

# REVEALING THE UNTOLD SIDE OF INDUSTRIAL SOCIALISM IN ROMANIA: PRACTICES, DISCOURSES AND PERCEPTIONS

Ioana Alexandra CIUPE

Faculty of Geography, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, ROMANIA  
alexandra.ciupe@yahoo.com

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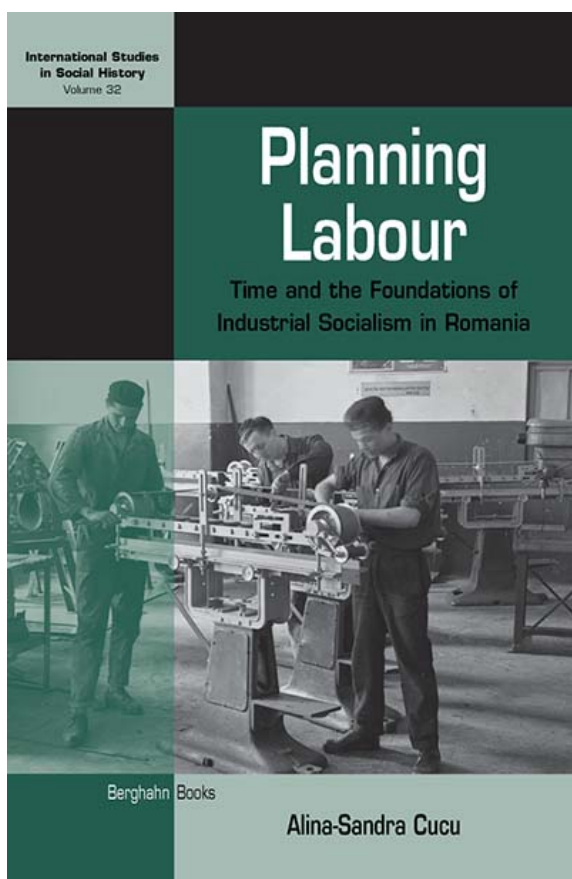
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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been considerable interest in the socialist period among Romanian researchers. This volume, titled “Planning Labour. Time and the Foundations of Industrial Socialism in Romania,” is in line with this trend, focusing especially on the particularities of the urban population’s behaviour, lifestyle, and perceptions during that period. Undoubtedly, the

book is an ambitious and successful attempt to study the history of socialist transformation and labour history in Romania. More specifically, the book is centred on the theme of the socialist plan, which becomes transparent from the “Foreword” itself, titled “What Was the Plan? And What Was It Meant to Do?”, written by Don Kalb, professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Bergen.

Either in the Introduction or throughout the book, this contribution brought the empirical data into close engagement with theory. Using various methods in approaching the problem (i.e. documentary research, the in-depth interview and the case study), the book examines two factories within the city of Cluj: “János Herbák,” from the 1970s known as “Clujana,” which was a leather and footwear factory founded at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and “Armătura,” set up in 1949, through the merging of three private workshops which underwent nationalization, a producer of domestic and industrial faucets and fittings.



## PERSPECTIVES

Progressing through the 246-pages, the book focuses on the city of Cluj, considered as a case study. The volume has two parts, each with three chapters. Chapters and sub-chapters are given concise titles. An epilogue concludes the volume, which also includes a rich eight pages final bibliography and an index. Notes are provided for each chapter, including the Introduction, having highly explanatory value.

To better guide the reader, in the “Introduction,” A.-S. Cucu presents extensively (pp. 1-34) the main ideas of her book, in the following subchapters: “Tensions and Contradictions of Industrial Socialism”; “Primitive Socialist Accumulation in the Romanian Context”; “Postponed Proletarianization and the Working of Class”; “Planning Labour on and beyond the Shop Floor”; “Industrial Cluj as a Case”. These all focus on Romania and more specifically on the city of Cluj, in the context of East Central European transition to central planning. Dr. Cucu underlines that she uses a temporal perspective to get insight into capital accumulation and everyday life, these two strongly intersecting as part of the civilizing process that socialist transformation brought about. She identifies the 1945-1955 decade as a key period that founded the Romanian transition to industrialization after World War II. Industrial socialism was guided by Stalinist ideas about fighting against backwardness. Progress in industrialization was the state’s official answer to this situation.

*The first chapter, “Productive State Apparatuses: Taking Over the Factories, 1944-1948,”* is devoted to the ways in which the state realised the nationalization of the industry, in the following sub-chapters: “Whose City, Whose Factories? Rethinking the Communist Takeover of Industry”; “The Right to Cluj between Class and Ethnicity”; “Life as a Battlefield”; “A Workers’ Factory’: Nationalization and Its Aftermath.”

Nationalization, which was crucial for supporting development in a state (not market)-driven economy, is defined as “the transformation of the factories into productive state apparatuses” (Cucu, 2019, p. 42). From among the policy measures adopted during this period, the restrictive wages and centrally planned productivity are the ones thoroughly analysed by the author. Among the flaws of the system, A.-S. Cucu mentions endemic clientelism and politicization of employment. Pointing out to “the over-politicization of the shop floor,” the author discusses the diverse and conflicting roles of Party activists in the factory. In this context, the shop floor reality explains the work/survival nexus and the permanent tensions between the two roles of the worker: as producer and as political subject, as well as the transforming moral economies and changing social justice ideas. In Cluj, factories were fractured along class and ethnic lines, rendering them “fragile nodes of state power” (Cucu, 2019, p. 72) and creating multiple problems to their top management representatives.

*The second chapter* focuses on what is “‘More Precious than Gold’: Labour Instability and the ‘Stickiness’ of Everyday Life,” discussing the chaotic factory life from three perspectives, as reflected in the sub-chapter titles: *Planning Wages, “Fixing” Labour, and ‘No Factory Ever Went Bankrupt Because of a Sledge’: Some (Not So) Ethical Dilemmas around Stealing and Everyday Life.* Workers’ self-restraint, as part of the development policy that ensured the realisation of the yearly plan and also of the First Five-Year Plan, was advocated for, but not accomplished because of the tension between labour power and living labour, between who was selling and buying labour. A.-S. Cucu underlines that, in these new geographies of accumulation, stealing incorporated in workers’ daily strategies for survival was a form of re-appropriating control over their lives.

The author continues the analysis of the planning labour in *the third chapter*, titled “‘Workers’, ‘Proletarians’ and the Struggle for Cheap Labour” and encompassing five sub-chapters: “Accumulation Rhythms and the Labour Regime of Early Socialism”; “Shrinking Life and the Territorial Logic of Socialist Industrialization”; “*Vinituri* at the Gates”; “In-Betweeners: Commuting to Cluj for Work”; “Arms That Built Socialism.” Dr. Cucu puts emphasis on the three-fold character of the socialist worker, who was, at the same time: creator of value, living labour and subject of the socialist emancipatory politics. This situation generated contradictions and disruptions in the economic flows of the planned economy, which the system failed to address, despite struggling with a diversity of approaches to find solutions.

All the above are meant to enlighten the discussion about the politics of austerity associated to highly intensive work, the emerging industrial regime in early socialist Romania, using the labour force of the peasant worker, the creation of a new social fabric in the urban area, and the state’s mechanism of surplus appropriation. Dr. Cucu describes how the control over the factories was put into practice, this affecting the evolution of cities and countryside. The countryside was heavily exploited for its resources in order to advance the industrial sector: especially manpower, food, and cheap raw materials. Rural reproduction was supporting urban industrialization through cheap unskilled labour. The early years of implementing the plan were characterised by insufficient supply for the industry, high prices for basic goods, low quality of food, low wages, rendering the socialist worker as a resource for industry and a dissatisfied participant to building socialism.

State-society relations are depicted using the logic of production in early state socialism, where the creation and extraction of surplus were crucial in making the economic system functional and in understanding the society of that period. The establishment of control over the cities, the countryside and especially over the industrial sector were crucial.

In *the fourth chapter*, “‘Hidden Reserves of Productivity’ and the Quest for Knowledge,” the manager-state is depicted using the control instrument of the individual charts of production, and the ethnographer-state as learning more about labour control from the workers themselves. Dr. Cucu underlines that the state was aware of the problems on the shop floor, because it acquired managerial, statistical and ethnographic knowledge, as explored in the four sub-chapters: “Knowledge of the Plan,” “Constructing Legibility Structures,” “The Manager-State: Seeing the Movement,” “The Ethnographer-State: Governing Beyond Numbers.” The factory was conceptualised as the depository of “hidden reserves” that could boost productivity, while workers could work more, faster, and better.

In this chapter, as well as in the next one, titled “Productive Flows and Factory Discipline” and structured in three sections (“State/Labour/Plan Discipline”; “The Rhythms of the Plan”; “The 480-Minute Workday”), Dr. Cucu provides a three-step argument about planning labour and its consequences on the Romanian society: objectified social relationships during state socialism, the tension between the worker as an object of the emancipatory project of socialism and the worker as a creator of goods and of capital accumulation, and the conflicting nature of state socialism as “a conflicting temporal regime” (capital accumulation on the shop floor, the civilizing mission that the Communist dystopia was promising and the workers’ daily realities of their personal lives) (Cucu, 2019, p. 4).

The author points out that the primitive socialist accumulation has to be embedded in the multiple temporalities governing it: “the historical ‘leap forward’ of early socialist industrialization as a solution to backwardness and economic isolation; the chronology of investment, which privileged heavy industry over consumer goods and agriculture, previously industrialized areas over the underdeveloped ones, and the city over the village; the different rhythms set by the new economic executives for the nationalization of the factories and for the collectivization of land; the pace at which the workforce was released from the countryside; the tempo at which people’s bare necessities were met; and the pulse of workers’ attempts to reproduce their experience of being in the world in terms of class, ethnicity and gender” (Cucu, 2019, pp. 4-5). These represent the key in which Dr. Cucu reads planning labour, referring to the regime’s ‘nonsynchronicity’ that she defines as “an amalgam of archaic, contemporary, and future-oriented forms of living and working” (Cucu, 2019, p. 5). The author considers that this ‘nonsynchronicity’, which marked early socialist productivity, could explain the failure of the production system, despite concentrated state policies and the local managers’ practices in safeguarding their factories, workforce, and position as managers.

These two chapters analyse the following features of early industrial socialism in Cluj and Romania: the bureaucratic instrument of the plan worked and failed and therefore the fragile Romanian workers’ state; both scientists and bureaucrats contributed to making the plan work; the modernist rationalization influenced calculating the value of labour (objectified labour power); the commodity character of the living labour in the Romanian centrally planned economy; the state was perfecting the mechanisms for surplus extraction; class relations were produced; industrial employment was not a secure source of livelihood because of the periods when production was stopped and because of the insufficient wages to support a family; political legitimacy on the shop floor was searched for on a daily basis; the Soviet-inspired primitive accumulation and central planning policies required a rearticulation of the production/life nexus.

Above all, as *the sixth chapter* – “Planned Heroism and Nonsynchronicity” – shows, the book adroitly and vividly captures the fact that the ‘time of production’ and ‘time of politics’ are two conflicting sides of the temporal logic of socialism that required a “sacrificial and rhythmic present” (Cucu, 2019, p. 23). This argument highlights the causes leading to the ethical ideal of socialism being betrayed each time the obligation to work was not fulfilled. The varied strategies of motivating the workers to fulfil the plan, as the three sub-chapters argue (“Faces in the Factory Newspaper”; “Slackers, Stakhanovites and the Time of Politics”; “Working in the Future? Socialist *Ungleichzeitigkeit*”), ultimately fail into exercises of public shaming for those not working (at all or enough).

*In the Epilogue*, “Really Existing Socialism as Nonsynchronicity,” A.-S. Cucu defines her book “as a plea for localized, in-depth and time-sensitive explorations of those realities that were so easily grouped under the label of ‘socialism’, and as a deconstruction of the taken-for-granted ‘Soviet model’ or ‘Soviet blueprint’, which still constitutes the starting point for most analyses of the postwar East and Central European regimes” (Cucu, 2019, p. 229).

The epilogue summarizes the arguments of the book. Without being redundant, the author critically discusses the following: the contradictions of capital accumulation during the construction of socialism; the magnified antagonistic trends during the 10-year period under scrutiny (1945-1955); the societal transformation marked by the simultaneity of exploitation and progress, leading to the failure of state socialism.

## CONCLUSIONS

Considering the above-presentation of the book, the reader can easily identify its central notions: socialist accumulation and planning. These are correlated with a series of *leit motifs* throughout the entire book, which convincingly articulate both the book contents and the author's discourse: the worker, the factory, the production, time, the New Man, political ideology and economic development, society as the reality of social relations, the state, nationalization, collectivization, ethnicity, class, the proletariat, progress, modernization, propaganda, industrialization, central planning, and the shop floor, as a pre-political space to be shaped by the Party and the working class.

*The 'worker'* was a problematic category shaping actively the relationships he or she was involved into. According to dr. Cucu, industrial workers are exploited and alienated, not matching the frame of the ideal socialist worker. It was not a fundamentally different and better world than the capitalist one, after all, but one that was harmful for workers (hard and poorly paid work and appalling living conditions).

The relationship between state and labour renders *the state* as a relation of production. State bureaucracy was a "new class." Moreover, as early industrial socialism was lacking proletarians, the working class was the main object of state politics, while the state managed "the factories as its productive and redistributive arms" (Cucu, 2019, p. 230).

Concomitantly, planning was "a condition of possibility for safeguarding socialist accumulation" (Cucu, 2019, p. 19). Throughout the book, Cucu rejects the fetishizing of 'the plan' as a bureaucratic tool, because this "obscures the set of activities, practices and relations that actually accounted for much of its performative power" (Cucu, 2019, p. 20). And she defines planning as "the daily weaving of material webs of practices and relations within which the socialist factory emerged as an object of governmentality, with its own conflicting regimes of knowledge, discipline and time" (Cucu, 2019, p. 20).

By reading Cucu (2019), one may acknowledge that her research is grounded in relational, processual, and critical realist epistemology. The book is a very good reference to those interested in the following subjects: socialism, 1945-1989 Romania (especially the first decade of this period), Cluj-Napoca city, 20<sup>th</sup> century developing countries, government ownership, central planning, economic policy, social conditions, and the working class.

In a similar vein, other books, some strongly acclaimed ones, explored the urban development during socialist Romania (Copilaş, 2015, from a historian's perspective) and in Cluj (Petrovici, 2018, through the lenses of political economy).

To sum up, open to critical reflection and scrutiny by scholars of diverse sciences, focusing on the processes of industrialisation and urbanisation in Romania, Cucu's book offers a valuable and timely contribution to urban studies. It is a detailed account of planned labour during early socialism in Romania, extensively discussed starting from a rich theoretical basis and pertinent empirical data.

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