.

Looking retrospectively at the last ten years of *Fabrica de Pensule* and at the whole art scene of Cluj-Napoca, there are voices of active cultural workers, among which some *Fabrica's* members, who say that the quality and the authenticity in the number of events have decreased. Zukin (2009) advances the idea of a “crisis of authenticity”, which she relates to global urbanism and the crisis of rampant capitalism. Alternatively, the richer offer contributes to

competition among *cultural producers*, a positive thing according to some more liberal opinions. Meanwhile, the global competition the city has joined comes with more initiatives and cultural events oriented toward a global public – such as music festivals (*Untold, Electric Castle*). They are unrelated to local history and identity; therefore they alienate locals. The applied urban development strategies of Cluj bring “undesirable change in the urban imaginary”, while the citizens experience an impression, as described by Jane Jacobs, that the city is *losing its soul* (Chan, 2007).

## Conclusions

*Fabrica de Pensule* and by extension its cultural workers have become the subject of my research because I had the chance to work among those people, to go to the events they organize and to experience partially their recent history. Hence, I decided to look into this contemporary art centre’s working dynamics, values and principles articulation process and, most importantly, to see how the wider development strategies of the city interfere with cultural policies and cultural workers’ experience within this organization. *Fabrica de Pensule* proved to be an excellent case study for digging deeper into the recent cultural and economic history of the city of Cluj-Napoca. *Fabrica’s* ten-years evolution unfolds perfectly parallel to the development of Cluj-Napoca from the global financial crisis up until now, when we live at the peak of the current capitalist cycle.

The imagined community which *Fabrica de Pensule* was at the beginning, before receiving public acclaim, has evolved into an imagined institution that was supposed to fulfil different expectations and projections of its members. It has become also a mirage for people interested in foreign art and for experts in the area. Later on, the whole institution and the possibilities given by it made it grow and contribute to the broader art scene, probably unready for such a project, but just in time to become commodified and used as an opening for investments in what has become a diverse and creative city. *Fabrica de Pensule* and as a following the city of Cluj-Napoca are *social products* in Henri Lefebvre’ terms because they have become not only material spaces but also spaces represented by specific public discourses – of success, novelty and profitability – and also representation spaces, where phenomena such as conflicts, commodification, entrepreneurship take place.

I inquired whether its members – artists and cultural workers - play the role of gentrifiers or of those who are gentrified. The social and political reality proves that they are part of a structure, made of cultural workers and cultural



entrepreneurs, municipal functionaries and resisting groups, and the cultural representatives are not always aware and able to resist when their ideas are perverted or commodified. Even though *Fabrica*'s discourse and practices were not formulated as part of an urban development project, it ended generating commercialization of the cultural scene, contributing to the gentrification of the neighbourhoods and of the whole city. Particularly the city's social structure, therefore consumption patterns, have been updated and connected to the newly extended middle-class' financial resources and leisure demands.

*Fabrica* and the city's art scene evolved toward a context in which the cultural offer "provides a cultural basis for rituals that makes class solidarity obscure and hard-to-see" (Gartman, 1991). This is precisely the role of culture and artistic production in Cluj-Napoca nowadays due to the rather touristic and mass culture that is promoted, in the face of content that draws lines of reference for resistance and awareness toward the stage of consumerism and entrepreneurship in which society is located. The empirical analysis conducted in this paper is an attempt to answer the question about the cultural workers involved in creating the cultural context of the city while being part of a wider culture-led development urban strategy. I try to make sense of narratives, subjectivities, institutional and personal struggles, global processes as gentrification and art commodification and their impact on the local level.

My immersion in the subjectivities of those involved in the foundation and development of the largest independent art centre in Romania up till now has proved to be a forming experience for me, and I hope also for those who will decide to read this text. My visits and collaboration with *Fabrica de Pensule* made me curious and very sensitive about its past and particularly about its possible future(s). The subjective allure this research acquired is both a fulfilment and a warning sign for me. My ambiguous role as a researcher and cultural worker simultaneously provided me with a better ability to understand the struggles of those producing and diffusing cultural products and the limits such a precarious position has.

The last three years have produced a lot of anxiety but also wisdom about the role of the culture in urban development, about the strengths and weaknesses of cultural workers in a city that is going more unaffordable by the day. There were moments when in the same phrase someone told me with awe "*We made the Fabrica look very good and have thousands of people at vernissage and events, it was an enormous 'human swarm' "*" and then continued by saying

We should not fall into the feathers, eventually, any empire can collapse, you know, and it is interesting how praised and renowned you have been in the country and around the world (K8, w, anthropologist, *FdP* member, Cluj-Napoca, 2019).

This sort of attitude is what gives me a straw when thinking about what can be done by artists, cultural workers and general citizens living in an increasingly entrepreneurial city. Assumed reflexivity is one of the main concept which comes to my mind when thinking about the relationship *Fabrica's* members have with that space and place. The theorization and analyses made by them during our talks have been the best thing could happen to me as a young cultural worker and researcher. Our shared reflections on their experience with *Fabrica's* history is a consistent incentive for my conceptualization of ethnographic data.

The discussion of whether there is anything to be considered from *Fabrica de Pensule's* present and future experience - as an independent cultural centre in a city that made a mantra from culture-led development - should be defined by the high influence of finance and politics on the cultural sector. The unequal impact of financial structures and of the investment rush on various cultural dimensions - commercial and social art, independent and institutional art - brings considerable changes, both to the art scene and to the economy. The structural status-quo overpowers easily what artistic initiatives can do as resistance practice to the mainstream cultural products. The existing critical discourse needs to be recognised and praised because the role of art and cultural workers in the capitalist mode of production is to provide space for expression and reflexivity. Therefore, only a more fundamental reconsideration of prioritized political values and public policies could bring a change in the way urban culture and urban space are administrated, in order to provide a representative space for the marginal categories too, and to reclaim our communal right to the city.

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# ***Romanian Sociology Today***

## ***Editorial Note:***

***This is a special section dedicated to research articles  
from the field of Romanian sociology.***



## INTELLECTUAL FIELD, NETWORKS, AND REPUTATION ECONOMY IN ROMANIA AFTER 1989

MARIUS LAZĂR<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT.** In this article, I analyse the transformations of the Romanian post-communist intellectual elites, using as a case study the disputes in the cultural press in Romania from 2002 to 2004, disagreements that influenced the repositioning of the Romanian public intellectuals through ideological alignments. Those debates gave birth afterwards to a cohesive Conservative pole and to anti-conservative tendencies of diverse political orientations, which constitutes the origin of the current divisions of the intellectual space. The analysis combines the Bourdieusian perspective on the social field and the theory of social networks with the purpose to formulate a hypothesis concerning the competitions meant to produce and preserve the prestige of the status groups in the social space that generate conflicting ideological positions. It outlines an alternative form of reassessing the “reputation economy” outside the space of the commodity exchange economy, starting instead with symbolic exchanges. The study describes the social rationale behind status production, as a source of strategies for maintaining dominant positions in a social field.

**Keywords:** intellectuals, social field, social networks, reputation economy, Romania after 1989

### Introduction

The present study aims to analyse the changes in the positioning of the Romanian public intellectuals that occurred at the beginning of the third millennium, especially between 2000 and 2004, from a perspective that combines the Bourdieusian analysis of the social field with the analysis of social networks. The term “public intellectual” used here is inspired by the sociology of the professions and follows the typology described by Gisèle Sapiro (Sapiro, 2009) for whom the intellectual professions are determined by three factors that structure their field: symbolic capital, autonomy from the political command and degree

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<sup>1</sup> *Sociology Department, Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca, e-mail: mlazar59@yahoo.com.*

of specialization. The population targeted by this study thus includes an important number of essayists, philosophers, literates and cultural journalists who, in terms of the classification operated by Sapiro (2009), cover several easily recognizable categories: a) "critical intellectuals", generalists and universalists, who retain a strong autonomy from politics but, however, belong to the dominant space (essayists and prominent philosophers, such as Gabriel Liiceanu, Andrei Pleșu, Horia Roman Patapievici); those who are confronted with b) "contesting groups" from the same autonomous area, but concentrated in the dominated space, to which are joining c) various other categories of specialized intellectuals from the literary or journalistic field, critical spectators or mere supporters, who actively participate in the competition for producing and validating their symbolic capital (see also Gherghiu, 2007; Kurzman, 2002 and 2008).

The cut-off time sequence is not chosen by chance. Thus, after a decade in which the positions of the intellectual space were polarized only according to the acceptance or rejection of the new political arrangement resulting after the 1989 revolution, dominated by the parties associated with president Ion Iliescu and the National Salvation Front [*Frontul Salvării Naționale – FSN*], with all its metamorphoses, the beginning of the new millennium acknowledged a diversification of cultural divergences, opening lines of confrontation and inside the "front" - until then solidarity - of "opposition intellectuals" (anti-Iliescians)<sup>2</sup>. The disputes were converging around several key issues of the post-89 cultural redefinition, such as the legacy of prominent Romanian inter-war authors and their sliding to the extreme right<sup>3</sup>, anti-Semitism (Livezeanu, 2003), or the influence of philosopher Constantin Noica and the members of the "Păltiniș School"<sup>4</sup> in the contemporary time span. However, the present analysis mainly

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<sup>2</sup> A description of the broader context of the transformations in this area after 1989 can be found in my article on the interdependence of the literary, intellectual and political fields that have marked these developments (Lazăr, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Relevant here are, for example, the heated controversies caused by the appearance of Alexandra Lavastine's book (*Cioran, Eliade, Ionesco: L'Oubli du fascisme*, Presses Universitaires de France - PUF, 2002), denouncing the complicity of some of the most admired, after 1989, inter-war authors, with the legionary movement.

<sup>4</sup> "Păltiniș School" is the label ascribed to the few intellectuals of predominantly philosophical formation having informally gathered around Constantin Noica (1909-1987), a philosopher trained in the cultural ambience of the interwar period, whose proximity to the extreme Romanian right and links with post-war intellectual *expats* such as Emil Cioran and Mircea Eliade determined his supervision under compulsory domicile and then political detention, until 1964. Although socially marginalized, Noica exerted an enormous influence before 1989, through his essays and his philosophy, which combined a form of cultural ethnocentrism and the conceptual construction of an intended "specifically Romanian" ontology, but mostly through consistent meetings with his disciples, who were then growing for this personality a true cult (see Liiceanu, 1983 - Gabriel Liiceanu, *The Journal of Păltiniș: A paideia model in humanistic culture*, Bucharest, Romanian Book Publishing House, 1983). The most influential members of the group included Gabriel

revolves around two important moments, non-continuous but thematically close, which sharpen the controversies in the cultural space. The first is related to the contradictory response to one of the new intellectual stars' recent books, promoted by the members of the "Păltiniș School" in the late '90s and published at the beginning of 2002: *The Recent Man*, by Horia Roman Patapievici. The second moment - also anticipated by the disputes of 2002 - describes the intense and strongly polarizing debates caused by the unexpected challenge, in 2004, of the prominent role played by Andrei Pleșu, Gabriel Liiceanu and Horia Roman Patapievici in the cultural establishment of the time, labelled by the press as "the quarrel of the intellectuals". Both these disputes - and especially the second one - have determined new clashes between different categories of cultural producers (public intellectuals, cultural journalists, literary critics, and writers) and have largely established the main encampments according to which cultural producers position themselves. The controversies of this time span explain the creation of a conservative intellectual phalanx, defensively grouped behind Patapievici's anti-modernist manifesto in his book *The Recent Man*, as a reaction to the changes in the external perception of the group.

### The background of the controversies

The debates stirred by *The Recent Man*<sup>5</sup>, a true anti-modernist intellectual manifesto, began with the critical positionings taken by representatives of what later would be the anti-conservative core.<sup>6</sup> *Observer cultural* [Cultural Observer] magazine publishes in two consecutive issues, on February 5, 2002, and then on February 12<sup>7</sup>, six reviews on *The Recent Man*, a latest volume written by Horia Roman Patapievici, under a cap entitled "Opinions on a book with problems:

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Liiceanu, Andrei Pleșu, Sorin Vieru, Victor Ieronim Stoichiță, Petru Creția, Andrei Cornea. Under Noica's charisma, a new intellectual movement emerged, as an alternative to the official cultural establishment of the communist period and taking also a critical distance towards the literary hegemony of the autonomous humanist elites before 1989. The prestige of Noica, as well as the influence of the Păltiniș School members, recognized mainly in the intellectual milieus before 1989, erupted immediately after 1989 and became a most desired dominant current (Verdery, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> H.-R. Patapievici, „*Omul recent. O critica a modernității din perspectiva întrebării «Ce se pierde atunci când ceva se câștigă?»*”, București, Humanitas, 2001 [The Recent Man. A critique of modernity by answering the question: «What is lost when something is won», Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2001].

<sup>6</sup> Probably by coincidence, the first set of reviews occur simultaneously with the publication of an interview of Horia Roman Patapievici in the magazine 22, stating clearly his ideological self-positioning on a conservative side ("Liberal or conservative?", *Magazine 22*, XII YEAR (622) No. 6 (Feb. 5-11, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> *Observer cultural* [Cultural Observer], No. 102 (37) and 103 (38)/ 2002.



The Recent Man”<sup>8</sup>. Those who sign in the first set of reviews are Ion Bogdan Lefter - the director of the publication (“On another spiral of history”), Gabriel Andreescu (“The reviewed man”), Adrian Miroiu (“An essay: The Recent Man”), Valentin Protopopescu (“The Postmodernism of a Conservative”), Dan J. Ungureanu (“Hit hard the upstart!”). The only supporting article from this issue of *Observator cultural* comes from Vlad Alexandrescu (“The recent man” and the time of the Spirit). The next issue, from February 12, adds another 4 criticisms: from Florin Buhuceanu (“A reply to Mr. Patapievici”), George Bălan (“Double facing? Ignorance?”), Liviu Andreescu (“Apocalypse after Patapievici”) and - more balanced - Paul Cernat (“Cathedral of translucent fundamentalism”). The comments were aimed at neutralizing the uncritical spell cast on the readers by this anti-modernist manifesto, assumed to be a “conservative” program. Patapievici’s book was meant to be a response to the tendencies of multicultural progressive liberalism and to the “political correctness” thinking, and his critics were, therefore, denouncing the reactionary side of this type of thinking, of the grandiloquent-amateurish infatuation, the alleged elitism, the Orthodox bigotry and the unsupported “spectral”, deceptively Spenglerian and outdated civilization analysis of that much acclaimed author.

The rationale formulated in the editorial cap of *Observator cultural* asserts that the two polemic sets of reviews are meant to make explicit the dissatisfaction of a part of the intellectual world with the content of Patapievici’s book, dissatisfaction inhibited by the author’s prestige (“Meanwhile, in the intellectual media there are to be found many opinions formulated about the book, many of them pretty negative. Why are they not formulated in writing? - it is a topic of reflection in itself ...”<sup>9</sup>). Thus, as the introductory note plays the card of courage, the publication is assuming to surpass a blockage and to overcome the fear caused by the possible critical confrontation of Patapievici as one of the new cultural stars promoted by the magazine *Revista 22*. Its association with the group of the “Păltiniș *coryphaei*” Andrei Pleșu and Gabriel Liiceanu makes the setting up of the upcoming discussion of Patapievici’s book that will destabilize the pre-established cultural hierarchies at that time. We need to recall that these hierarchies had been maintained by the opposition of self-entitled “democratic” intellectual circles to FSN policy, opposition by which intellectual solidarities are at the same time “front” solidarities, ways of grouping around principles and personalities with symbolic value (Gheorghiu, 2005).

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<sup>8</sup> The phrase “a book with problems” recalls how critical comments from the official press were framed in politically undesirable books during the communist regime.

<sup>9</sup> *Observator cultural* [Cultural Observer], “Opinions about a book with problems: The Recent Man”, No. 102 (37)/ 2002.

Patapievici was one of these symbols of the opposition culture and, until then, his contestation came only from the adverse “ideological front”, through frequent attacks triggered by the extreme nationalist magazine *România Mare* and other publications belonging to the pro-Iliescian political groups. Or, now the appeal of *Observator cultural* was born inside the “opposition culture”, an attack that dismantles the symbol embodied by Patapievici’s and his high ranked supporters’ profiles altogether. But even so, the challenge of Patapievici and especially the openly premeditated group of negative reviews strengthened this prominent position that the successful young essayist held. Scandalized or supportive reactions will follow, accompanied by reproaches and attacks against “growlers”, on the behalf of his supporters and from magazines such as *România literară* [Literary Romania] and *Revista 22* (Andrei Cornea, Gabriela Adameşteanu, Andrei Pleşu, Bogdan Pascu, Bogdan Tătaru-Cazaban, Livius Ciocârlie, Petru Cimpoeşu, Virgil Nemoianu, Traian Ungureanu, Mircea Mihăieş).

Papapievici’s contestants were considered as belonging to the same side as the former ideological enemies of the “civic” anti-Iliescian intellectuals: Corneliu Vadim Tudor, former communists, and the extremist nationalists, to whom this kind of challenge would only feed the raging attacks on the “opposition” characters. The “besieged fortress” complex, which had hitherto weakened dissensions, was losing its suppressing force. A first display of the cleavage that will occur inside an intellectual body plays its final scene here, but the cutting edge of the swords will sharpen in collateral polemics, until the emergence of new disputes - tougher, more divisive - during the “Fight of the intellectuals”, starting with the summer, and then throughout all the year 2004.

This new phase of the debates, prepared on the one hand by the previous attacks and the replies - not yet fully consumed - is on the other hand occasioned by two independent events, with a triggering role. In the first part of 2004, the public is notified about the publication of a book analysing the intellectual space, signed by a Romanian sociologist established in the United States of America, with a literary and journalistic background in the Romanian world of the 80s and 90s: Sorin Adam Matei. His book on intellectuals had a provocative title: “The Boyars of the Mind. Romanian intellectuals and the prestigious groups”<sup>10</sup>. The volume included a series of essays on the sources of intellectual power and elitist claims in the Romanian cultural tradition, however, and was discussing also the strong influence of the contemporary “prestige groups”, among which the most notorious was the “School of Păltiniş” group. An early alert about the book content came from Luminiţa Marcu, which gave

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<sup>10</sup> „Compania” Publishing House, 2004.

it a favorable assessment: “Romanian intellectuals provoked from overseas”<sup>11</sup> *Evenimentul zilei*, May 2, 2004, which drew attention on the exciting analysis proposed by “the American” Matei. On May 15, Horia Roman Patapievici reacts veiledly<sup>12</sup> to Matei’s statements. According to Matei, Patapievici’s public success was presented as an artificial orchestration linked to a political scandal about a former Securitate officer, Captain Soare, who was seemingly tracking Patapievici for his opinions on President Ion Iiescu, in 1995. Shortly after, Ciprian Şiulea published another positive comment on the book (“The Skeleton in the Library”, *Obsevator Cultural*, No. 73 (330), July 20-26, 2006).

At the same time, however, a second event was to divert the positive trend of response to Matei’s book and triggered the great “Quarrel of intellectuals”: the award of the ASPRO<sup>13</sup> literary prizes for 2003. A jury composed of famous literary critics<sup>14</sup> granted *ex-aequo*, by individual and from a distance votes, the great prize for both the essayist Gelu Ionescu (for the *Tree in the field*, Iaşi Polirom Publishing House), and Andrei Pleşu (for *About the angels*, Bucharest Humanitas Publishing House); Andrei Pleşu had also been rewarded, for the same book, with a prize for literary criticism and essay. As the customs of ASPRO required, the very respected president of the jury, Adrian Marino, wrote a brief motivation for both the great prize winners, but what he did was to build an antithesis between the two award-winning books, praising the rationalistic and lucid spirit of Gelu Ionescu and approaching an insinuating critical inflection in the characterization of Andrei Pleşu.<sup>15</sup> On the latter, the president of the jury placed him in the extension of the “absolutist, potential or explicit totalitarian, mystical, metaphysical, ethnicist spirit, obsessed with « the Romanian being », under the influence of « Noica school », but he nevertheless recognized its

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<sup>11</sup> *Evenimentul zilei* [The Daily Event], May 2, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> „Cetatea românească a încetat să mai fie o excepție patologica”. Iolanda Malamen in dialog cu: Horia Roman Patapievici [„The Romanian stronghold ceased to be a pathological exception”. Iolanda Malamen in dialog with Horia Roman Patapievici], *Ziua*, May 15, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> ASPRO (The Association of Professional Writers of Romania) was at that time an alternative guild organization to the Writers Union of Romania. It was initiated by a group of writers, in majority representatives for the “80’s generation” group, an organisation which had attracted many other older writers, extremely prestigious, dissatisfied with the way things worked in the old “Union”. Among these prestigious veterans of the writing was also the critic of Cluj Adrian Marino, honorary president of the association.

<sup>14</sup> Adrian Marino (chairman), Stefan Borbély, Al. Cistelean, Cornel Moraru, Ioana Pârvulescu, Monica Spiridon.

<sup>15</sup> Adrian Marino’s distancing of the resolution of the members of the jury created a breach in the previous unanimous system, masking the apparent homogeneity of opinion in the field. All the members of the jury were, in fact, admirers of Pleşu, but Marino opposed the winner, for ideological reasons. It should be noted that Marino did not prevail over his position as honorary president of ASPRO, in order to impose or refuse an award, but accepted the decision of the others, with a separate opinion.

literary merits and, therefore, the legitimacy of the award. In his message, Marino lets it be understood that he made a somewhat forced concession. He invoked the difficulty of the jury he presides over (for which, says Marino, who was himself a former prominent member of the non-liberal Peasant Christian and Democratic Party, “The basic ideological orientation remains, indisputably, liberal”) of not being able to ignore “the intellectual quality of books written from an opposite perspective”<sup>16</sup>. This type of characterization immediately aroused the offended replica of Andrei Pleșu, who decided to return one of the prizes - the “big” one, keeping the other one out of respect for the ASPRO members. He referred that the argument drafted by Marino was “built in so as to justify the cancellation of the distinction offered, rather than its confirmation”, and that “the prize has been given to me as if it would be taken away”<sup>17</sup>, making also some malicious observations regarding the inconsistency in time before and after 1989, of the rationalist cultural options of the prestigious critic.

What followed next was almost a war. Press titles such as “The Quarrel of the Intellectuals” (Bogdan Ciubuc<sup>18</sup>) - but also the “Turbulence of the Intellectuals” (Claudiu Groza<sup>19</sup>) - came to describe, from outside, a whole whirl of justifications, personal attacks<sup>20</sup>, declarations of solidarity, bitter replies, calls to orders and cries of disappointment - pigmented by ideological duels in which the older polemics reactivate. Thus, again and again, the pros and cons of *The Recent Man* book reappeared. The book of Sorin Adam Matei, *The Boyars of the Mind* will be processed as mainly following the point of view of the attacks on the hegemonic position of the “School of Păltiniș” people, to which the latter reacted with vituperation and extreme irritation; opinions polarized and gave rise to two camps: one of those regrouping and digging trenches around the conservative option, now programmatically and explicitly assumed by Patapievič’s supporters; the other one was the camp of anti-conservative contestants, who besieged the establishment controlled by Patapievič allies from all positions. I hesitate to label that last camp as “liberal”, despite the explicitly liberal initiative of the most active contributors to the articles in *Observator cultural*, where Ion Bogdan Lefter proved out by far the most engaged, because, at the time they were formulated, the criticism came from several different emerging ideological directions, not yet explicit enough.

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<sup>16</sup> Prizes of the Association of Professional Writers of Romania - ASPRO for the editorial year 2003, *Observator cultural*, No. 223 June 1, 2004 - June 7, 2004.

<sup>17</sup> Andrei Pleșu, Replică [Reply], *Observator cultural*, No. 226, June 22, 2004 - June 28, 2004.

<sup>18</sup> *Evenimentul zilei* [Daily Event] of June 27, 2004

<sup>19</sup> *Clujeanul*, No. 224/June, 28 - July, 5, 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Gabriel Liiceanu would then publish a personal attack against Adrian Marino, accusing him of complicit hypocrisy with the communist power before 1989, unveiling a flattering written dedication of Adrian Marino on one of his books to the head of Ceausescu's propaganda of that period, Dumitru Popescu.

### **Bourdieu revisited: on “field” and “networks”**

What I am interested in is the description of how these divisions occurred and also in observing the structural logic that created and nurtured their accentuation, along with understanding the role of conflicts in establishing hierarchies between producers. To reveal the mechanisms that describe their dynamics, I use the Bourdieusian theory of the field, as addressed through a perspective specific to the analysis of social networks. With all the mistrust Bourdieu has shown to the social media theory<sup>21</sup> (Bourdieu, 2015: 539), I believe, along with other contemporary researchers (de Nooy, 2002; de Nooy, 2003; Bottero and Crossley, 2011), that field theory and network analysis are perfectly compatible. Moreover, Bourdieu’s reflection on the concept of social field itself encourages the premises of such an approach by the way it overlaps a “physicalist” and an “interactionist” model of analysis, in which the social field is defined at the same time as a “field of forces”, and “a battlefield” (Bourdieu, 2015 and 2016). Bourdieu emphasizes also the structuring effect, inherent to the field, which blends both its objective and subjective components. The structure is given by the system of external constraints which field agents are subjected to and by a system of structural oppositions between actors, determined by the components already mentioned. Thus, in Bourdieu’s terms, the field is configured by a system of (objectives) *positions*, (subjective) *dispositions* (both internalized, together, as *habitus*) and *position tokens* displayed through practices and strategies of action on behalf of the agents.

The Bourdieusian concept of “social field” overlaps two analogies. The first one, from a “physicalist” source, relates the social field to the magnetic field: the individuals are thus set in movement by the social field’s external forces in the same way as iron casting is ordered by the magnetic field’s power lines. Therefore, there is an objective determinism, external to individuals, which acts coercively upon the agents, independent of their subjective dispositions or personal characteristics. These forces are immanent to the field, being those that distribute the agents in a system of social positions according to the field’s structure and morphology. The second analogy emerges from comparing the social field to a battlefield, one in which individuals whose behaviours are guided by their own will and subjectivity, are using strategies of cooperation or, at the same time, strategies of competition or confrontation. Thus, there is,

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<sup>21</sup> Without abruptly rejecting the importance of methodology based on the description of social networks, Bourdieu believes that they can be responsible for producing a “finalist illusion” in the representation of social space, which creates the impression that the social is a byproduct of subjective forces, detached from external context, which imposes on them specific constraints (Bourdieu, 2015: 539).

consequently, a form of teleologism within the social field, which causes these subjectivities to interact, creating a compositional effect transformed into a structural constraint (interaction effect), endowed with a degree of independence to all these individual initiatives, as effective as that determined by the objective constraints. The interaction effect converts to an objectivized intersubjectivity.

Those two types of constraints infers that the conscious behaviour types within the field may be affected by a predetermined framework, which would be not a simple echo of the “objective historical forces”, as suggested by Marxist theory, and neither an effect of individual strategies (as proposed by methodological individualism, the theory of rational choice, the strategic analysis or various variants of neoclassical economism). The “social field” concept tries to overcome their limitations, proposing an autonomous ontology. What is specific to this ontology - which Bourdieu only suggests - is that it truly makes the two logics of the field (an objective positioning system, and a subjective one, determined by the struggles to impose a legitimate view on the world) intermingle: in other words, the social field is not just a sandwich with two separate mechanics - one objective and the other subjective - but a continuum, in which objective and subjective conditions coexist, but to varying degrees. The degree of subjectivization of the social field probably depends on the degree of autonomy of the actions in the field, on the ability of the actors in the field to act within it as if this is the only social reality - and the degree of denial of the objective properties by the properties - the symbolic attributes built by the actors, as it happens in the cultural field. The value of the segmentation of social groups, therefore, raises upon the symbolic factor, upon hierarchy and comparative valorisation of the subjects within the field – a trace that pre-determines the value magnitude of the segmentation of classes and social groups, as Bourdieu sees them.

From this perspective - and in accordance with the fundamental principles of the Bourdieusian analysis - the network is not properly an expression of the social field but rather a detector of it (Bourdieu, 2015: 539). Network interactions highlight the structure and the tensions of a social field to which the actors belong, revealing also the pre-existing constraints generated by the interactions within the analysed network. Those interactions themselves contribute to an ongoing reorganization of the relations defining the cultural field. The field itself is a package of forces, opportunities, and resources, objectified through subjected action rules and procedures (what “has to be done” or “has not to be done” in relationship to others) that express an opportunity structure for the way actors unfold their mutual contacts. Their interactions and the way they are organising the actors’ networks, in moments of a specific competition, are actualising the latencies of the field, highlighting their power lines and making

observable the social constraints of actor's behaviour. On this basis, the network is structuring gradually, in order to metonymically reflect the field as a whole, covering wider areas. The autonomous dynamics of the interactions in the network (their *autopoiesis*) manifest simultaneously as both an effect and a generator of the social field: the structure and the inside the field transformation of the networks affect subsequently the dynamics of the social space as a whole. Or at least this is the conclusion we can formulate by analysing "the quarrel of the intellectuals" in its evolution.

Thus, the prestige of the members of the "Păltiniș School" was already settled long before the beginning of the controversies in the early 2000s. Among the actors involved in the polemics, on both sides of the barricades, there existed affinities even before the time of the quarrels: for example, the conceptual project and the publication of *The Recent Man* had been encouraged from scratch by some of the New Europe College (NEC) students<sup>22</sup>. Also, Patapievici had already become one of the new editorial stars promoted by Gabriel Liiceanu's publishing house, Humanitas. On the other hand, Ion Bogdan Lefter - one of the initiators and promoters of ASPRO, was in amicable relations with Adrian Marino who, as Lefter testified in an 1988 interview, had recommended him for obtaining a Herder scholarship, which Marino had had previously obtained in 1986 (one must nonetheless notice that at the same time Marino had recommended the candidacy also of Sorin Antohi, Radu G. Țeposu, and Vasile Popovici<sup>23</sup>).

### Reputation Economy

By using network analysis, this raises an opportunity to isolate and observe how social networks help produce the symbolic capital of the actors in the social field, emerging status groups by establishing reputation hierarchies, understanding the divisions generated by these mechanisms and how all of these are maintained and reproduced. At the same time, I am interested in finding the demarcation strategies used by the competing agents, strategies matching the positions created through the divisions and hierarchies in the field, and their increasingly structuring forces. I am also interested in how the

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<sup>22</sup> This institute of advanced studies created and run at that time by Andrei Pleșu had among its alumni Vlad Alexandrescu, Mircea Mihăieș and Cristian Bădiliță. Patapievici thanked them in the preface for the effective support granted during the elaboration of *The Recent Man*. After the controversy generated by his reception, those former fellows of NEC will show solidarity with their colleague.

<sup>23</sup> Maria Dinu, "Ion Bogdan Lefter: Pumn de fier în mănușă de catifea" [Iron fist in velvet glove], *Mozaic*, No. 3 /2017.

dynamics of confrontations contribute to the reconfiguration, through and during the conflict, of all the relations in the field. The reputation economy is based on a “symbolic arithmetic” of competition, treating the reputation as a “symbolic good”, created by its circulation on a market of intersubjective opinions between competitors. Consider here the suggestions offered by other social network analysts, who treat the way of production of social prestige (DeNooy, 2002; DeNooy 2003), the complex dynamics that uniformize the space of opinions in structurally balanced networks<sup>24</sup> (Altafani, 2012) or the economic modelling of the reputation of an individual as “aggregate opinion of the others” about him. In the latter modelling, “an opinion is an asset trading in an imaginary market”<sup>25</sup> (Sawyer and Gygax, 2018; Sawyer and Gygax, 2019) and can be analysed by econometric parameters alike to the analysis of commodity markets.

The modelling suggested by this study, however, takes into account the distinction between the two types of markets (Bourdieu, 1992): one that corresponds to the “extended production field” of symbolic goods (equivalent to the economic space in a broad sense, a market where the success and commercial profitability are supposed to produce reputation as popularity validated by a public in the broadest sense) and the market corresponding to the field of “restricted production”, intended for circulation among producers, where reputation stakes aim at obtaining legitimacy by the recognition granted by peer agents. That is, the reputation of artists, writers or intellectuals is gained by gaining the admiration of other artists, writers or intellectuals.

The mechanisms of reputation production I am analysing envisage this second, restricted market. That is the place where competition aims to gain higher levels of appreciation towards other competitors, by accessing an area of authority that allows exercising the symbolic power that allows the making and unmaking of the reputation of others, as well as increasing their own reputation. Here, I identify the reputation as a form of prestige obtained by the gradual cumulation of several parameters, including notoriety, popularity, and recognition in the groups of equals. By cumulating the bonuses received from other agents in the field, those groups become “status groups” - in the Weberian sense - or “prestige groups” as conferred by Sorin Adam Matei’s analysis in *The Boyars of the Mind* (Matei, 2004).

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<sup>24</sup> Altafani, C. (2012) Dynamics of Opinion Forming in Structurally Balanced Social Networks. PLoS ONE 7(6): e38135. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0038135.

<sup>25</sup> Sawyer, Kim Russell and Gygax, André, Reputation As an Option (December 17, 2018). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3165409> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3165409>.



### **An actor-network model and some basic parameters**

Technically, my analysis starts by finding the positionings revealed by the participants in the intellectual debates, held between February 2002 and 2005, on judging the cultural hegemony of the members of the Păltiniș School. 294 press accounts<sup>26</sup>s were retained, retrieved from various cultural publications, out of which 232 contained 671 direct nominations of other actors, active in the cultural field at the time. They also envisaged other cultural “heroes” with symbolic significance for the competitors. The period subjected to the analysis was divided into several time intervals: the discussions regarding the appearance of the book *The Recent Man* were taking place throughout the year of 2002, and those engaged by “the quarrel of the intellectuals” between May 2004 and August 2005. Other positionings, on topics such as the relation to the ideological heritage and the value of the inter-war authors, the intellectual anti-Semitism and the prestige of the members of the “Păltiniș School”, cover the whole period.

For the construction of the model, the mutual contacts were considered, as well as the modalities of inter-subjective evaluation between the agents. Thus, the unit of analysis considered stands for the reciprocal evaluations performed by each actor to others, as uttered in the articles mentioned in the selected corpus. Evaluations express positive, neutral or negative appreciation attitudes and are quantified by values of “1” (positive ratings), “0.5” (neutral mentions, no appreciation) and “-1” (negative ratings). So, each debate contributor enters into relationships of approval, disapproval or simple monitoring (in the case of neutral attitudes) towards each other. The visual depiction of deployed relations among polemicists, as the debates are developing, is showed in the charts 1-6 of the Annex. There can be seen the way the participants connect reciprocally, either by positive or by negative assessments on their competitors. These charts reveal also the prominent position some actors own in the ongoing debates, some of them already benefiting from a previous reputation, and others building their reputation throughout.

An elementary quantification of these relationships measures the prestige effect these relationships ultimately produce. The actors are divided into **issuers** (those from which a verdict starts) and **recipients** (those to whom the verdict is addressed). Each of these types of relationships defines an adjacency directive IxR type matrix, consisting of n Issuers (I) and m recipients (R). The matrix,

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<sup>26</sup> The corpus of articles was selected mostly from the online press, during the debate on the “Intellectual Struggle”, between 2004-2005, and does not claim to be an exhaustive one. However, this proves to be sufficiently large in order to allow capturing the structural characteristics of the field under observation.

consisting of  $n$  lines (for issuers), and  $m$  columns (for recipients) describes the links between those issuers and recipients being unidirectionally connected (from I to R) through positive, neutral or negative value judgments (Table 1).

**Table 1. Directive adjacent matrix model IxR linking issuers and recipients**

	IxR	Recipients						Total
		$r_1$	$r_2$	...	$r_j$	...	$r_m$	$\alpha$
Issuers	$e_1$							$i_1$
	$e_2$							$i_2$
	...							
	$e_i$				$k_{ij} * e_i r_j$			$i_i$
	...							
	$e_n$							$i_n$
N		$n_1$	$n_2$	...	$n_j$	...	$n_m$	$\Pi$

Source: Author's table.

Thus, a certain issuer, where  $i = 1, \dots, n$ , can send a finite number of appreciative verdicts  $k_{ij} \neq 0$ , with different meanings: positive, neutral or negative, (0 is the indicator for the absence of a verdict) to any container  $r_j$ ,  $j = 1, \dots, m$ . Also, any recipient  $r_j$  can receive from a certain issuer a certain number of  $k_{ij}$  verdicts, measured by the same values. Now, here starts the dynamics of prestige and here we can see how a corresponding "reputation economy" works. This is because a matrix of directed relationships can be understood as a give and take structure, similar to an exchange of gifts (or the exchange of offenses!).

Reciprocity marks and maintains the solidity of social relationships. In the case of positive appreciation, it builds mutual recognition and mutual esteem. Mutual respect openly acknowledged - or just simulated, as in formal politeness relationship - is the foundation of group solidarity. Conversely, the reciprocity of attacks is, in the mirror, solidarity in enmity.<sup>27</sup> Those who attack each other recognize each other as each other and each other. The spiral of conflict is the reversed mirror image of group solidarity. Each individual in the network can be characterized by the amount he gives and receives, as his position is defined by the place he holds in the network positioning system describable by indicators such as betweenness, cohesiveness, structural equivalence, etc. (Wasserman and Faust, 1994; Scott, 2000), as well as by his ascribed prestige and influence.

<sup>27</sup> See *Addendum* to visualise the networks of positive and negative relations among the competitors of 2002-2004 debates.

The “reputation economy” comes with some measurable parameters, starting with two network indicators, the simplest and most intuitive.

The first is the **Notoriety index** (the *Indegree* measure). This is a centrality indicator that quantifies the interest expressed by the “issuers” towards an actor from the group of “recipients”, and is a measure obtained by simply summing the other actor’s verdicts to which the “recipient” is connected in the network.

In a mathematical expression, for the matrix  $I \times R$ , the notoriety ( $v_j$ ) of a given recipient to  $r_j$  is given by the sum of the verdicts that recipient receives from all issuers, that is, by the sum of  $k_{ij}$  on the vertical  $r_j$  of the matrix:

$$(1) \quad v_j = \sum_{i=1}^n k_{ij} \text{ for } j = 1, \dots, m;$$

Another indicator of centrality is the **Index of influence** ( $i_i$ ), measuring how many verdicts an issuer sends to the subjects in the group of recipients. The *Outdegree* of the issuer is the symmetrical equivalent of notoriety among the recipients: this is the sum of  $k_{ij}$  on its horizontal of the matrix:

$$(2) \quad i_i = \sum_{j=1}^m k_{ij} \text{ for } i = 1, \dots, n;$$

Here, however, some details need to be added. Prestige, notoriety, influence, success, popularity - all these ways of giving a meaning to reputation have to be understood in a more nuanced way. The subjects are linked by their attitudes which structure the network progressively. The matrix describing their formal relationships is a valued matrix (that is, the evaluations that the actors make of each other can be described as “positive”, “neutral” or “negative” - and can be scored appropriately, on a scale from, say, -1 to 1. Notoriety, in this case, differs from popularity: The notoriety is given by the totality of the votes, and it can be positive or negative. It can be “honourable” or “ill-famed”. Positive fame becomes synonymous with popularity.

**Popularity** is the equivalent of success and is therefore determined by the number of positive votes obtained from others. It is indifferent to the “weight” or “importance” - respectively the quality - of the verdicts it attracts. However, this “weight” can be moderated depending on the source of the assessment - that is the network prominence of the evaluators.

Thus, when we talk about the notoriety structure of a network (Katz, 1953), we can consider at first stage that notoriety can be attributed to those who occupy central positions in the network (so those who obtain more preferences from other members of the network). This means that in the network structure there will be a centre area, which groups individuals with high reputation scores, and a periphery area, where individuals with low scores are distributed. And the Centre will be the region of the “chosen” - of the

recipients who distinguish themselves from those at the periphery by their own success and are setting up a status group. Now it can be said that popularity has become prestige.

When those positioned at the Centre change their role from recipients to “donors” (issuers), that will produce a hierarchical differentiation between the recipients they target. The notoriety is transmitted to the other members of the network from Centre to Periphery, through choices following the principle: the chosen of the “chosen” are themselves “chosen”. That is, “the nominations made by the prestigious ones create more prestige to the nominees than the nominations of the less prestigious” (deNooy, 2002).

Prestige is therefore positive notoriety (popularity) validated by the status groups (prestigious in their turn). Instead, popularity can be devalued by prestigious groups. Otherwise considered, the prestige is popularity within the status groups. In other words, prestige can be measured as the number of positive appreciations that come from members of prestigious groups.

An indicator that takes into account this recursive and cumulative character of allocating recipients’ notoriety, directly dependent on the size of the issuer’s notoriety indices to which they are connected, is Bonacich’s power-based centrality measure. Thus, an appreciation from a prestigious person makes a prestigious transfer to the appreciated person. This means that the prestige score of the subject who in turn receives, as a recipient, an assessment from a person with a certain prestige score (issuer) should also contain the prestige score of the issuer. The prestige scores will thus multiply and will accentuate the differences between those who have many positive verdicts and those who have fewer, increasing the centrality of the first ones in the network.

For an adjacency matrix  $A$ , valued, with  $i$  subjects ( $c_i$ ) the centrality of any subject is given by the formula:

$$3) \quad c_i = \sum A_{ij}(\alpha + \beta c_j),$$

where  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  are parameters that contribute to the construction of the prestige indicator, depending on the analysis strategy and the dimensions of the network.<sup>28</sup>

The formula works both for the *indegree* values of the prestige index (*InBeta*), for the recipients, and for the *outdegree* values (*OutBeta*), which measure the influence power of each actor. For the type of network where the verdicts in the adjacent matrix are valued either positively or negatively, the *InBeta* and *OutBeta*

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<sup>28</sup> „The parameter  $b$  reflects the degree to which an individual's status is a function of the statuses of those to whom he or she is connected. If  $\beta$  is positive,  $c(\alpha, \beta)$  is a conventional centrality measure in which each unit's status is a positive function of the statuses of those with which it is in contact” (Bonacich, 1987, *AJS* Volume 92, Number 5 (March 1987): 1170-82).

scores will polarize the subjects according to their mutual attitudes expressed in the debates. Thus, in addition to the Centre-Periphery partition, the clustering of subjects with similar affinities and apprehensions will outline two antagonistic groups: “Conservative” and “Anti-conservative” camps, gradually structured, through controversial inter-group addresses and expressions of intra-group support.

**Competition and hierarchy in the intellectual field.  
Making the distinction**

**Table 2. Prestige and influence scores at the Centre and Periphery of the conflicting intellectual groups (average values, summed values, and the number of competitors)**

		Centrality Bonachich - normalised:				Subjects
		OutBeta (module)		InBeta (module)		
		Mean	Sum	Mean	Sum	
Centre - Periphery	Centre - Conservatives	15.43	200.55	19.99	259.84	13
	Centre - Anti-Conservatives	17.84	303.26	11.51	195.65	17
	Periphery - Conservatives	3.20	115.07	1.52	54.63	36
	Periphery - Anti-Conservatives	2.48	116.52	1.80	84.37	47
Total		6.51	735.39	5.26	594.48	113

**Source:** Author’s computations and table.

Table 2 traces the structural effect of these partitions, based on means and sums of absolute values of the *OutBeta* and *InBeta* indices. Each of the two groups – “Anti-Conservatives” and “Conservatives”, has its own distribution in an area of Centre or Periphery. The fiercest competition proves to occur between the two Centres, which concentrate most of the prestigious capital in the two camps. As seen in the table, the Conservative Centre has higher prestige scores than the Anti-Conservative one; also, considering the influence capital, the Anti-Conservatives at the Centre transfer more capital than the Conservatives.

Data in Table 3 display the distribution of the two forms of reputation capital among the two Centres exclusively, reflected by the *InBeta* and *OutBeta* indices, as well as the hierarchies at the level of each group.

**Table 3. The prestige capital and the influence capital of the competitors at the Centre of the conflict area in the intellectual field (2002-2004). Bonacich centrality indices, normalized. (Value of Beta: 0.111984649062573,  $\alpha=1$ )<sup>29</sup>**

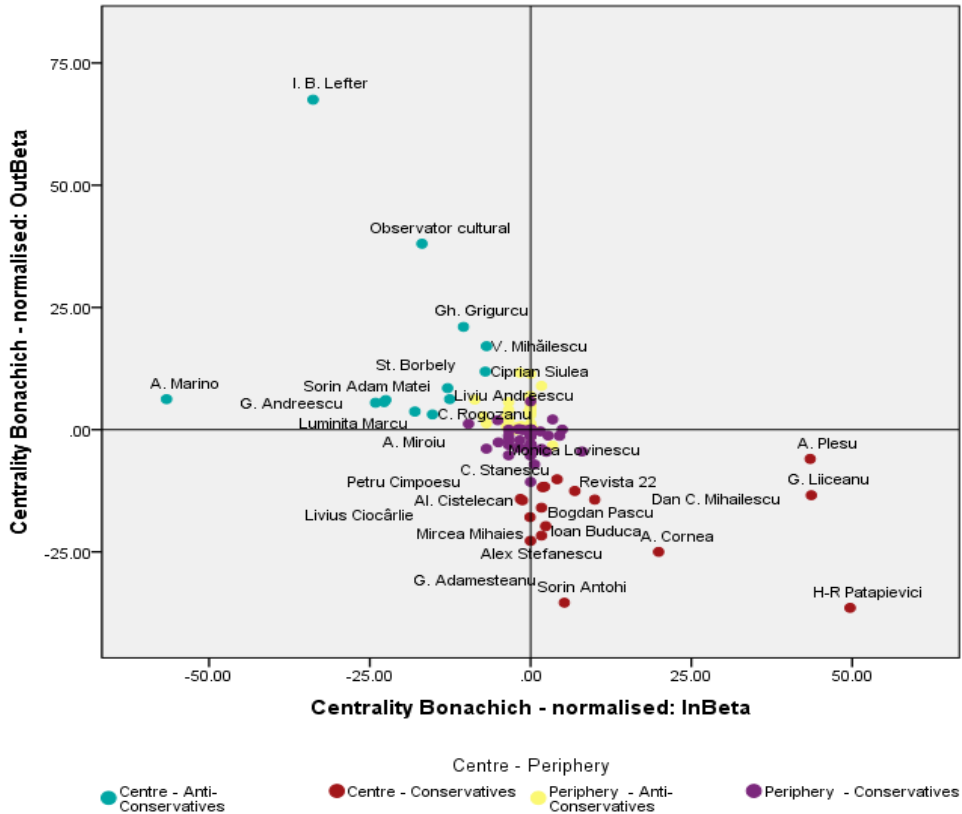
Competing Group	Competitor	Prestige (InBEta)	Influence (OutBeta)	Balance*
Anti-conservator	A. Marino	-56.62	6.24	50.37
Anti-conservator	A. Miroiu	-17.99	3.71	14.29
Anti-conservator	C. Rogozanu	-15.26	3.11	12.15
Anti-conservator	Ciprian Siulea	-7.05	11.89	-4.84
Anti-conservator	G. Andreescu	-24.11	5.51	18.61
Anti-conservator	Gh. Grigurcu	-10.44	21.03	-10.59
Anti-conservator	I. B. Lefter	-33.83	67.5	-33.66
Anti-conservator	Liviu Andreescu	-12.58	6.24	6.34
Anti-conservator	Luminita Marcu	-22.52	6.08	16.44
Anti-conservator	Observator cultural	-16.89	38.03	-21.14
Anti-conservator	Sorin Adam Matei	-22.79	5.64	17.15
Anti-conservator	St. Borbely	-12.91	8.5	4.41
Anti-conservator	V. Mihăilescu	-6.85	17.08	-10.23
Conservator	A. Cornea	19.91	-25	-5.08
Conservator	A. Plesu	43.48	-5.97	37.51
Conservator	Al. Cistelecan	-1.28	-14.46	-13.18
Conservator	Alex Stefanescu	1.69	-21.67	-19.98
Conservator	Bogdan Pascu	1.69	-15.96	-14.27
Conservator	C. Stanescu	1.85	-11.76	-9.91
Conservator	Dan C. Mihailescu	9.97	-14.31	-4.33
Conservator	G. Adamesteanu	-0.03	-22.73	-22.71
Conservator	G. Liiceanu	43.65	-13.41	30.24
Conservator	H-R Patapievici	49.68	-36.45	13.23
Conservator	Ioan Buduca	2.35	-19.74	-17.39
Conservator	Livius Ciocârlie	-1.59	-14.17	-12.58
Conservator	Mircea Mihaies	-0.09	-17.89	-17.81
Conservator	Monica Lovinescu	4.12	-10.15	-6.03
Conservator	Petru Cimpoesu	2.16	-11.66	-9.51
Conservator	Revista 22	6.87	-12.53	-5.66
Conservator	Sorin Antohi	5.25	-35.39	-30.14

\* Balance = the difference between the absolute values of the prestige capital and influence capital.

**Source:** Author's computations and table.

<sup>29</sup> The indices are computed using the UCINET network analysis program, version 6.684 - Copyright (c) 2002-19 Analytic Technologies, in a normalized form. The Multiple Centrality Measures routine - Bonacich Power - was used.

**Figure 1. Scatterplot - Distribution of actors by prestige and influence in groups engaged in the disputes within the intellectual field (2002-2004). Measurements based on the Bonachich centrality indices (standardized measures) shown in Table 3.**



**Source:** Author's computations and graph.

Figure 1 represents the placing of the actors in the Conservative and Anti-conservative camps as well as their level of prestige and influence. The two axes divide the confrontation space into two symmetrical spaces, marking the competitors' distribution in two opposite camps: conservatives are mainly grouped in the lower-right rectangle and anti-conservatives in the upper-right rectangle. The degree to which their position distances them from the centre of the chart describes their importance in relation to the accumulated prestige and influence they exert. Thus, the farther a name is from the centre (where the value is 0), the higher its prestige or influence score.

The horizontal axis – expressing the value distribution of the Bonacich *InBeta* index, normalized, describes the hierarchy of the prestige in the two groups. The more a name is placed beyond the centre of the axis (either in the positive or negative direction), the more relevant its reputation capital is. On both sides of the axis, personalities are antagonistically polarized, Conservative and Anti-conservative. So, in the Conservative camp, the competitor with the highest prestige is Horia Roman Patapievici (with a score of 49.67 points): He is followed by Gabriel Liiceanu (43.6), Andrei Pleșu (43.5), and then by Andrei Cornea (19.9). The rest of the actors of the Conservative Centre have much lower scores, but their importance is given by the validation issued by the tops of the group, the four with the most prominent scores. Adrian Marino has the highest score at the Anti-Conservatives (score of 56.6 in absolute value), followed by Ion Bogdan Lefter, Gabriel Andreescu, Sorin Adam Matei, Luminița Marcu, Adrian Miroiu and the *Observator cultural* magazine.

The vertical axis ranks the most influential personalities by the *OutBeta* index; their prestige capital is transferred as such as it increases the scores of other team members. Here the hierarchy at the conservative centre is changed: if Patapievici keeps his place at the top of the hierarchy, closely followed, as important influencers, by Sorin Antohi, Andrei Cornea and Gabriela Adameșteanu - Gabriel Liiceanu and Andrei Pleșu are placed much lower. At Anti-conservatives, Ion Bogdan Lefter stands out as the most powerful of the influencers, followed by the anonymous editors *from Observator cultural* (among whom Lefter is, in fact, the most active), Gheorghe Grigurcu, Vintilă Mihăilescu, and Ciprian Șiulea, while Adrian Marino descends to the bottom of the standings.

In conclusion, Table 3 and its corresponding diagram describe the dynamic allocation of symbolic gratification resources accumulated within the support networks, during the four stages that were timing the intellectual confrontations between 2002-2004, at the main core.

The table summarizes how the accumulation of symbolic credit raises upon two different dynamics of prestige allocation. On the one hand, there is a segment whose popularity index (indegree) increases progressively in an exponential manner. Marino, Pleșu, Liiceanu, and Patapievici accumulate the most important popularity scores, an effect produced largely through their mutual support during the confrontations, as owners of the highest indexes. On the other hand, surprisingly, the contribution of Marino, Pleșu and Liiceanu to the growths of their neighbour's index - measured by the outdegree scores - is relatively modest, compared to their popularity: it is clear that they receive more sympathy than they are kin to offer. However, when they offer their support, the effect is considerable, and the mutual exchange of appreciation between the owners of high scores - such as Liiceanu, Pleșu, and Patapievici, in their group,



builds a real **prestige accelerator**, which finally raises the total conservatives notoriety score more than the score of their anti-conservative competitors. There seem to exist a sort of asymmetry rule in giving and receiving popularity, which can explain the exponential progression of prestige.

As for Patapievi, he responds with more generosity to the appreciation gestures expressed by others, being the person in his group who offers more than he receives. Its recognition capital is largely provided by his recruitment in the status group (by Pleșu and Liiceanu, in particular), but also by the appreciation of the others, his popularity being more democratically shared with others in his group. As a newcomer to the status group, Patapievi will also be the one to develop a courteous relationship with the semi-periphery. He will play an intermediary role in establishing amicable relationships between the members of the status group and the most appreciated supporters, as being at the heart of the intense traffic between those segments. His behaviour, on the one hand, makes the hierarchy bond through the consolidation of the leading position of the status group, and on the other hand, ensures the necessary legitimation of the status group among the others.

Holding a prestige capital (InBeta) lower than the influence capital (OutBeta), Ion Bogdan Leter is an illustrious influencer, whose authority is built through the abundance of nominations he produces, more than by recognizing the affinities that come from the peripheral literary area, although the one who transfers a capital of more substantial influence is the renowned Mircea Cărtărescu. It is worth noting here the role played by the writers' segment, following a tendency to polarize the literary field in a similar manner as the intellectual field (Lazăr, 2015).

The discrepancy between the *indegree* and the *outdegree* (the *balance* between what is received and what is offered) is a measure of self-preservation of the supremacy in the group hierarchy: the more prestige capital one accumulated, and at the same time the more it is scarcely managed by redistribution only within a group of equals - the stronger the dominant position of prestige group strengthens. If the bonuses were to be distributed equally to all the members in the support group, then the differences between the teammates would become minimal. The continuous reproduction and consolidation of a position in the hierarchy of members with high status members are made through an unequal allocation of rewards and by adopting *deference strategies*. The members of the Centre may call other members outside their status group either as "the talented young X" when they want to promote them or by calling them "some y guy" when they want to minimize a name. In the reputation economy, deference strategies make the reward value directly proportional to the rarity of acquiring it right from the "hands" of those who form the status group, not from intermediaries.

The production of symbolic capital is made by appealing to these strategies of marking their distinction by actors who rely on their uncontested recognition by a public who, through the act of recognition, will consider themselves as part of the social order represented by the elite (Bourdieu, 1984; Daloz, 2010). Those to whom these marks are addressed can accept without critical inquiry their exposure, especially if their reception is strengthened by the confirmation of the most prestigious actors. That is why mutual confirmation - the prestigious collective parades, through which Pleșu confirms Liiceanu and Liiceanu confirms Pleșu, for example - contributes to the mobilization of social capital, as part of the way of accumulation, consolidation, and reconfirmation of status and social credibility.

The mechanisms that produce the differentiations are thus governed by two social logics immanent to the field, which lead to the segregation and polarization of the groups. One deduction is, as we have seen, that of the exponential accumulation of prestige by those who are already validated, which multiplies with the accumulation of the scores of the most prestigious. Success continues to attract success. This is glory exhilaration. Another logic, however, relates to the struggle of accumulating symbolic capital in the group, due to the low status of those in the periphery, very little contributing to the value accumulation within the group. It is the despondency of symbolic capital accumulation.

Both these tendencies generate structural constraints, externally regulating the status of individuals in the network and providing a basis for individual escape strategies from marginalization. They can provide an explanatory framework for the movements of the actors inside and outside the group - promotions, downgrades, defection to other groups that might offer better chances for raising an individual symbolic capital. At the same time, the marginal position within the network can lead to a more probable chance of migration from in-group to out-group, higher than for those at the centre.

But these are the logics of the extremes because there are also intermediate situations, which lead to the increase of prestige indices by aggregating the behaviour of the marginal actors when they are numerous enough, as they issue positive or negative scores to the centre. The idea is that the “despondency of accumulation” of the symbolic capital can be broken by a “revolutionary” appeal to the strategies of mobilizing the “many” against the “few”. It is exactly the situation that lays at the origin of confrontations such as those related to *The Recent Man* or to the “quarrel of intellectuals”. These kinds of struggles are in fact true wars of repositioning and their deeper social stakes aim to the restoration of the group order and to increase the chances for status improvement by contesting the actual hierarchies.

### The balance of forces and the distribution patterns of the judgments

But perhaps the key element for explaining the intellectual field dynamics during the analysed period is the balance of power in the two groups. These are not symmetrical and make it clear that there are different ways in conflict for mobilizing the conservatives and anti-conservatives. Table 4 summarizes the assessment exchanges between the two groups, both vertically, between Centre and Periphery, and horizontally, between the conservatives and anti-conservatives. Relationships within the table are directed, “give and take” like, oriented from issuers to recipients.

**Table 4. Positive and negative acknowledgements, between Centre and Periphery and between anti-conservatives and conservatives in the debates in the intellectual field between 2002-2004**

Value	Centrality of issuer	Centrality of recipient				Total
		Centre - Anti-Conservatives	Centre - Anti-Conservatives	Centre - Anti-Conservatives	Centre - Anti-Conservatives	
positive	Centre - Anti-Conservatives	31	9	13	13	66
	Centre – Conservatives	7	52	8	8	75
	Periphery – Anti-Conservatives	19	8	7	3	37
	Periphery – Conservatives	9	34	5	8	56
	Total	66	103	33	32	234
negative	Centre - Anti-Conservatives	4	64	3	14	85
	Centre – Conservatives	67	4	10	6	87
	Periphery – Anti-Conservatives	5	50	2	8	65
	Periphery – Conservatives	17	4	5	6	32
	Total	93	122	20	34	269

**Source:** Author’s computations and table.

Now, looking at the area in the table that shares positive feedback one can notice that the patterns of gratification between centre and periphery of the two opposed actors’ segments differ significantly. Thus, looking at the values of the entries expressing totals in the group anti-conservatives, the total positive feedback distributed and received by the anti-conservative centre are of the

same volume (66 to 66) and approximately equal to the anti-conservative periphery (37-32). Instead, at the conservatives, the centre receives many more positive appreciations than it distributes (receives 103 assessments and provides 75), while peripherals conservatives give more than they receive (56 appreciations made to others and only 32 received).

Thus, there is a tendency towards capitalizing on the positive reputation (popularity) more important towards the centre, in the conservatives, as compared to the anti-conservatives: the conservative subjects in the status group tend therefore to keep their own capital within the centre of their own segment (52 of the 75 positive appraisals being distributed in this prestigious nucleus). It is also noted that an important amount of appreciation is attained, towards the centre, and from the conservative periphery, concerned to send more positive messages to the group's core of authority than to its own peripheral area. Thus, a centralized structure of distribution and collection of bonuses is suggested, in which the prestigious capital accumulates more towards the centre and dissipates towards the periphery. A similar trend, but much weaker and "decentralized", can be observed also at the level of the anti-conservative segment, where the symbolic capital reproduces almost as well at the centre, without decreasing to the periphery.

One may note a more important trend towards capitalization of positive reputation (popularity) at the centre, the conservatives versus anti-conservative: conservative status group members show a stronger tendency to keep their own capital within the centre of their own segment (52 of the 75 positive reviews are distributed throughout this prestigious core). One can also observe that a significant amount of feedback arrives at the centre from the conservative periphery keen to send more positive messages to the authority nucleus of the group than to its own periphery. There exists a centralized structure for distribution and collection of gratifications through which the prestige capital accumulates more at the centre and dissipates at the periphery.

A similar trend, but much weaker and "decentralized" can be seen in the anti-conservative segment, where symbolic capital is reproduced almost as well at the centre, without being attenuated at the periphery. What we noticed in the previous paragraphs, namely that is a tendency in the conservative camp to capitalize prestige favouring their status group, it is also confirmed here. But it is balanced by the positive signals coming from the periphery towards the centre. Thus, proving its legitimacy, the conservative centre is much better supported, through approvals, by its own group, compared to the anti-conservative centre, where the in-group support is much weaker.

Now, returning to the area of Table 3. dedicated to negative values, we notice that the attacks exchanged between the two camps are close at the centre (85 attacks by the anti-conservatives and 87 attacks by the conservatives

towards the rival centre. However, it differs from the performance of the peripheries, where lower-status anti-conservatives deliver twice as many negative verdicts as the periphery conservatives. Most of the attacks of the anti-conservative periphery go to the conservative centre (50 out of 65), while the conservative periphery address almost half of their attacks to the anti-conservative centre (17 out of 32), compared to the periphery of the rivals.<sup>30</sup>

In the end, we see conservatives being more cohesive in their judgments, more caring and more willing to fight for their leaders in the status group, while anti-conservatives are ready to challenge hierarchy symbolic of the cultural field, but do not get enough support from their own peers. Anti-conservative supporters have no other clotting solidarity points outside the urge for contestation and invest confidence neither in the opponents of their own camp.

### Final remarks

The present study shows, overall, how the polarization of the intellectual field comes about by the progressive outline of a set of critical attitudes addressed to an intellectual fraction self-defined as conservative, attitudes that end by outlining a common reaction, but not quite a group, a form of solidarity, but not an assumed common ideology, throughout the criticism of cultural conservatism exposed by the conflicts of the “quarrel of intellectuals”. One can, therefore, observe a process of regrouping and self-recognition of the conservatives, coming from a progressive dissociation from the conservatives who until then have monopolized the public esteem. To this, the conservative camp reacts in solidarity and grouped but losing ground as the polemics deepens, putting them on the defensive.

On the other hand, the polemics around *The Recent Man* indicate a critical change in the level of the intellectual environment insufficiently controlled by the GDS and “Păltiniș School” members, threatened to be delegitimized in their sovereign place. Patapievici’s open positioning on the side of a nebulous philosophical conservatism is embraced and fully assumed by the “Păltinișeni”. This is the moment when Patapievici is fully accepted as an equal, continuing to be promoted with the same assiduity. All the disputes that followed have only strengthened this solidarity, multiplying the interventions of mutual support.

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<sup>30</sup>Another way to read Table 4 is by acknowledging the in-group support against the out-group attack initiative. This estimates the legitimacy of the attacks, being measured as a ratio between the number of out-group-oriented attacks (negative verdicts transmitted), at the numerator, and the number of positive verdicts received in-group that are supposed to endorse them, to the denominator. As a global indicator, the total number of claims in the entire population, based on the number of attacks ( $234/269 = 0.87$ ) might be a relevant comparative index.

What happened during the “quarrel” led to a gradual dismantling of the consensus about the symbolic supremacy of the “Păltiniș School” group, but not to the emergence of a cohesive and coherent alternative group, with shared ideology, but, rather, to some temporary coalitions. The criticism initiated by the *Observator cultural*, on the other hand, provoked a reaction of solidarity in the conservative camp, which would then acquire group characteristics and assess common subordination to the ideology of their prestige group.

Without immediately cutting between winners and losers, “The Quarrel” puts an end to the monopoly on the symbolic capital that establishes the intellectual field, but, at the same time, transfers the competition outside, leaving some victims behind. In 2005, Gabriela Adameșteanu, the editor-in-chief of the *Revista 22* had to abandon her position as a reprimand following the publication of a series of critical essays on cultural strategy topics signed by Mircea Martin. The blame came from some “influential voices” (Adameșteanu, 2014: 353) within the GSD – The Group for Social Dialogue leadership (we might think was the voice of Liiceanu) accusing a less partisan position displayed during the *Revista 22*’ war with the anti-conservatives.<sup>31</sup> In the same year, Ion Bogdan Lefter was also forced to leave the editorial office of *Observator cultural*, after a conflict with obscure roots against the magazine’s administration. Not accidentally, following these polemics, conservative groups reformed and counter-attacked, occupying positions in the institutional sphere, through an alliance with the political leadership.

The “Băsescu intellectuals”, as some of these conservative orientation protagonists will be labeled lately, will be pushed to a politicizing game as a strategy of reproducing the reputation supremacy made possible by controlling the institutions that ensure symbolic domination. This game implies, on the one hand, a courtship of the political factors in the immediate vicinity, towards which the intellectual field had already shown affinities, as the attraction to the anti-SDP (Social Democratic Party) opposition, manifested in 2004 by an alliance between the LDP (The Liberal Democratic Party) and NLP (National Liberal Party), the opposition forces that determined Traian Basescu’s victory in the presidential elections of 2004. In the new establishment, where both conservatives and anti-conservatives had their places, Andrei Pleșu will become presidential adviser and H-R Patapieviçi will lead RCI (The Romanian Cultural Institute), while a number of NEC (New Europe College – Pleșu’s former Institute for Advanced Studies) will occupy positions in diplomacy, administration or research institutes. They will control the means of accumulating symbolic capital in the intellectual field and the forms of institutionalized reproduction of the anti-communist nebula that formerly legitimized the opposition to the SPD in the post-socialist stage. The breakdown, later, of the political governing coalition

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<sup>31</sup> See also Gheorghiu, 2005; Runceanu, 2008.

under the pressure of Basescu and his party will deepen the clash between conservatives and anti-conservatives. The latter pushed to the brink, will seek refuge in liberalism or later in the fledgling movements to the left.

Parallel transformations and discrete tendencies of politicization will also affect the literary field, where the dominant intellectual conservative subfields influence the public discourse of more and more writers or literary critics (see also Lazăr, 2015). Denouncing “political correctness”, displaying new forms of orthodox pietism, re-inventing the “civilizational” discourse of a Europe that “had to be saved” by the assault of immigrants, emerging atheism and postmodern realism – that embodied the main trend conquering the new “junk conservatism”<sup>32</sup> of the literary elites. Among them, there were also writers with a reputation for dissent and fight for freedom before 1989.

A new formula of ideological conformity, that sometimes received its reward, showed up. It is the symbolic investment, with double profit, for the author and for the publisher, which guides the careers of those who are launched at Humanitas publishing house, making them assured for their success and notoriety. Literary releases would be sumptuously announced by prefaces of the events in *Revista 22*, with discourses functioning as ways of transferring prestige from Liiceanu, or Pleșu, to chosen newcomers. Let us remember that H.R. Patapievici had been published through such a ceremony at the launch of the volume *Politice* [Of Politics] after the author was greeted in *Revista 22* by Gabriel Liiceanu as a revelation. Mircea Cărtărescu had started his career as a brand author at Humanitas in early 1997, with the launch of the volume *Orbitor* [Dazzling], at the Writers’ Union, in the presence of the famous critics Nicolae Manolescu and Laurențiu Ulici. Other “first shelf” authors promoted by Gabriel Liiceanu’s publishing house and becoming stars later were Dan C. Mihăilescu, Neagu Giuvara, Lucian Boia, Ioana Pârvulescu, Ana Blandiana, Andrei Cornea, Radu Paraschivescu.

On the opposite side, the anti-conservative spectrum remained little coagulated, fragmented in various political currents weakly institutionalized, but still waiting for the opening of new opportunities and moments of consecration. However, history is ironic: 30 years after the 1989 revolution, the fierce demand for intellectual and artistic autonomy from politics claimed by the most vocal intellectual opponents of the communist regime seems forgotten. The cultural field is re-politicized, and, as before, ideological demand seems to open the gates of public recognition and fame. Everything has changed for staying the same.

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<sup>32</sup> Gabriel Andreescu, „20 de ani de războaie culturale. Victoria junk-conservatorismului” [20 years of cultural wars. The victory of junk-conservatism], in Matei, S. A., & Momescu, M. (Eds.). (2010) *Forum idols: Why a middle class spirit is preferable to the “elite” of public intellectuals*. Indianapolis: Ideagora. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-54248-8>, pp. 67-81.

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## THREE DECADES AFTER. ADVANCING CAPITALISM AND THE (RE)PRODUCTION OF ROMANIA'S SEMI-PERIPHERALITY

ENIKŐ VINCZE<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT.** The article elaborates upon the production of Romania's semi-peripherality at the intersection of *long-durée* dependency, uneven development, Eastern enlargement, and imperial politics, while addressing the advancement of capitalism not as a purely economic endeavour, but as a process of political subjection. It discusses the particular status of Romania in contemporary global capitalism by analysing the broader context of (1) a semi-periphery country subjected to a *long-durée* dependency; (2) uneven development underlay by imperial politics as endemic feature of the neoliberal European Union; (3) 'Eastern enlargement' and its economic conditionalities; (4) unevenness in the EU in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis. As its conclusion, the article notes that in the past three decades, each of these components had a productive (material or symbolic) function in the reproduction of Romanian's semi-peripherality as part of capitalism's advancement in the new Millennium.

**Keywords:** semi-peripherality, capitalism, *long-durée* dependency, uneven development, Eastern enlargement, imperial politics, Romania

### Introduction

The document *Europe in 12 lessons* (European Commission, 2016) recalled that the European Union was created to achieve political goals through economic cooperation to ensure economic growth and be able to compete on the world stage with other major economies. Decision-makers recognized that the European Single Market (created in 1986) could provide for the European companies a broader base than just their national home market; therefore, the EU endeavoured to remove obstacles to trade (European Commission, 2016: 8). Out of the four freedoms established by the 1993 Maastricht Treaty, the free movement of capital was crucial for the evolutions of neoliberal global capitalism that needed new territories for capital investment, new markets for the surplus product as well as new sources of the cheap, both skilled and unskilled labour force. Critical

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<sup>1</sup> Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca, e-mail: eniko.vincze@ubbcluj.ro.

analysts of the neoliberal European Union observe that the Treaty defines the single market as an area without internal frontiers, in which the free movement of goods, persons, services, and capital is ensured, however this single market in reality functions as a union of states that compete with one another. Therefore, even if discursively the EU is constructed as a space where competition goes hand in hand with solidarity, and also with socio-economic and territorial cohesion, the actual construction of the Single Market shows that ‘in the rules, in accordance with which competition takes place, social standards do not have anything like the importance of the free movement of capital’ (Lehndorff, 2015: 10). Under these conditions, we expect that existing inequalities between the Member States will increase rather than diminish, the uneven development within the ‘competition union’ being mostly evident ‘between the export and surplus oriented core countries, and the periphery countries dependent to a considerable extent on imports and financed by external credit’ (Lehndorff, 2015: 10).

The story of incorporating Romania into global capitalism as ‘emergent market’ and ‘fragile democracy’ did not start in 1990. The economic exchanges and political diplomacy between Romania and the institutional predecessors of the European Union know an extended pre-history. Nevertheless, at this very moment of three decades after the end of the Ceaușescu regime, this paper aims to recall how the post-1990 ‘Eastern enlargement’ reproduced the country’s dependent semi-periphery status.

The significant contribution of this article to critical European Studies consists in adopting the political economy perspective of uneven development as endemic feature of capitalism (Smith, 1984; Harvey, 2005, 2006) to the critical analysis of ‘Eastern enlargement’ and imperial politics (Böröcz and Kovács, 2001; Behr, 2007; İçener, 2009; Russell, 2013; Stivachtis, 2018). More precisely, the paper aims to elaborate upon the (re)production of Romania’s semi-peripherality at the intersection of *long-durée* dependency, uneven development, imperial politics, and Eastern enlargement. In this sense, it examines how did the relevant EU institutions put into motion towards Romania three mechanisms of imperial politics during its accession to the European Union, i.e., conditionality politics, the geopolitics of centre-periphery, and the civilizational discourse (Behr and Stivachtis, 2016: 1). Besides, this article also applies to the domain of European Studies Nancy Fraser’s (2016) understanding of the economic and political conditions of possibility for the formation and advancements of capitalism. In particular, it stresses that the creation of the European Single Market (1986)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/in-the-past/the-parliament-and-the-treaties/single-european-act>.

and European Monetary Union (1992)<sup>3</sup> – continuing the primordial goals of the European Economic Community (1958)<sup>4</sup> or those of the European Free Trade Association (1960) –,<sup>5</sup> is not a purely economic endeavour, but also a process of political subjection. The custom union, the single market, and the capital market union were created politically by a system of national and supra-national legal regulations (treaties, strategies, international law). While enabling capital to circulate across borders freely, – at a particular moment of their histories – these regulations also ranked the former socialist countries according to how functional their market economy was and put them in the line of waiting for their time to become Member States of the EU. Romania's time came in 2007 when the first signs of the worst crisis since the Great Depression already appeared.<sup>6</sup> Once the ruins of actually existing socialism were cleaned from its territory, the country was entirely dependent and ready to offer multiple investment opportunities for Western capital, to provide cheap labour force, to create an open market for imports, but as well as to release a large amount of precarious labour force engaged in transnational migration. Bad, i.e. communist dependencies were replaced by supposedly good, i.e. anti-communist ones.

The empirical material of my inquiry includes documents of the European Commission, European Council, Council of Europe, the International Monetary Fund, and other institutions; Eurostat statistics that highlight uneven development in the EU through displaying territorial, social and income inequalities, as well as discrepancies in what regards investment into social protection; information about the creation of the Romanian private banking sector published on the banks' websites.

After this Introduction, my article unfolds through the following four sections, each of them discussing Romania in broader contexts: 1) A semi-periphery country subjected to a *long-durée* dependency; 2) Uneven development underlay by imperial politics as endemic feature of the neoliberal European Union; 3) The 'Eastern enlargement' and its economic conditionalities; 4) Unevenness in the EU in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis. In its Conclusions, the article notes that in the past three decades, each of these components played a productive (material or symbolic) role in the reproduction of Romanian's semi-peripherality as part of capitalism's advancement in the new Millennium.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/economic-and-monetary-union/what-economic-and-monetary-union-emu\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/economic-and-monetary-union/what-economic-and-monetary-union-emu_en).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.econlib.org/library/Enc1/EuropeanEconomicCommunity.html>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.efta.int/about-efta>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.thebalance.com/2008-financial-crisis-3305679>.



## **A European semi-periphery country subjected to a *long-durée* dependency**

The world system is made up of three groups of countries: the hegemonic core (the dominant Western capitalist countries), the periphery (developing countries of the South), and the semi-periphery, including countries with some industrial capacity and national capital (Wallerstein, 1974). The semi-periphery includes states that are in an intermediary stage: they exhibit characteristics both of the core and peripheral countries. This group includes commodity-exporting and newly industrializing economies (Knox and Agnew, 1998), as well as the post-socialist states in East-Central Europe. The latter share the dominant values of the EU and participate in its political institutions and alliances, nevertheless, they are not equal partners but depend both economically and militarily on the core states they are attached to (Büdenbender and Aalbers, 2019).

Viewed in the world system of the 1990s, the accession process of Romania to the European Union – as part of its Eastern enlargement – started in the decade of the creation of the EU itself by the Maastricht Treaty.<sup>7</sup> The 1990s were also an era when the international financial organizations began to play out their economic surveillance role in Central and Eastern Europe, which they globally have strengthened even earlier, after the collapse of the Bretton Woods system.<sup>8</sup> At least since the 1980s, the loans and debts from the West always (re)created dependency, came with conditionalities, fostered austerity measures, and enforced economic liberalization. When Romania joined the EU in 2007, the ‘internal market’<sup>9</sup> set up by the Single European Act (1987),<sup>10</sup> was already fully developed.<sup>11</sup> Initially focusing on the facilitation of the free movement of goods, integration of the services markets, the reduction of tax obstacles and simplification of the regulatory environment, in years the European Single Market made substantial progress in opening up transport, telecommunications, electricity, gas and postal services, and eliminating all the restrictions on capital movements between Member States,<sup>12</sup> in 1994 benefiting from defining the free movement of capital as a Treaty freedom.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/3/the-maastricht-and-amsterdam-treaties>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/silent/index.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/ftu/pdf/en/FTU\\_2.1.1.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/ftu/pdf/en/FTU_2.1.1.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/2/developments-up-to-the-single-european-act>.

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/ftu/pdf/en/FTU\\_2.1.1.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/ftu/pdf/en/FTU_2.1.1.pdf),  
<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/33/the-internal-market-general-principles>.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/39/free-movement-of-capital>.

In the decades before the collapse of actually existing socialism, Romania was not disconnected either from the capitalist world system. Its need to rely on external capital was reproduced despite the socialist state's developmentalism strongly oriented to industrial growth (Ban, 2014), which aimed to avoid dependency. In the 1960s and 1970s, the West highly acclaimed Romania's pretended sovereignty towards the Soviet Union. However, the Ceaușescu regime began to be repudiated later in the 1980s when it refused to follow the reforms and conditionality policies enforced both by Gorbaciov and the occidental creditor countries and international organizations. During the 'Cold War,' under the umbrella of pretended independence, the Ceaușescu regime recreated Romania's dependency, since it assured capital for the country's industrialization and infrastructural development mostly from some Western, especially US commercial banks.<sup>13</sup> After joining it as a member in 1972, it also looked for lower interest rate loans from the International Monetary Fund, especially since 1981, when it aimed to repay its previous debts to the private banks.<sup>14</sup> Following such an aim, Romania also applied for and was granted the statute of a 'developing country.' Even more, after 1974, when the US legislation allowed this in relation with non-market economies,<sup>15</sup> it requested and received the most-favoured-nation clause<sup>16</sup> that reduced barriers in its external trade, but it gave up this status in 1988<sup>17</sup> (and applied again for it after 1990<sup>18</sup>). Moreover, the country was part of economic exchanges with different states of the globe since it searched external markets for its products, regardless of their political regime. By this, too, it played its independence card to the Soviet Union. However, after its external trade with the westerners did not bring the expected results, Romania increased its exchanges with other developing countries and the member states of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecom).<sup>19</sup> Between 1949-1991, the latter was the Eastern Bloc's reply to the formation of the Organization for European Economic Co-operation, a prelude to the European Economic Community founded in 1957 and the Organization for

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.profit.ro/povesti-cu-profit/financiar/banci/documente-oficiale-americane-ceausescu-ar-fi-impus-in-1978-o-taxa-pe-dobanzi-bancilor-straine-de-la-care-se-imprumuta-17643054>.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.historia.ro/sectiune/general/articol/cum-a-ascuns-ceausescu-de-fmi-situatia-reala-a-economiei-romanesti>.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/t/trade-act-of-1974.asp>.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/m/mostfavorednation.asp>,  
<https://digitalcommons.law.uga.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=2349&context=gjicl>.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.romania-insider.com/romania-lobbied-favored-nation-status>.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-report/104th-congress/house-report/629/1>.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Comecon>.

Economic Co-operation and Development established in 1961. In a sense used by Verdery and Chari (2009), these institutional frames were manifestations of the Cold War rivalries between the ‘First’ and ‘Second Worlds.’

Altogether, external trade became vital for the country during the 1980s, when Romania’s economic policy directed production towards export and reduced food import in order to repay its debts. But in the 1980s, the developed countries were also confronted with a new cycle of economic crises (that of ‘stagflation,’<sup>20</sup> i.e., the decline in GDP mixed with high unemployment and inflation) in a world system marked by the effects of the oil crises and the end of the fixed-exchange-rate regime in the 1970s. Their demand for imports from developing countries decreased, which affected the latter’s economy negatively.<sup>21</sup> Romania was not so much dependent in this sense on the West as Latin-American or African countries were since it belonged to Comecom, but it still was vulnerable to the external economic crises of the 1980s. Besides, it aimed to fully reimburse the IMF-owed money in the context of a generalized debt crisis, marked by increasing loan interest rates. Romania did not want to accept the conditions of structural adjustment programs, which became attached to such loans in the case of the developing countries. The price of this was paid by the population subjected to severe austerity measures. Developing countries of Latin America and Africa agreed to implement the so-called Washington-consensus policies<sup>22</sup> in the exchange of enjoying debt relief plans.

After 1990, Romania started to receive a new series of loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), European Commission (EC), World Bank (WB), and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), and to enter into a new stage of dependent development. The loan allocated to Romania from EBRD in June 1992 aimed to support ‘actions, objectives, and policies for the implementation of structural adjustment of the economy,’ more precisely to ‘finance urgent imports necessary for the execution of the program.’<sup>23</sup> Between 1991-2004, the country signed seven stand-by agreements with IMF, which all came with conditions regarding macroeconomic policies and, most importantly, privatization. After Romania’s accession to the EU, in 2009, the eighth agreement of the government was signed with the Troika formed by the EC, IMF, and WB. This was completed in the same year with a loan for development

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/s/stagflation.asp>.

<sup>21</sup> [https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/WESS\\_2017\\_ch3.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/WESS_2017_ch3.pdf).

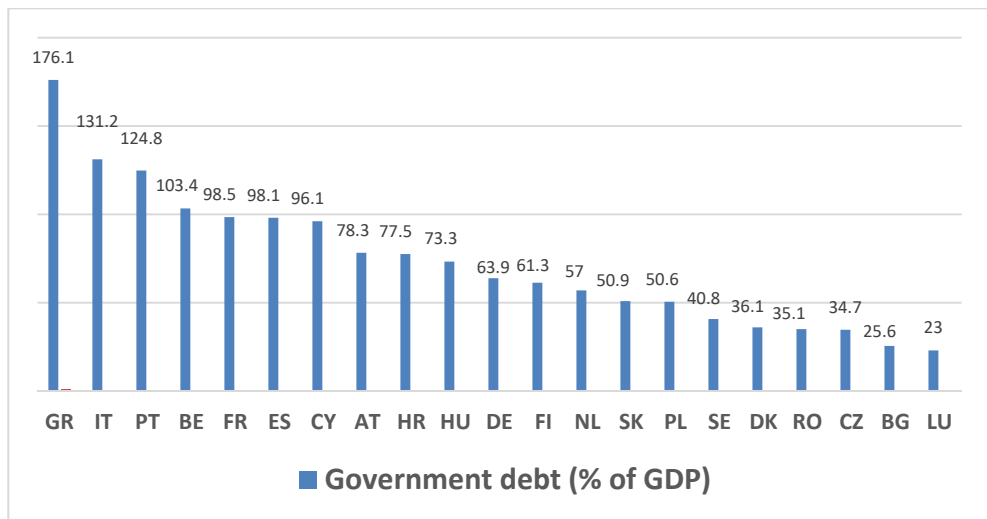
<sup>22</sup> [https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/WESS\\_2017\\_ch3.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/WESS_2017_ch3.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> <http://lege5.ro/Gratuit/heydmmzr/acordul-de-imprumut-imprumut-de-ajustarestructurerala-intre-romania-si-banca-internationala-pentru-reconstructie-si-dezvoltare-din-02061992>.

received from EBRD. As far as the IMF loan from 2009 is concerned, it was justified by saying that this was needed to ‘help the country in reducing the effects of global financial crises.’ However, some analysts state that, as it happened in other countries too, the loan and the accompanying structural adjustment in Romania worked as means to subordinate the economy of the country to the economic interests of powerful states such as the USA or Germany. As such, they negatively impacted workers’ rights, public spending for social protection, and social development because they supported the privatization of goods and deregulation in the economy (Horvath, 2009).

In the subsequent years, the Troika continued to surveil the country’s performances in terms of privatization and marketization. In 2014, Romania signed with the WB the Country Partnership Strategy for 2014-2017, which aimed ‘to improve the country’s capital, real estate, and energy market essential for private capital.’ In 2017, compared to the other EU Member States, the public debt of Romania was among the lowest (Figure 1), so the country respected in a very disciplined manner the norm of keeping public debt under 60% of its GDP.

**Figure 1. Public sector debt in the EU, 2017**

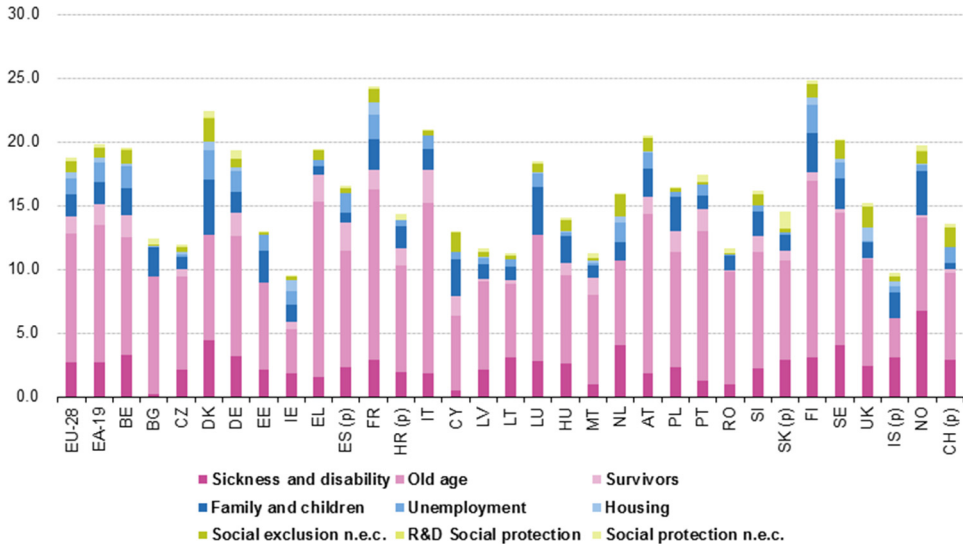


**Data source:** Chart made by the author based on Eurostat<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=sdg\\_17\\_40&plugin=1](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=sdg_17_40&plugin=1).

Besides – even if it is not a euro-zone country – Romania also considers the EU regulations regarding the public deficit; therefore, it keeps its expenditures on social protection on a low level, which is among the lowest in the EU (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Total general government expenditure on social protection, 2017 (% of GDP)**



**Data source:** Eurostat<sup>25</sup>.

In the past three decades, in Romania, the neoliberal public discourse maintained the fear of ‘too much public spending,’ especially scapegoating the ‘socially assisted’ but also the employees in the public sector. By this, dependent neoliberalism (Ban, 2014) continued to justify the austerity measures applied to the population and privatization of public services. Moreover, it did so even in periods, such as the recent one, when Romania is characterized by economic growth and low public debt. Neoliberal governance always expressed the country’s continuous dependence from foreign capital: it responded to its demands by assuring low taxation of capital, profit, and high incomes, in parallel with maintaining the labour force cheap and vulnerable to the precarious labour contracts endorsed since the legislative changes from 2011. Up to all, after 1990, in Romania, dependency was beautified by discourses of Europeanization and anti-communism used as moral arguments for the post-socialist changes, which supported the interests of global and local capital.

<sup>25</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Total\\_general\\_government\\_expenditure\\_on\\_social\\_protection,\\_2017\\_\(%25\\_of\\_GDP\).png](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Total_general_government_expenditure_on_social_protection,_2017_(%25_of_GDP).png)

## **Uneven development underlay by imperial politics as an endemic feature of the neoliberal European Union**

Uneven development is a systematic product and geographical premise of capitalist development: it is a landscape of developed and less developed spaces at different scales, but also the ground of further capitalist expansion, which means that uneven development is exploited by capital for further accumulation (Smith, 1984). Differently put, uneven development is an endemic feature of capitalism (Harvey, 2005, 2006): capitalism depends on the capacity to expand towards territories, sectors, and domains not yet incorporated into the circulation of capital. What Harvey calls the quest for a spatial fix (1982), i.e., the intrinsic need of capital to spread out over space to overcome its inherent crises of over-accumulation, is not a new evolution of capitalism. However, since Romania's accession to the EU happens in the broader context of neoliberal capitalism, it is relevant stressing how spatial fix manifests under such particular circumstances. Most importantly, it is to highlight: because this accession happened after the dismantlement of actually existing socialism, it was a process that created new spaces where Western capital could freely move for accumulation, being a case of the penetration of neoliberal capitalism into the collapsed economies (Schmidt, 2018) looking for new sources of accumulation.

As said above, spatial fix is not a novelty in the history of capitalism. Its formation shows that one of its crucial resources was the colonization of non-European territories by European powers, in the absence of which internal forces on their own could not lead to the development of capitalism as we know it (Brewer, 1980; Wolf, 1982; Seth, 2012). It was precisely imperial politics that pushed the former colonies towards the paths of dependent (under)development and provided the empires or the core countries with resources for the creation of their wealth. If one compares the historical 'Western' and 'Eastern' part of the European Union, should definitely notice that the latter did not have colonial past and consequently 'did not benefit of the original influx of value in the form of colonial trade or extraction' as several countries of Western Europe did (Böröcz, 2001: 28). Therefore, he/she may conclude that this is one of the primary sources of their underdevelopment compared to the wealth produced in Western capitalist countries as a result of the exploitation of their colonies. It is not the paper's aim to describe the debates around 'Europe as empire' or around what kind of empire the EU is (as discussed by Böröcz, 2001; Zielonka, 2006; Behr and Stivachtis, 2016). The article only highlights how are used the three technologies, which historically resembled as features of an empire, in the process of 'Eastern enlargement.' Therefore, in what follows, I am briefly addressing how were

conditionality politics, the geopolitics of centre-periphery, and the civilizational discourse put into practice during the incorporation of CEE territories into the circuits of global capital and in particular towards Romania.

Romania's accession to the European Union was conditioned most importantly by the privatization of state-owned companies as a core condition of marketization. Nevertheless, Romania's relationships with what became later the European Union did not start with the beginning of the country's 'transition' to a market economy, but with the 1970s, when the country signed its first trade agreements with the European Community. Likewise, as already discussed in the second section of the article, the membership of Romania in the International Monetary Fund dated back in 1972, and the conditionalities imposed on the loans that the latter offered to this country started well before the collapse of actually existing socialism. The novelty of conditionality politics practiced towards Romania starting with the 1990s was that this happened in an era when capitalism became global in its neoliberal form. By the end of the 1990s, the Romanian governments, together with the international financial organizations, agreed that the economic problems of the country, respectively, the negative economic growth resulted from the structural weaknesses of the entrepreneurial and the banking sector. Differently put, from the limited privatization of these sectors and from the weak corporate governance that leads to 'excessive raise' of the salaries in the country (IMF, 1999). Consequently, all the powerful actors stated the need to restructure the banking sector, to privatize the societies with predominant public capital, to improve the business environment, and to decrease the social costs of the reform.<sup>26</sup>

In what regards the EU geopolitics of centre-periphery, one should recognize that development (at the centre) and underdevelopment (at the periphery) are the two faces of the same phenomenon, i.e., of uneven development as an endemic feature of capitalism. Uneven development reflects the asymmetric relations of wealth between, for example, Romania and other European Union Member States (see Figures 2-7). Moreover, the geopolitics of centre-periphery practiced by the 'Eastern enlargement' of the EU is based on the fact that the former socialist countries of CEE constitute new sources for the commodification of nature (raw resources). They are also sites of cheap wage labour force or even less expensive labour outside the wage contracts (used in the home countries or in the host countries of immigrants looking for sources of living outside their countries of origin). Furthermore, they are open markets for goods produced

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<sup>26</sup> Aims defined in the National Strategy of Privatization, 2000, accessible here - <http://www.monitoruljuridic.ro/act/strategia-nationala-de-privatizare-din-26-octombrie-2000-pentru-anul-2000-emitent-guvernul-publicat-n-monitorul-oficial-24894.html>.

elsewhere by multinational companies and for the financial products of different monetary organizations. Even recently, in January 2019, before Romania took on the EU Council Presidency, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker voiced his doubts on this in an interview, saying that Romania is 'one of the poorest and most peripheral countries in the EU.'

The different colonial histories of Western and Eastern Europe made possible that by the beginning of the 2000s, a wild consensus could be built around the civilizing and disciplining processes (reminisces of imperialism) in the EU's Eastern politics (Böröcz, 2001: 30). The use of civilizational discourse in relation to the former socialist countries might be detected in how the economic backwardness of these countries and the cultural cleavages between their population and the population of the Old Member States of the European Union was explained. From the very beginning, 'Eastern enlargement' was put in terms of democratizing those who were supposedly undemocratic before their accession to the EU: 'By inviting 12 more countries to join it, the EU ... was putting an end to the division which had split the continent in two since 1945. European countries which, for decades, had not enjoyed democratic freedom were finally able to rejoin the family of democratic European nations' (European Commission, 2016: 21). Moreover, EU's foreign policy, which was added by the Maastricht Treaty to the existing community system as a new dimension of intergovernmental cooperation together with justice and internal affairs, mentioned among its objectives the aim to promote not only democracy and peace, but also the rule of law and human rights all over Europe and beyond. It was not only the local economic elites' interest that generated support at the decision-making level for international power groups such as multi-national firms, assistance agencies, and other agents. The contemporary Romanian cultural elite was also ready to support the 'transnational re-socialization' of the country by the means of 'moral regulation' or 'liberal othering,' similar with how the 'synchronization with the West' in the process of Romanian nation-building was a core preoccupation of the intellectuals in the past (Arfire, 2011).

Addressing the civilizational discourse productive of subjectivities, which are part of creating the conditions of possibility for capital accumulation in the context of 'Eastern enlargement,' one may recognize why the EU as a new form of empire needs the racialization of Eastern Europe. Racialization – a technology of creating a subject as inferior or as 'naturally' of lesser value – happened during the process of mixing different entities (nation-states) under a new (supra-national) subject. Who imposed the rules of the mixture had symbolic power over the ones supposed to become part of this process later, pending on their capacity to change. They had to become suitable to belong or to play the role that the founding fathers prescribed to them on the global stage of capitalism.



In the case of CEE, the capacity to change meant the capacity to get rid of their socialist past in all the senses of the word, since it was 'socialism' in itself that was considered polluting their essence and supposedly transformed them into something inferior. Moreover, the assumption that (collapsed) socialism was of less value from the very beginning than the regime which survived the 'Cold War' (capitalism), and the association of the political regimes with geographical spaces and people inhabiting these spaces, easily led to the supposition that these spaces and people are not only having something inferior to struggle with but are in themselves inferior. Additionally: from observing how 'the problems' continued to remain with them (not enough privatization and liberalization, fiscal insecurity, poverty, corruption, democracy deficit), it was only a step to conclude that 'these people' and 'these territories' are immutable. Meanwhile, the fact that such problems resulted from how their transition to capitalism was administered, remained unspoken. By racialization, the supposedly superior actor not only could justify its entitlement to dominate (via the instruments of economic power), but it also could re-enforce itself as a stance of normality that should become hegemonic. In due process, the need for transforming particular social categories into symbols of the inferiority and immutability of the territory as a whole also had to be solved. This role was played by 'the poor,' respectively by 'the Roma' (from Romania), especially at the moment when they appeared at the doorstep of the Old Member States looking for a living or trying to make use of EU's principle of free movement of people.

### **The 'Eastern enlargement' and its economic conditionalities**

In 2001, Böröcz proposed to understand the term 'Eastern enlargement' used in the EU discourse as an orientaling tool, which was applied as a marker of current re-division of Europe (Böröcz, 2001: 6). This linguistic device was used to hide the economic interests of Western companies behind the narrative of democratization and the promotion of human rights in Eastern Europe. The 'mainstream transitology, a perspective that continued to organize the world in flat Cold War binaries of capitalist West and communist East' (Verdery and Chari, 2009: 9), continued to view Eastern Europe as polluted with the wrongs of socialism or communism as backward forms of modernity.

It is not difficult to recognize that since the creation of a single market was one of the essential foundational ideas of the EU, the same aim informed its enlargement towards Central and Eastern Europe, too. However, while this was explicitly assumed as a target in the relationship between the supposedly equal and dignified capitalist countries, in the case of CEE, decision-makers emphasized

the civilizational mission of the EU extension. Nevertheless, in fact, the dividing wall between 'West' and 'East' was never civilizational, but economic and political: by its means, before 1990 the Soviet bloc wanted to protect itself from the intrusion of Western capital, and the Western market guarded itself against the invasion of cheap goods produced by the centralized socialist economies. However, both sides used cultural reasons as justifications of the 'Cold War.' Furthermore, the 'West' justified breaking this wall and conquering the territory behind for the reasons of capital accumulation in the name of a supposedly true, i.e. Western and capitalist modernization, and with a colonial self-confidence according to which 'what people are being dispossessed of (in CEE, note by the author) has no value anyway because socialism was in all respects inferior' (Verdery and Chari, 2009: 14).

Viewed from the perspective of uneven development, 'Eastern enlargement' was shaped by the search for profit during the times of crisis of capitalist over-accumulation when the excess capital from the Old EU Member States looked for new profitable investment opportunities. Moreover, the mainstream views about how the market economy should develop on the ruins of the bankrupted centralized socialist economy to become able to nurture a business environment favourable for foreign direct investments also defined the direction of the 'transition' from actually existing socialism. Eventually, Romania became one of the most FDI friendly countries. It has one of the lowest flat tax, VAT, and income tax in the EU. One may enjoy here tax exemption on reinvested profit and income tax exemption. In what regards the real estate business, the gross annual rental income is situated in Romania at 7.76% (third position in the European ranking of Gross Rental Yields). In this country, there is no interdiction on ownership rights over real estate (apartments, commercial, or industrial buildings) for foreign citizens and companies (Global Property Guide, 2018).

The European Council adopted the 'Copenhagen criteria' in June 1993 that dealt with the application for EU membership of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe. This document and the position of the Council presented in Madrid two years later, on the one hand, referred to the fact that one of the conditions to be fulfilled by a candidate country is the existence of a functioning market economy (European Council, 1993). Moreover, on the other hand, it defined the pre-accession strategy of the applicants as consisting of the development of market economy, the adjustment of their administrative structure, and the creation of a stable economic and monetary environment (European Council Presidency, 1995).

Romania presented its EU accession request in June 1995, and it became an EU Member State in January 2007. The document *Agenda 2000 - Commission Opinion on Romania's Application for Membership of the European Union* (issued

by the European Commission in 1999) assessed its application. As a starting point, the document observed that in the 1980s, Romania was marked by Ceausescu's policy to pay off the country's external debt by engaging the economy in a forced export drive and compression of imports. Most importantly, it assessed privatization as a core element of the formation of a market economy. The document noted: 'while in 1996, in Romania, the private sector generated 52% of GDP, the economy was still dominated by state-owned, loss-making monopolies and value subtracting enterprises [...]. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) was low ... and ... they have remained insufficient to make a strong impact on the economy. In a clear change of policy, the new government has been actively courting foreign investors' (EC, 1999: 20). In what regards trade, the document observed that 'external trade has been substantially re-oriented away from the former Comecon partners and towards Western Europe, so trade with the EU member countries represented about half of Romanian's foreign trade in 1996 and trade with Germany, France, and Italy has been particularly dynamic' (EC, 1999: 26).

The overall conclusion of the EC at that time was that Romania could not be considered a functioning market economy yet. The regulation of property rights was not yet fully enforced (especially in what regards land, energy, and telecommunications); a well-developed financial sector was still awaited; prices have not been totally liberalized; the barriers to trade were not entirely removed. However, those who were deciding on Romania's accession to the EU were hopefully looking to the implementation of the structural reforms announced by the new right-wing authorities in early 1997. Moreover, there were also some advantages of this country that made it attractive for the European Single Market. According to this document, its key advantages were: its geographical location, the size of its population, the relatively young population, and its low level of labour costs – which could make Romania a strong export base for accessing markets of smaller neighbours, especially for consumer goods. Besides, the EC positively appreciated that 'the new Romanian authorities have already recognized the crucial role that foreign investors and international financial institutions will play in the success of their reform efforts' (EC, 1999: 34-35).

The political decision, which announced the end of 'transition' in Romania or its acknowledgment as a functional market economy was taken in 2003: 'Romania can be considered as a functional market economy once the good progress made has continued decisively' (quoted in the *2004 Report on Romania's Progress Towards Accession*). This Report repeated that 'the existence of a functioning market economy requires prices and trade to be liberalized, and an enforceable legal system, including property rights, to be in place.' The Commission was pleased to note that the share of the private sector in GDP has steadily

increased; the private sector employment grew; the private majority-owned companies accounted for 81.6% of turnover in 2002; 96.3% of all land was privately owned. The document stressed the vital role played in these processes by the stand-by-agreements with the International Monetary Fund that conditioned the loans offered to Romania to the privatization of state-owned companies. In parallel with these appreciations, the Commission expressed its concerns about the fact that the privatization of companies remained unfinished, and the continuing influence of public ownership largely rested upon its predominant role within the energy sector. However, it positively assessed the establishment of the Romanian Agency for Foreign Investment in 2002, as part of the endeavour of the government to improve the country's business environment. As a result of all these processes, in April 2005, the Accession Treaty to the European Union of Romania (and Bulgaria) was signed in Luxemburg, going through a lengthy ratification process among the EU Member States and institutions. The European Commission published its last report on these countries in September 2006, confirming January 1st, 2007, as their accession date, which was acknowledged by the European Council on 14-15 December 2006.

Meanwhile, the privatized banking sector (except CEC Bank) was almost entirely taken over by foreign banks. *Banca Comercială Română*, the inheritor of the commercial operations of the Central Bank of Romania, sold in 2006 the state shares to the Austrian Erste Bank. *Banca Română de Dezvoltare*, formed as a commercial bank from the former *Banca de Investiții*, being responsible for administering the WB loans, in 2003 was rebranded as BRD - Groupe Société Générale, and in 2004 it sold out the residual stock held by the Romanian State to the French Société Générale. *Banca Agricolă* was sold by the state in 2001 to the Austrian Raiffeisen Zentralbank and Romanian-American Investment Fund, and functioned as Banca Agricolă-Raiffeisen Bank till 2002, when it merged with Raiffeisen Bank, becoming Raiffeisen Bank Romania. Foreign banks also purchased the commercial banks created after 1990 (except *Banca Transilvania*). *Banc Post*, created in 1991, was taken over by Greek Eurobank Ergasias Group (however, in 2018 was sold to Banca Transilvania); *Banca Comercială Ion Țiriac*, established in 1991, merged in 2005 with HVB Bank Romania becoming Unicredit Țiriac Bank, which was taken over in 2015 by Unicredit Bank Austria AG, becoming Unicredit Bank. *Banca Românească*, formed in 1992, was taken over in 1999 by the Romanian American Enterprise Fund, and in 2003 by the National Bank of Greece. In 2016, the latter sold its shares at *Banca Românească* to OTP Bank Romania. Some other foreign banks opened branches in Romania. In 1994 Alpha Bank was created as a subsidiary of Alpha Bank Group, Greece's largest financial group (this was the first bank that in 2001 launched housing and real estate loans, and in 2019 began the first

program of mortgage bonds in Romania, together with the investment bank Barclays Bank). In 1994, Raiffeisen Bank was first opened by the Austrian Banking Group Raiffeisen as a dealership in Bucharest. In 2000, Pireus Bank was opened when Piraeus Bank Greece entered into the Romanian market by acquiring Pater Bank. Later, in 2018, it was acquired by JCF IV Tiger Holdings SRL, part of JC Flowers & Co, which is a leader in private equity investment services specializing in global investments in the financial services industry. As a result of such developments, by those years, more than 80% of the banking sector was owned by foreign banks.

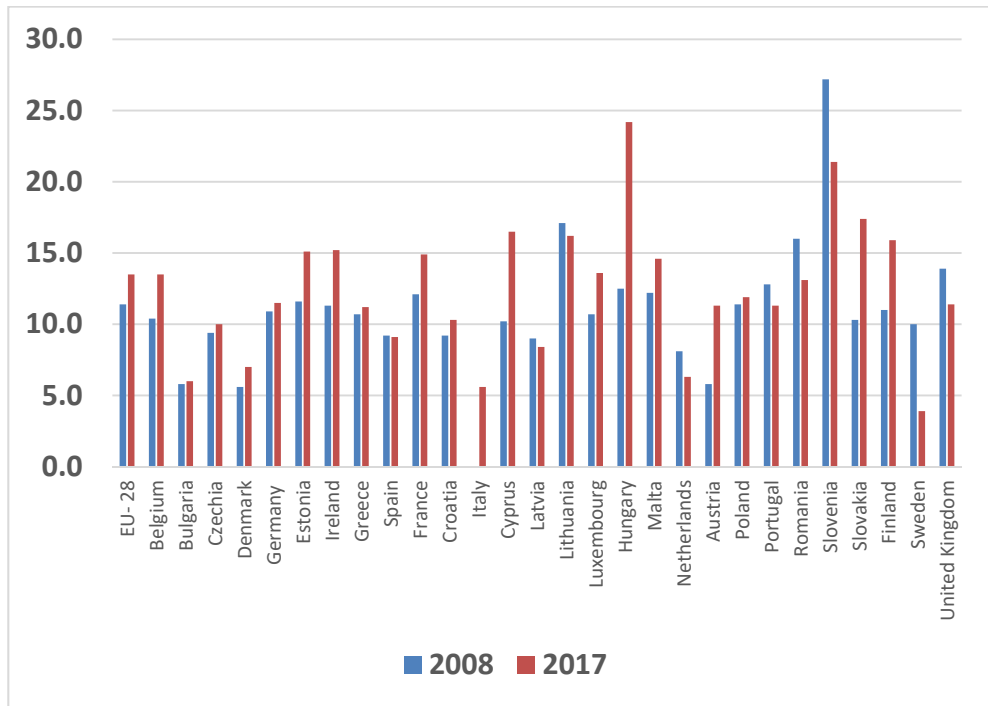
### **Unevenness in the EU reflected in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis**

The privatization process, unfinished in a sense perceived by the EC at the moment of Romania's accession into the EU, continued after the very moment of its integration, and it gained a new impetus under the conditions of the 2008 financial and economic crisis.

Generally speaking, this crisis 'led to the establishment of new EU mechanisms to ensure the stability of banks, reduce public debt, and coordinate Member States' economic policies, particularly those using the euro' (European Commission, 2016: 17). As critics observed, in order to save the Monetary Union, the deployed rescue packages were conceived in a neoliberal tone. 'The European Central Bank compelled the endangered states to take medicine that only makes the illness worse', i.e., it 'provided the banking sector with unlimited credit at zero interest in order to boost lending to the crisis states at lower interest rates', while 'the loans given to the crisis states were conditioned by austerity measures' (Lehndorff, 2015: 11-12). Moreover, the Commission enforced a new economic governance system, the so-called European Semester, that became an instrument of economic surveillance. This step also reflected that the 2008 crisis produced by neoliberal capitalism was used to re-enforce neoliberalism and to re-legitimize the anti-Keynesian economic policies. While in the past, the solution of several crises of capitalism stood in rising public investments, social expenditure and supporting demand, the 2008 crisis of financialized capitalism was thought being solved by financial interventions, i.e., via supporting the private banking system that was credited to save the economy by re-boosting growth. The other side of this 'solution,' imposed mostly in the periphery countries (both within and outside of Euro-zone), was the re-enforcement of privatization and structural reforms and the related cuts in public spending, respectively the austerity measures regarding healthcare, social services, pensions, and even infrastructural investments.

In what regards Romania, it is its specificity among the EU Member States (shared with Bulgaria) that the time of its accession almost coincided with the 2008 global financial crisis. One should observe that whatever caused the latter, and whatever was its impact on the economic development of this country (measured, for example by the indicators of economic growth), the neoliberal policy of crisis management has had dramatic effects on its population in terms of in-work-poverty (Figure 3), income inequality (Figure 4), poverty and social exclusion (Figure 5), or housing deprivation (Figure 6). Selected Eurostat statistics from below shows Romania's situation comparative to other EU countries and EU average data.

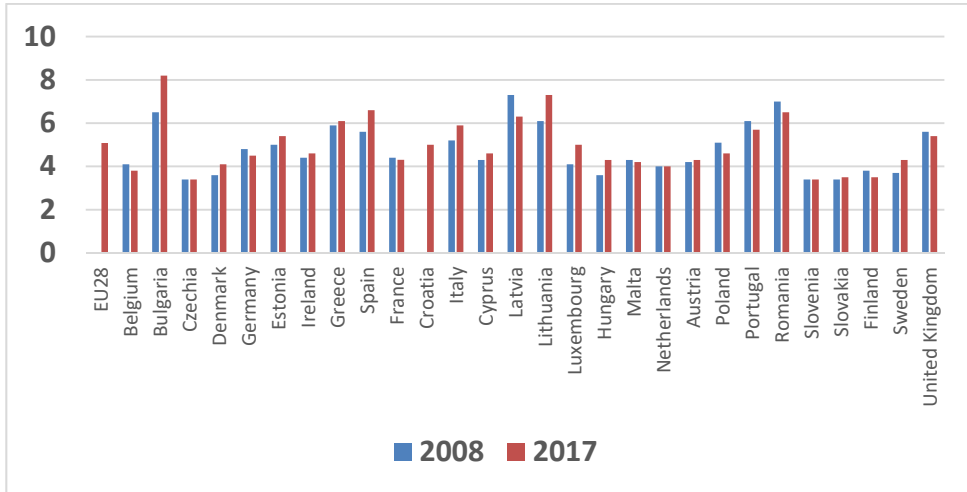
**Figure 3. In-work at-risk-of-poverty rate by household type, single person**



**Data source:** Chart made by the author based on Eurostat<sup>27</sup>.

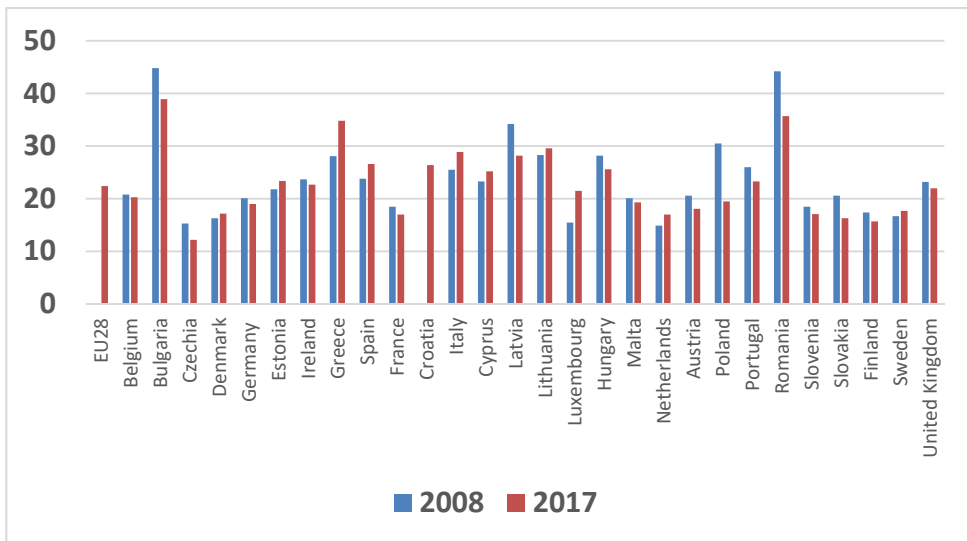
<sup>27</sup> <https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>.

**Figure 4. Inequality of income distribution**



**Data source:** Chart made by the author based on Eurostat<sup>28</sup>.

**Figure 5. People at risk of poverty or social exclusion**

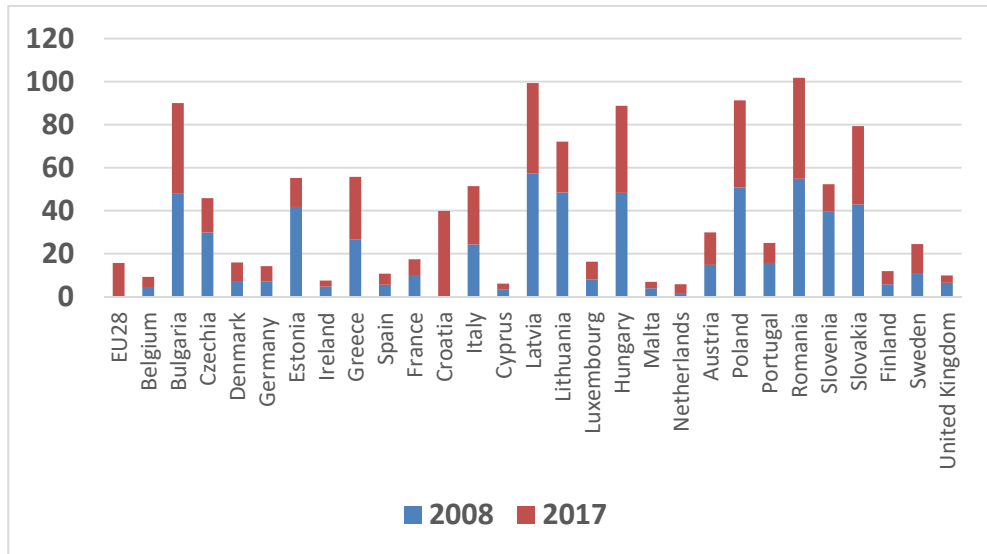


**Data source:** Chart made by the author based on Eurostat<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tespm151&plugin=1>.

<sup>29</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=t2020\\_50&plugin=1](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=t2020_50&plugin=1).

**Figure 6. Housing deprivation - overcrowding rate**



**Data source:** Chart made by the author based on Eurostat<sup>30</sup>.

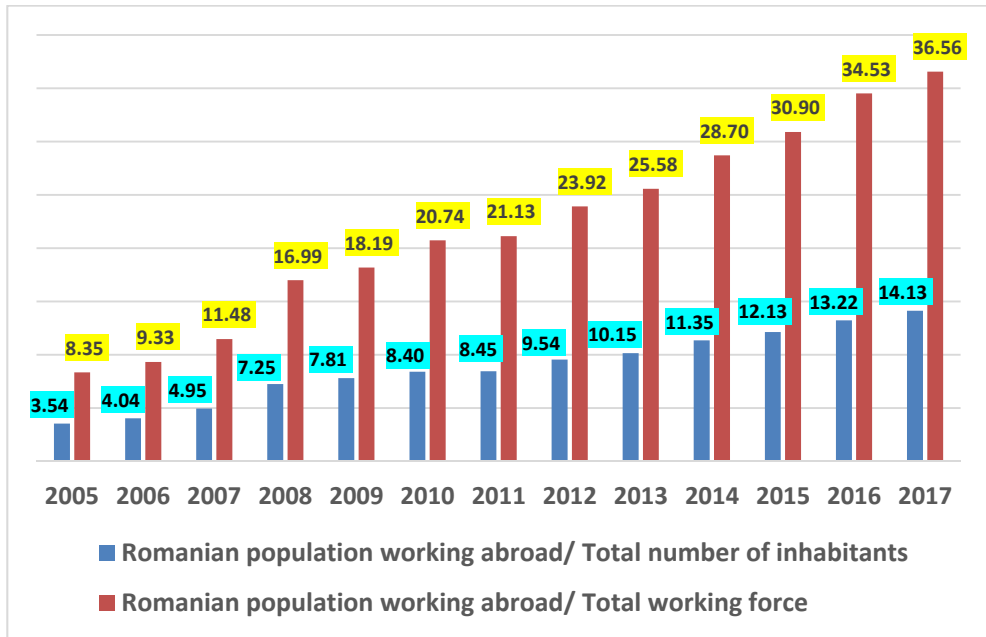
The international financial institutions' loans offered to the Romanian Government since 2009 came with a set of conditions that were acting as instruments of neoliberal governance adopted by the Romanian government of that period (Vincze, 2015). The idea of 'economic recovery' was thought to be served by 'the reform of the state,' i.e., by strengthening its market-maker role and by dismantling the reminiscences of the welfare state. When the austerity measures were imposed in Romania by Troika, one could observe that this country was among the countries with the lowest levels of public debt in the EU (Eurostat, 2009, 2011, 2014). Thus, public indebtedness alone could not have justified cutting the funds for social policies. Moreover, cutting these funds was not justified either because the population of Romania was second after Bulgaria regarding the poverty rate; life expectancy in this country was among the lowest in Europe; funds for social welfare represented one of the smallest shares of GDP compared to the other Member States. In 2007, social expenditure in Romania represented 12.8% of GDP compared to 29.5% in Belgium and 30.5% in France; in 2009, the percentage allocated to social protection was below 20% of the GDP in countries like Poland, Estonia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania and Latvia, while in countries like Denmark (33.4%), France (33.1%), Sweden (32.1%), the Netherlands (31.6%) and Germany (31.4%) the ratio was evidently higher

<sup>30</sup> [https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=ilc\\_lvho05a&lang=en](https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=ilc_lvho05a&lang=en).



(Eurostat 2011, 2013).<sup>31</sup> The low wages in Romania (being its comparative advantage on the global market), the reduction of the public investments including costs of social protection, and all the measures enforcing the country to appeal for foreign investors – were realities in the front of which the rising poverty level in the country and the increase of emigration could not have been a surprise to anyone. According to a United Nations estimation of migration in 2015, "Romania entered the world's top 20 countries that are source of migrants, with over 3.4 million citizens living in another country" (which, compared to its whole population counted on 1 January 2016 meant over 17%), and, as such, it 'registered the fastest growing number of immigrants from a state that did not face war.'<sup>32</sup> Figure from below, extracted from the data-base of the Romanian Central Bank presented in its annual Financial Stability Report (2018) reflects the increase of the number of the Romanian laborers working abroad, which remained dramatically high across the years.

**Figure 7. Transnational migration for work from Romania**



**Data source:** Romanian Central Bank Data-Base<sup>33</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> Eurostat. Key figures on Europe, editions 2009, 2011, 2013, and 2014.

<sup>32</sup> Information accessible here - <http://cursdeguvernare.ro/romania-enters-the-top-20-states-with-the-largest-diaspora-according-to-the-un-report-on-migration.html>. (Accessed on 25 January 2018)

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.bnr.ro/Financial-stability-report--7674.aspx>.

Nevertheless, during the post-crisis period, when in Romania the neoliberal measures were eased with small interventions on behalf of the laborers, one could observe an improvement of the amount of minimum income. In March 2019, the gross minimum wage was three times higher than in 2011, but – due to the changes of fiscal regulations – the net salary in March 2019 was only twice higher than in 2011. Most importantly, one needs to note that in both of the years of our comparison, the minimum wage of workers in Romania was meagre, respectively 108 Euro in 2011, and 265 Euro in March 2019, while the percentage of working contracts with minimum income remained close to 50%. Moreover, compared to the minimum costs of consumption, the reality in Romania is still that 85% of the working contracts do not provide enough income to cover these costs (Syndex Romania, 2019). Discursively, nowadays there is a contestation from the liberal parties of the sustainability of the recent income increases in the public sector, while some foreign companies are threatening the government that they are going to leave the country if salaries have to be raised in the private sector as well.

### **Conclusions. Advancing capitalism and the (re)production of Romania's semi-peripherality**

In contemporary globalized capitalism, national and supranational political actors are strongly preoccupied with creating the legislative frames that enable market economy to function, i.e., to assure the free movement of capital across national borders. Neoliberal governance (re)produces uneven development between the global South and global North or between the West and East or between the core and the semi-periphery countries (of Europe). The division between the Euro-zone countries and the non-Euro territories also reproduces unevenness among others due to how the post-crisis neoliberal fiscal surveillance was practiced in the Member States in a way that increased poverty and income inequalities especially in the countries where the rate of poverty and inequality was always the highest. The above processes unfold under a global post-socialist condition or capitalist hegemony, which includes not only the breakdown of actually existing socialism in the 'East,' but also the crisis of the welfare-state regimes in the 'West.' Besides, this hegemony seems to suppress for a long time the ability to imagine socialist alternatives to neoliberal capitalism and to actually existing socialism, while also justifying unevenness among territories playing different roles in the advancement of capitalism.

My article addressed the reproduction of Romania's semi-periphery status in the past three decades, but also as a result of its *long durée* dependency. It viewed this process as both product and constitutive element of uneven development. The paper demonstrated that this endemic feature of capitalism functioned – among others – through the EU's Eastern enlargement. The latter was facilitated by the means of imperial politics and re-created dependency between the core and semi-periphery countries by making use of conditionality politics and civilizational discourse.

In the post-1990 capitalist world system, Romania's semi-periphery status was reproduced due to its economic dependency, which at its turn resulted from how its dismantled socialist economy created a new space for foreign capital investment, for the goods produced in the West and for profitable businesses exploiting a cheap labour force. Romania's dependency was also rooted in the conditionality politics to which it had to respond in order to secure capital for its development during the 'Cold War,' balancing in-between the demands of the capitalist West and the communist Soviet-Union.

The architects of the neoliberal European Union knew well that capitalism depended on the capacity to expand towards territories not yet incorporated into the circulation of capital. The stake of EU's 'Eastern enlargement' unfolded in the context of the global expansion of neoliberal capitalism was precisely this. Romania, transformed from an export-based to an import-dependent country and into a pool of cheap labour force, also had a role to play in this scenario. Its broken economy cried not only for foreign capital, but also demanded new waves of loans from international financial organizations, which functioned at their turn as conditions for more and more privatization and marketization, or more and more territories, sectors and domains transformed into sources of capital accumulation.

Economic conditionalities and the geopolitics of centre-periphery, as elements of imperial politics, were inscribed into the very documents that prepared and monitored the accession of Romania to the EU, which embodied the political agreements between the national governments and several international organizations. Moreover, the EU's civilizational discourse also played a productive role in the creation of subjectivities ready to justify capitalism as the only possible direction to be taken after the collapse of actually existing socialism.

In Romania, both Europeanization and anti-communism were and still are the moral arguments that legitimized the post-1990 changes underlay by the interests of capital accumulation. Eventually, besides its economic function played in the contemporary world system, Romania – the Eastern border of the EU – continues to be used as a semi-periphery, which has to demonstrate that the wrongs of the past three decades of great transformations are due to communist legacies and not to capitalism.

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## ***Critical Reviews***

### ***Editorial Note:***

***This section provides reviews and critical reflections upon recent evolutions in social research, with focus on changing societies and current dilemmas.***



## BOOK REVIEW

***The Neoliberal Subject: Resilience, Adaptation and Vulnerability***  
by David Chandler and Julian Reid, London: Rowman & Littlefield  
International, 2016, 210 pages.

SORIN GOG<sup>1</sup>

Neoliberalism has occupied the central focus of research in anthropology and sociology in the past decade and has animated many debates regarding the ways in which the latest stage of global capitalism has to be understood in relation to previous forms of capitalism. There have been many attempts to define this concept and give it a more socio-empirical grounding that can enable capturing the transformations within capitalism and the specific social and economic processes associated with these changes. The field of social sciences have been so much flooded with studies of neoliberalism that some have advocated giving up the term altogether because of the confusions and obscurities it creates (Dunn, 2017). Many of the studies on neoliberalism have dealt with the political processes embedded in the economic structures of global capitalism, but have focused little on what these transformations have meant at the level of subject-formation. How is the self constituted by neoliberalism and what are the inner features the self has to develop in order to be attuned to the new political-economic regime? Neoliberalism cannot function without cultural legitimations that actively sustain the capitalist mode of production in its specific constellations and most of all it cannot function in the absence of social ontologies that regulate the self and corresponding societal relations. Chandler and Reid's book *The neoliberal subject: Resilience, adaptation and vulnerability* constitutes one of the most articulate contemporary attempts to define these processes in terms of how they impacted on the subject and the specific modes of socialization that were enabled by these new political-economic structures which contributed to the institutionalization of a new generalized self-understanding.

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<sup>1</sup> Babeş-Bolyai University, e-mail: sorin.gog@ubbcluj.ro.



The book focuses on three important aspects of how neoliberal regimes embed particular forms of ontologies within the structures of the subject: resilience, adaptation and vulnerability. The discussion between the two scholars explores the genealogy of these transformations that have shaped the current understanding of the subject as it is instituted within a great spectrum of forms of governmentality: from security studies and international relations to UN resolutions and social policies implemented by global governing structures. The book brings a great deal of clarity in terms of how the bio-political subject is aggregated and constructed in contemporary security studies and global neoliberal politics and it enfoldes an incisive criticism of the ways in which these modes of understanding the self de-politicizes structural power relations and global inequalities.

One of the most important aspects of the book is its attempt to delineate neoliberalism from liberalism and outline the specific ways in which at the level of the subject we can differentiate between different regimes of socialization and operationalize these differences in terms of capabilities with which the self is endowed:

*The knowledge capacities and capabilities necessary for the neoliberal subject are very different from those of the traditional or classical liberal subject. The capabilities and capacities required are those that enable the subject to actively embrace and adapt to change rather than resist it. [...] Whereas liberal frameworks of governmentality focused upon how governments might regulate and control specific levers of the economy—inflation levels, unemployment rates, interest rates, and such—under neoliberal approaches, the governance of economic processes is displaced by the enabling of societal processes, particularly of knowledge and communication, facilitating the adaptive capacities of individuals, enabling them to make better or more efficient lifestyle choices (Dunn, 2017: 76-77).*

This break between neoliberalism and liberalism and its impact of subjectivity formation can be followed in the three inter-related dimensions which the book analyses, which are an integral component of what neoliberal governmentality regards as a 'complete' and 'well-developed' subject: resilience, adaptation and overcoming of vulnerability.

*Resilience* represents one of the most important features of the neoliberal subject. By this, Chandler and Reid refer to the capacity of the subject to re-adjust and calibrate itself in a period of fluctuation and changes. The resilient self is flexible, pro-active and capable of transforming critical situations in opportunities for self-development. The main idea is not to stabilize uncertain conditions of existence, but to intervene at the level subject and instil in it the capacity of self-reflexivity and readiness to change in order to be able to face the fluidity and instabilities generated by global capitalism.

The book takes a comprehensive look at the field of international relations and security studies and analyzes the growing attention given to sustainable development and the way this is linked with a new emphasis on developing the capacity of being resilient. This can be seen in wide spectrum of expertise and knowledge production implemented by governing structures such as UN, UNDP and other international bodies, or in nation-state agencies that enable evaluations and benchmarks for assessing capacities for sustainable development. Although sustainable development emerged as a criticism of classical Western theories of development that had little regards for preserving ecosystems and focused mainly on economic aspects of development, the authors show how this was captured eventually by neoliberal governance policies (Chandler and Reid, 2016: 56). Sustainable development emphasis the need of engaging community and personal human resources in dealing with risks and encouraging them to display a pro-active commitment for creating one's own general well-being. The area where these two different paradigms of governance overlap (sustainable development and neoliberalism) is in the way they perceive the need for agency enhancement and capacity of individual and collective organisms to adapt and cope with structural fuzzy changes.

Reid traces the genealogy of the concept of resilience and its embedding in contemporary institutions in the discursive practices of ecology. Here, *living systems* have the capacity to adapt to their environmental changes and create a surviving niche within the wider biosphere through articulating a resilient behaviour (Chandler and Reid, 2016: 62). This applies as well to human beings who have to learn to model themselves accordingly. Generating a resilient subjectivity becomes this way an instrumental aspect for advancing sustainable development. This means most of all the entrepreneurialization of inner resources, insistence on self-responsibility and self-sustainability. The authors show how, by emphasizing this, the current neo-liberal governing strategies depart from the previous liberal ones. Whereas the classic liberal regimes aimed at securing individuals and creating governmental structures that could mediate and enable this goal, neo-liberalism aims at enhancing the capacity of individuals to adjust and accommodate themselves to the insecure conditions of this world.

This shift from liberalism to neoliberalism can be much clearly observed in the way current governing structures engage with another important feature of the neoliberal subject, that of *adaptability*. By adaptability the authors understand the capacity through which resilience is actualized and it refers to the ability subjects have to adjust and get acclimatized to their swirling insecure environments:

*In this conception, political freedom and market economic competition are to be valued because they help facilitate individual choice-making capacities and enable their expression, thereby enabling efficient adaption to changing*

*circumstances. The assumption is that without development individuals will not be free, in the sense of no longer lacking the capabilities necessary for efficient adaptation. Here none of us are free from the need for development. Development is the process of altering the institutions that shape our capacities and capabilities for adaptive choices. In this understanding of freedom, there can be no assumption of originatory or universal autonomy and rationality, such as that underpinning social contract theorising: the mainstay of the political and legal subject of liberal modernity (Chandler and Reid, 2016: 90-91).*

In comparison with the liberal forms of governing which focused on a state driven development and economic growth through specific macro-interventions led by the nations-states, neoliberalism emphasizes competence development of the subject and its adaptive capabilities through giving stakeholders access to the empowering informational fluxes and knowledge. The dissolution of the liberal promise of economic and social development through institutional interventions makes now way to an emphasis on self-reflexivity and emotional adjustment to the conditions of the world. Rather resisting them and mobilizing political projects in order to alter these conditions, neoliberalism stresses the need for self-adjustment and creative flexibility which subjects need to acquire in order adapt better. This is why neoliberalism releases the proliferation of a multitude of knowledge devices that interrogate and model the interiority of the self. Adaptive decision-making therefore relies very much on the extent to which the subject is able to develop capabilities of plasticity and self-governance as a result of self-interrogation (Chandler and Reid, 2016: 77-78).

The aim of neoliberal governmentality is to enable not just abilities that the subject has to develop, but an empowering way of living as well. Sustainable development starts with facilitating those endogenous processes that allow for the cultivation of a sustainable subject. The constitutive power of this multi-scalar forms of governmentality relies on the way it interrogates the subject and shifts to it the responsibility for its own well-being. Learning how to become resilient and adapt to fluidity of the contemporary world is one of the most of important element that the neoliberal ethics of authenticity instil in individuals and communities.

Another important feature of the way neoliberalism socializes the subject is structured around how it accounts of *vulnerability*. Vulnerability is understood in this book as the conditions that prevent subjects and communities to become resilient. In comparison with the liberal moral ontology that all human beings are rational, entitled to emancipatory human rights and the services of a democratic state power that guarantees individual freedoms, the neoliberal political assumption is that the subject (individual or communal) is responsible of producing and creating its own welfare. All dysfunctions and vulnerabilities are understood as a lack of informational resources on which

decision making is based (Chandler and Reid, 2016: 141). This means that the existing social and economic differences are explained not in terms of structural features relating to access to resources, inequalities, spatial arrangements and political ecologies, but in terms of subjective inner strength, willingness to successfully overcome problems and crisis and access to relevant informational flows. The lack of this strength, vulnerability, is understood as the main feature of governed subjects which needs to be addressed by neo-liberal policies. Empowering these vulnerable subjects and transforming them into resilient, self-relying units which are capable of overcoming their limits constitutes one of the main features of our neoliberal age. Social difference and the ontological oscillation between vulnerability and resilience is understood by neoliberal governing structures as being due to informational engagement capabilities (or lack of them) and access to relevant data for decision-making.

One of the shortcomings of the book is its lack of embedded ethnography and in-depth sociological analysis on how this neo-liberal subject is actually constituted in everyday life. Although the book draws on a vast amount of data and on a careful analysis of the variations of neoliberal shifts within contemporary governing policies, it lacks specific case studies that show how this type of subjectivity constitutes an integral part of actual-existing neoliberal regimes. The authors present compelling evidence that these transformations are real in terms of how contemporary governmentality technologies function and the way different political-economic regimes institute different subject-formation process. But to what extent are these self-configurations actually internalized and appropriated by human beings and communities in everyday life? How stable are these self-formations and how do they function in specific spaces of interaction? The book surveys masterfully the variety of changes at the level of development strategies, governmentality procedures and discourse formations, but gives only limited insight into how these transformations are actually embodied in real-life. An anthropology of neoliberal subjectivity has the future task of making more visible how neoliberalism is appropriated in specific social and cultural contexts. In spite of this, the book is an outstanding addition to the debates on neoliberalism and brings an important contribution to clarifying how the self is re-imagined within this political-economic regime.

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## THE AUTHORS OF THIS ISSUE

**MIKI BRANIȘTE** is cultural manager and curator for performing arts and interdisciplinary projects, president of Colectiv A Association, founding member of The Paintbrush Factory / Fabrica de Pensule, space for contemporary art in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. She was directing the Festival Temps d'Images from Cluj starting with 2008 till 2017. Braniște was a member of the board of the Paintbrush Factory and actively participated in the strategy of this cultural space for 10 years. Preoccupied by the economic, social-political and environmental transformations that occur within the global society, she is involved in projects together with artists inspired by the need to re-imagine our futures. In November 2015 she received the title of "Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres" from the French Ministry of Culture for her activity to support the independent performing arts sector in Romania. In 2018 she started a PhD in cultural policies at The Theatre and Film Faculty, Babeș-Bolyai University. In 2016 she received the prize for interdisciplinary projects from the Administration of the National Cultural Fund and the prize for the support for contemporary dance from The National Centre for Contemporary Dance.

**SORIN GOG** is lecturer at the Sociology Department of the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, teaching courses on contemporary sociological theories, symbolic anthropology, sociology of religion and paradigms of secularization. He has been a research fellow at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland), the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology (Germany), Institut für Wissenschaft der Menschen (Austria), New Europe College (Romania), CEU-IAS (Hungary) and Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies (Finland). His PhD thesis, defended in 2011, deals with secular and religious identities in post-socialist Romania.

**MARIUS LAZĂR** is associate professor at the Sociology Department of the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, teaching courses on Social Theory and The History of Romanian Sociology. His most important book is *Paradoxuri ale modernizării. Elemente pentru o sociologie a elitelor intelectuale Românești (Paradoxes of modernization. Elements for a sociology of Romanian intellectual elites)*, Cluj-Napoca, Limes, 2002. His research interests regard the sociology of intellectual elite, ethnic relations, sociology of arts and literature. Currently, he is engaged in research about the transformations of the intellectual field in Romania after 1989.

**MARINA MIRONICĂ** earned a bachelor of arts in Sociology in 2017, and a master degree in Advanced Sociological Research in 2019, both from the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, Babeş-Bolyai University. Her research interests are related to urban processes, especially urban planning and urban development, and their connections to art and culture. She currently works in the independent cultural sector in Cluj-Napoca.

**IULIA POPOVICI** is a performing arts critic and curator based in Bucharest. She has published extensively about the alternative performing arts scene, collectives and artists in Romania and Eastern Europe, documentary-based theatre, the social challenges of contemporary arts and the shifting in working practices. In 2011-2017, she was co-curator of the Independent Performing Arts Platform (Temps d'Images Festival, Cluj). She curated programmes of independent performing arts in Romania and abroad, and edited several books on contemporary performing arts in Eastern Europe. The most recent publication: *Metaphor. Concept. Protest. Performance Art in Romania and Moldova* (with Raluca Voinea; Idea Design & Print/tranzit.ro, 2017).

**DAVID SCHWARTZ** is a theatre director by training, a cultural worker involved in numerous politically-engaged performing arts projects, all of them documentary-and/or community-based. He works in non-hierarchical models of artistic collaborations based on solidarity and support. He is based in Bucharest. Schwartz is co-founder of Macaz Bar Teatru Coop. (2016-2019) and he is working exclusively, in the last decade, on the independent scene. He was involved in theatre productions such as *Sub Pământ. Valea Jiului după 1989 (Under the Ground. Jiu Valley After 1989)*, *'90, Lucrător universal (Universal Worker)*, etc., and the landmark community project *Vârsta 4 (4th Age)*. He has earned his PhD at Babeş-Bolyai University, with a thesis on socially-engaged theatre.

**ENIKŐ VINCZE** is professor at Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, teaching on the sociology of international relations, social Europe, and critical urban theories. Currently, her research interest is focused on uneven development, socio-spatial and housing inequalities, and racialization processes that reproduce and justify them. Recently she co-edited two volumes: *Racialized Labour in Romania. Spaces of Marginality at the Periphery of Global Capitalism* (Palgrave, 2018); *The Romani Women's Movement: Struggles and Debates in Central and Eastern Europe* (Routledge, 2018), and co-authored the book *Şantier în lucru pentru profit. Redezvoltare urbană în Cluj: zona Ploieşti-Someşului-Anton Pann-Abator-Parcul Feroviarilor* (Desire, 2019).



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