

THE POLITICS OF RESEARCH AS PRAXIS: THEORY AND ACTION IN THE STUDY OF REAL ESTATE DEVELOPMENT IN ROMANIA*

Ioana FLOREA¹  and Enikő VINCZE² 

ABSTRACT. Based on the view that praxis evolves in the dialectical relationship between theory and action, the article contributes to a Marxist understanding of knowledge production and its adaptation in the field of urban studies. It elaborates on our insight into the politics of research as praxis by focusing on its main precepts: 1) knowledge production as a social process, i.e., how is it created within a network of social relations that evolves to pursue action (for housing justice in this case); 2) the embeddedness of researchers in the material realities they address, taking a critical standpoint to the ruling classes and increasing consciousness about the fact that action (eg. for housing justice) should be part of revolutionary struggles targeting the capitalist political economy regime as a whole; and 3) how researching real estate development, as a core element in the Post-Fordist accumulation regime and a vehicle of reurbanization that uses urban space for profit-making, answers the need of housing justice activism for extended knowledge that can underpin more radical transformative actions.

Keywords: praxis, theory, action, real estate development, housing justice, revolutionary struggles

Introduction

Our paper expands beyond existing work on participatory action research that aims to solve concrete issues with the involvement of people affected by

* The article grew from a paper presented by the authors at the AFPP 2025 Conference, “30 years of Alternative Futures & Popular Protest”, Manchester, 16-18 June 2025.

¹ Södertörn University; email: ioana.floreaa@gmail.com

² University of Babeş-Bolyai; email: eniko.vincze@ubbcluj.ro.



them (Stringer, 2014; McIntyre, 2008; Reason, 2008) and militant research, which prioritizes political struggle over the academic pursuit of knowledge (Ross, 2013; Adams, 2023). Still, alongside these endeavours, we decline the positivist notion of ‘neutral’ or ‘objective’ knowledge, understanding politics (in the broad sense of the word, as positioning or endorsing a standpoint) as an immanent dimension of knowledge production that facilitates transformative action. We agree with the need to support, through research, the political activism for changes reclaimed by social classes and racialized or gendered groups exploited or expropriated within the capitalist world system. However, we take a step further from how participatory action research and militant research address the politics of research, following the line opened up by Marx (1845) in exploring the dialectical relationship between theory and action, understood as praxis.

Furthermore, we rely on how militant epistemology acknowledges the social and political nature of knowledge production, and that the latter’s potential and limitations are rooted in its—and its producers’—embeddedness in particular circumstances. Moreover, we deem that militant research has the power to critique the system by questioning its fundamental assumptions and challenging its discursive justifications (Zamfir et al., 2020; Vilenica et al., 2021; Vincze, 2024a). Nevertheless, in this paper, we go beyond epistemological matters to develop a view on the politics of research in social sciences that assumes an anti-capitalist critique, which may become a constitutive element of revolutionary praxis. Our main argument is that critically examining the structural features of capitalism—by focusing on specific issues through a macro-social perspective—can become part of a broader flow of systemic contestation.

Concretely, we reflect on how our ongoing research on real estate development and urban transformations stems from and serves social movements demanding housing justice, with the potential to inform transformative struggles. We demonstrate that connecting theorizing on real estate development (interrogating how and why it is a constitutive process of capitalism) and housing justice activism can provide a fruitful ground for a transitional program consistent with a future socialist housing system (Vincze, 2024b) within a postcapitalist society.

In what follows, we begin by briefly describing the Marxist understanding of knowledge production and its application in the field of urban studies, which serves as a general framework for developing our own view on the topic. Afterwards, in three sections, we elaborate on the central precepts of our insight into the politics of research as praxis, highlighting that (1) knowledge production is a social process; 2) researchers are embedded in the material realities they address; and 3) theorizing reveals how the studied phenomena

contribute to the accumulation of capital, and can thus underpin transformative action. We draw on our recent research on real estate development in Romania, as well as on our activism within the housing rights movement. This investigation was conducted between 2021 and 2023 within the project “Class formation and re-urbanization through real estate development at an eastern periphery of global capitalism” (REDURB) and since 2023 within the project “Sustaining civil society in the context of multiple crises” (Sustain Action). Subsequently, we present their activism-linked prehistory, as well as some of their methodological options and theoretical contributions to illustrate our particular view on the politics of research as praxis.

A Marxist understanding of knowledge production

The Marxist understanding of knowledge production, in the broad sense of the word, encompassing everyday, scientific, and cultural knowledge, draws our attention to the dialectical relationship between thinking and acting. This relationship posits that ideas have the power not only to reflect the world but also to change it, and actions cannot exist without thinking. Both thinking and acting are practices of social beings whose lives are determined by their economic circumstances. Still, they can also transform these circumstances by creating products through their material and mental labor, as well as by political work and revolutionary actions. Thought reflects the historical social relations that give rise to it (Marx & Engels, 1845), and people's consciousness is shaped by their material conditions, including forces and relations of production. These, in turn, are outcomes of both past labor and their current productive activities. Therefore, both ideas and actions are rooted in the materiality and positions of the thinkers/actors from which they think/speak/act. Nevertheless, through class struggle and consciousness, workers can revolt against the capitalist mode of production and transform it.

Regarding the producers of scientific knowledge, their thinking through theories has a radical socio-political transformative potential if it is rooted in the perspective of historical materialism, and it contributes to strengthening the class consciousness of workers. In a materialist vision, knowledge production has the potential to become praxis, in which theory (as the practice of thinking) and the practice of acting (as an enactment of theory that can drive theory forward) are interconnected. The new materialism of Marx (1845), as he refers to it in his Ninth Thesis on Feuerbach, posits that its standpoint should be human society or social humanity, rather than a single individual or civil society. It affirms that all social life is essentially practical, and the mysteries of theory are

resolved through human practice (thesis #8). Additionally, it asserts that philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, but the point is to change it (thesis #11). In the present article, we argue that our interpretation of the world, specifically real estate development within the capitalist system, has the potential to alter it, as it guides people's awareness about its structural features and dynamics.

Applying the above understanding of politics of research as praxis to the field of urban studies, we position ourselves close to the theory on the right to the city, in its Marxian paradigm (Lefebvre, 1968; Castells, 1972; Harvey, 2003), which aimed at informing radical urban transformations, and not in the frame of liberal policies that appropriated this concept (Kuymulu, 2013). In Lefebvre's (1970) view, the urban revolution created the urban society, which has the potential for liberation that could be realized through a genuine urban revolution re-prioritizing the use value over the exchange value of urban space. Castells (1972) conceived the city as a central site of contradictions between capital accumulation and social reproduction, and as an explicit locus and target of political organizing. He thought that profound social and political transformation is possible if driven by urban social movements. Harvey (1985) analyzed how urbanization under capitalism is driven by the need to absorb surplus capital and argued that the right to the city, as a collective right, implies democratizing decisions about how a city is organized so that the people who live and work there have a say. In the following, we illustrate how our analysis of real estate development was informed by housing justice activism and, as we revealed the centrality of this phenomenon in the capitalist political economy regime, our theorizing sustained the radicalization of activist actions.

Politics of research as praxis. Illustrations from our study on real estate development

In a Marxist perspective, praxis serves as a vehicle for revolution or radically challenging capitalism, a system founded on class relations. In turn, this praxis is grounded in the theoretical analysis of the capitalist mode of production, characterized by the accumulation of capital through the exploitation of labor and the appropriation of surplus value by the owners of the means of production across various economic sectors. From this historical materialist standpoint, we elaborate on our view of the politics of research within the context of contemporary capitalism, beginning with the recognition of two key features. One of its characteristics is that capitalist accumulation not only occurs during the process of economic production, but it also takes place

through profit-making from investments in the built environment, including real estate development, which connects construction as a productive industry to the financial markets where non-productive speculation occurs. Another relevant feature of late capitalism is that, in the post-Fordist accumulation regime, class exploitation not only happens as the appropriation of surplus value created by the labour force. It also occurs in the form of profit extraction through debt and private rents, phenomena linked to the financialized real estate actors and markets.

Furthermore, from a Marxist perspective, knowledge can become part of praxis because it is produced within social relations and is a social and political, rather than purely epistemological, product. Knowledge may nurture a political consciousness when it is produced critically and self-reflexively by individuals and groups who are part of the realities they study; that is, when they study not only to learn about them, but also to change them. Moreover, theory does not merely support everyday activist practices that respond to the immediate needs of people in various domains of their lives, from economic production to social reproduction. Due to its dialectical relationship with these actions and the spatial and temporal contextualization of the particular issues it addresses, theory becomes a constitutive element of revolutionary praxis.

Our research on real estate development in Romania provides concrete examples that illustrate three key aspects of our view on the politics of research. We analyze these in what follows, also referring to the connections between the REDURB research project and prior or parallel housing justice activism, as well as some methodological options of this research and its major theoretical contributions that reveal its potential for revolutionary struggles.

Knowledge production as a long-term social process

The knowledge produced through the REDURB research project was made possible mainly due to three trajectories the members of its team have taken over the past decade.

The first trajectory was housing justice activism. All members of the research team were either members of housing justice contentious groups or part of its broad supporting infrastructures. Since the mid-2000s, we have encountered manifestations of the wider housing crisis, and over time, its connections to real estate development have become increasingly apparent. Together with colleagues from REDURB, the authors of this paper are long-time members of the local movements Căși Sociale ACUM!/Social Housing NOW! (Căși) from Cluj-Napoca, the most expensive housing market in Romania, and Frontul Comun Pentru Dreptul la Locuire/ Common Front for Housing Rights

(FCDL) from Bucharest, the capital city of the country. These groups are part of the Romanian national network Blocul Pentru Locuire/Bloc For Housing (Bloc), and the European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and the City (EAC). All these collectives, in addition to organizing actions against forced evictions from homes and demanding access to social housing, have also conducted militant research on these topics (Blocul pentru Locuire, 2019; Căși Sociale ACUM!, 2019, 2021, 2023; Vișan & FCDL, 2019) and related issues, such as housing financialization (European Action Coalition, 2018).

A second trajectory that led us to developing the REDURB research project has been the previous investigations into real estate developments on former industrial platforms in Cluj-Napoca, displacing entire working-class communities (Vincze et al., 2019), and into housing debt hidden as consumer debt and arrears on utility bills (Florea & Dumitriu, 2022). Our prior investigations (conceived rather as short-term militant research than academic projects) revealed the importance of these phenomena for ongoing housing activist practices: understanding urban regeneration projects and household loans as key factors contributing to evictions and segregation, thus also hindering broader activist alliances.

Last but not least, in our attempt to understand the mechanisms of the aforementioned injustices and segregation, we delved into the literature on real estate development and its financialization in various geographies. This has helped us identify the global processes manifesting in a series of local phenomena against which local movements struggle. Thus, we could further interrogate how the advancement of global capitalist transformations is shaped in unevenly developed local contexts, which are part of a semi-peripheral country such as Romania.

Guided by these three trajectories, we connected activism and research through various social relationships established within and outside academia³. All these signalled the need to address the root causes of the housing crisis through a longer-term and in-depth investigation, which had not been previously done in Romania. Research was required on a larger geographical scale, with related theorizing on how capitalism produces real estate developments and markets, while reciprocally reproducing itself through them. Thus, we conceived the REDURB project with the general aim to investigate these phenomena as products of the dismantling of state socialism since 1989 and, simultaneously, as a constitutive factor of capitalism. More specifically, this investigation aimed to examine the state-led processes that have created a

³ For an analysis on the tensions and complementarity within-outside academia, for research aiming at social change that has inspired us, see Bell & Pahl, 2019; Sustain Action Method Lab et al., 2025.

market economy, including in the domains of housing and real estate, as well as the neoliberal accumulation regime in Romania.

Based on this awareness—stemming from activism—of the root causes of the housing crisis, our initial project proposal referred to the following matters to be investigated:

1) The processes that acted as preconditions for the emergence of real estate development in Romania, such as privatization and the dismantlement of socialist industries, the transformation of the housing regime, and the changing role of the state in economic transformations.

2) The role of real estate development as a business sector in the creation of the capitalist class (the developers and investors); the production of social hierarchies and inequalities between different status groups within the labor classes, according to access or lack of access to different types of real estate; increasing spatial polarization and unevenness in the cities; the transformation of the built urban environment into an asset for financial investment and a source of capital accumulation both on the real estate and financial markets; the re-urbanization of former socialist towns according to the logic of profit-making.

3) The interdependencies between real estate development, entrepreneurial urban governance, and privatized spatial planning.

The resources of the REDURB research project (UEFSCDI funds via the Exploratory Research Projects program) allowed us to conduct fieldwork in four second-tier and four third-tier cities in Romania: Cluj-Napoca, Iași, Brașov, and Craiova, and, respectively, Reșița, Târgu Jiu, Bârlad, and Bragadiru, belonging to unequally developed regions.⁴ Due to this, we could collect information on several topics: about the cities' economic restructuring, including the privatization and bankruptcy of factories after 1990, and the emergence of real estate development as business in several localities; about urban development strategies and local urbanistic policies aimed to attract investors; about national legislation providing conditions for the privatization of industries, housing and the banking sector; and, in strong connection, national legislation setting up and regulating investment funds and asset management companies as part of the post-1990 regime's profit-oriented financial system.

Together with the entire project team, we published the knowledge produced during the REDURB research through various materials: fieldnotes and investigations in Romanian and English language shared on the project

⁴ Romanian Law 351/2001 classifies urban localities as rank 0 (Bucharest municipality), rank I (the 11 municipalities with over 200.000 inhabitants), and, further, rank II (81 municipalities) and rank III (172 cities). However, not including the capital in our research, we followed the classification of cities that defines urban centers located below the capital city of the national urban hierarchy, as second-tier cities, and those located below the latter as third-tier cities.

website; popularization videos on youtube, explaining more complex processes linked to privatizations, deindustrialization and financialization; the co-creation of an international exhibition that provided an opportunity for exchange with artists from Central and Eastern Europe working on urban transformations and critique of capitalism's advancement; a Romanian language book offering a synthesis on the whole research for the local public. We presented our results to an international academic audience through the collective volume *"Uneven Real Estate Development in Romania at the Intersection of Deindustrialization and Financialization"* (Vincze et al., 2024). As stated in its closing remarks, the volume could be of interest to researchers and students of urban sociology, economic sociology, political economy, human geography, and political geography. However, the knowledge inscribed in this volume was also intended to inspire political activism. Our critical inquiry into capitalist transformations can support struggles committed to more just cities and economies, including the expansion of the non-profit housing sector, access to public services, and diminishing territorial inequalities and uneven development. Ultimately, our study, by examining how real estate development is integral to the capitalist world system, has the potential to inform the search for an alternative to the capitalist political economy regime: one that redirects financial resources to serve people's housing and broader social-economic needs rather than to private profits from investments in the built environment.

In parallel with the REDURB research project, inspired by its approach and gradually informed by its findings, between 2020 and 2024, in Cluj-Napoca, Căși Sociale ACUM!/ Social Housing NOW! organized a series of events that critically targeted the new real estate developments in the city. We denounced their entanglement with the urbanistic policies of the local public administration and their contribution to the housing affordability crisis. Among our protests, we mention: Social housing, not real estate business⁵; Real estate development for profit suffocates us! We demand social housing!⁶; City tour: desiring social housing⁷; Everything is too expensive! Utilities, food, and housing!⁸; Take back the city (from corporations)⁹; Guided tour Carbochim-Someș: we demand a green

⁵ Locuințe sociale, nu afaceri imobiliare!, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/events/144812843184076>.

⁶ Protest - Dezvoltarea imobiliară pentru profit ne sufocă! Vrem locuințe sociale!, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/events/2833227573605010/>.

⁷ Tur de oraș: Dor de locuințe sociale, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/events/265271852470006/>.

⁸ Protest: Totul e prea scump! Utilități, alimente, locuințe, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/events/882542579791760/>.

⁹ Ne luăm orașul înapoi (de la corporații), 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/events/257925793967407/>.

built environment, public spaces, and housing for all¹⁰. In both Cluj-Napoca and Bucharest, we built upon the REDURB research results with other activist groups allied with FCDL and Social Housing NOW!, such as the Political Theatre Season and ActingWorks, the Socialist Action Group (GAS), “Ecaterina Arbore” Cooperative, the Socialist Vision, Új Szem, Mozaiq LGBT, and E-Romnja organization for the advancement of Roma women. We are thus building broad alliances opposing the extraction of profit from our cities and lives through high housing and utility costs.

Embeddedness of researchers in the material realities they address

As researchers based in Romania, where we investigate real estate developments, we are part of the broader historical processes of transformation from state socialism to neoliberal capitalism, in an Eastern European semi-periphery. Simultaneously, as political activists, we are critical of how the emergence and advancement of real estate development as a business contributed to the housing affordability crisis in Romania. Our latter position had a major influence on our choice of topic and aim for the REDURB research project, defining its questions and approach. This enabled us to critically examine the capitalist advancement that has impacted all domains of life in Romania over the past three decades. Being part of these transformations and approaching them from a critical research perspective becomes a strategy to reveal them as historical and social constructs that can be overturned. We can thus morph them into an object of critical analysis and, subsequently, into an object of transformative action.

Our epistemological and methodological options are not unique or new. We embed our endeavour within the practices of the reflexive science model (Burawoy, 1998), which takes as its premise the intersubjectivity of the scientist and the subject of study. Burawoy (2009) asserts that researchers are simultaneously participants and observers, as they inevitably live in and are part of the world they study. To reveal how micro-processes are linked to macro forces, researchers are guided by the theories they adopt. These theories enable them to view the world or interpret and explain the empirical material they gather in a specific way.

Throughout the REDURB research project, we drew on critical urban theories that address uneven geographical development (Harvey, 2005), the

¹⁰ Tur ghidat Carbochim-Someş: vrem mediu construit verde, spaţii & locuinţe publice accesibile tuturor, 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/events/703670051713033/>.

urbanization of capital (Harvey, 1985), and entrepreneurial urban governance (Harvey, 1989; Jessop, 2002). This helped us analyse the privatization and demolition of specific factories in the cities chosen for our case studies, the new real estate developments erected on their platforms, as well as the urban planning policies of local public administrations. Moreover, we employed a critical political economy approach to housing (Aalbers & Christophers, 2014) and its financialization (Aalbers, 2016), as well as to the varieties of financialization (Aalbers, 2017), including its subordinate (Büdenbender & Aalbers, 2019) or semi-peripheral forms (Rodrigues et al., 2016).

By examining several real estate developments on former industrial platforms in eight Romanian cities, we contributed to scholarly debates on global convergent trends in real estate development and its financialization, extending beyond the divergencies of empirical cases. We drew inspiration from Aalbers (2022), employing the locally embedded cases as illustrations of national and global processes. As a result, even though our analysis used particular cities as locations from which our knowledge production began, it did not remain city-centric. Instead, it contributed to revealing cross-cutting processes that evolved in multiscale frames of uneven development, shaped by institutional path dependency and current local conditions. Currently, we continue to valorize our case studies as lenses for theorizing postsocialism.

Observing the localized cases of real estate development and discovering how they are shaped by local, national, and global processes does not necessarily make political activism easier. Our embeddedness actually requires us to acknowledge the complex tasks ahead of us. As we learn more about the structural processes of entanglement between real estate markets and capital markets, as well as the interplay between business strategies and state policies, we realize how challenging it is to disrupt the functioning of capitalism in this sector and at large. Revolutionary praxis needs both complex critical theorizing and transformative actions. Embeddedness helps to illuminate the limits of both, as well as the narrow niche of possibilities.

Theorizing on how the studied phenomena contribute to capital accumulation

Following a Marxist analysis, we know that capital accumulation remains at the centre of the capitalist mode of production, based on private ownership of the means of production and the appropriation of surplus value created by the labour classes (Marx, 1887/1999). However, in the post-Fordist regime, as capital continuously seeks novel economic sectors and geographical areas for

profitable accumulation, it shifts back and forth between the productive economy and the built environment, encompassing real estate development and urban infrastructure, and travels across core, periphery, and semi-periphery countries (Harvey, 1985, 2005; Rodrigues et al., 2016). Additionally, as the role of financial logics, actors, and markets increased in all economic and societal domains (Aalbers & Christophers, 2014), capital accumulation in contemporary capitalism also occurs through the exploitation of various asset classes, including financialized residential and commercial real estate. Therefore, in their political struggles, activists need to have an understanding of the fact that real estate development (including the production and exchange of housing) is both a territorially embedded phenomenon (in lands and local real estate markets) and a decontextualized process linked to financial markets existing beyond and above particular geographical spaces. In what follows, we briefly describe how we analysed several processes related to real estate development within this frame of understanding.

State-led privatization and economic restructuring

The transitology literature celebrated privatization as an inevitable solution to the socio-economic crisis of Romanian and Eastern European state socialism (Vincze & Vlad, 2024). On the contrary, by adopting a critical political economy perspective on privatization (Mercill & Murphy, 2018), we addressed it as a state-led process that created the conditions for subordinating societal (re)development to the logic of capital accumulation (Vincze et al., 2024). Pressured by the conditionality politics of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, during the first two decades of capitalist transformation after 1990, the Romanian state facilitated the formation of a capitalist market economy through massive privatization programs implemented in the industrial sector (and subsequently in all economic domains). Privatization in this country has acted as a phenomenon with two faces, encompassing both the primitive accumulation of capital and capital accumulation through dispossession. The primitive accumulation of capital during the erection of capitalism on the ruins of the state socialist productive capacities represented “the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production” (Marx, 1887/1999, p. 508) and provided profit-making opportunities for emerging entrepreneurs.

Additionally, the conversion of a non-capitalist mode of production into a capitalist one created investment opportunities for foreign capital. This occurred during the era of globalized capitalism, a period when novel forms of accumulation by dispossession, such as profit extraction from the built environment, were

gaining significant importance at the global scale relative to traditional production. Privatization processes in Romania illustrate that politics and state restructuring were strongly entangled with economic restructuring, “transitioning” from a planned socialist economy to a market-centered one. A centralized socialist economy could only be dismantled through the active participation and coordination of the state, which would create investment opportunities for private capital (Vincze & Florea, 2024).

Activism based on these findings opposes privatization measures, which have been continuously proposed by powerful political and economic actors over the last few decades of Romania’s history. It also demands public investments for public interests, such as public housing, as well as forms of centralized production and redistribution of public goods and services. Moreover, our activism envisions a generalist public system that ensures accessibility to social housing for all social categories that cannot afford to purchase or rent a home from the market. Additionally, we consider defining ways in which at least a part of the private housing sector can be socialised and/or rendered public. At the same time, we are aware that such demands contradict the logic of the capitalist organization of the economy and of our cities, which makes it difficult to achieve immediate results. Thus, our praxis is constructed as a long-term effort, resisting and continuously seeking new possibilities beyond narrow or fleeting definitions of “success.”

Deindustrialization as a condition of real estate development

Privatization in Romania led to the formation of the private sector, but also contributed to deindustrialization as part of economic restructuring aimed at creating a service-based economy, in anticipation of integration into the global neoliberal post-Fordist regime (Vincze, 2023). The privatization of most state-owned factories resulted in the dismantling of their industrial production. The ensuing deindustrialization of cities represented one of the conditions that led to the emergence of real estate development as a business. The latter used former industrial platforms as assets that could be rented, traded, redeveloped, or used as collateral for bank loans. Additionally, these were vacant lots and buildings in urban areas with good infrastructure or close to city centers, making them attractive for capital investment. Similar processes occurred during the de-cooperativization of agricultural productive capacities and their integration into the real estate development circuit especially in rural areas, reshaped in the proximity of big cities (Sandu-Dumitriu, 2024).

Moreover, these processes opened countries like Romania to foreign direct investments. They created space for retail, industrial, or real estate capital from core capitalist countries to invest safely in the semi-peripheries. Lastly, deindustrialization contributed to the contraction of the productive economy, favoring consumption-based and financialized growth, while the emergence of a reindustrialization process was organized according to the needs of global production chains. As a result, real estate development as a business could flourish at the intersection of landed property and money circulation. Altogether, deindustrialization and the transformation of former industrial platforms into real estate development sites occurred as constitutive elements of larger political economy transformations.

Documenting these processes, our housing activism connects to labour activism, trying to build broad alliances against dispossession and against debt extraction (in the form of housing or consumption credit) in a financialized world. Our militant arguments highlight the interconnectedness between labour and housing (Blocul pentru Locuire, 2020). We emphasise that, besides being exploited in the job market, the labour force is also exploited in the housing market, and adequate living conditions require both an increase in salaries and a decrease in housing costs. At the same time, we understand the causes of massive labour migration from Romania and other CEE countries towards the European West. Many dispossessed workers have left in recent decades, hoping to gain and save enough money to afford homeownership, which has become the materialized ideal of safety (Vincze & Florea, 2020). This framework also helps us understand the recent move to the extreme right in electoral options. Thus, our praxis will focus on changes in material conditions (and not in discourses), which could turn this around.

Uneven real estate development across cities

Conducted across eight different cities, the REDURB research project revealed the unevenness of real estate development across geographical spaces. We described the local economic and administrative conditions that enabled the unequal penetration of transnational capital and global processes into these areas. We observed how global, national, and local engines hybridized and created variegated arrangements of real estate development, which were subordinated to the interests of capital and constantly sought expansion (Vincze et al., 2024). We also highlighted the reciprocal nature of the 'catching-up' process evolving in the relationship between global financial institutions and local actors (Florea & Vincze, 2025).

In the third-tier cities we studied, investments in retail and logistics could be more easily integrated into local societies than new office or residential developments (Zamfir, 2024; Florea et al., 2024). In second-tier cities, the demand for retail and logistics was complemented by a high demand for office and residential buildings. The residential real estate sector in Romania was initially dominated by Romanian companies with a build-to-sell business model, advancing in parallel with other real estate segments favored by foreign investors, which focused on building or purchasing properties to rent (such as office, retail, and logistics spaces). However, after 2014, multinational companies and foreign investment funds have become increasingly entangled in residential and mixed-use developments in the country. During the last years, this trend has been facilitated by the opportunity to construct on former large industrial platforms (Vincze & Florea, 2024).

Learning about how uneven development is at the core of the capitalist world system and how real estate and financial capital move freely across borders (while international organizations facilitate these processes) inevitably led us to a consciousness about the need to connect local housing movements globally. Furthermore, to be effective in the sense of a transformative praxis, the latter should be part of larger political struggles of the exploited and dispossessed labour classes beyond their nation-states. In addition to being aware of the challenges of such an endeavour, we are also mindful of the difficulties of building broad political solidarity around housing justice in our cities. The obstacles of this effort are structurally created by the effects of uneven development on the social stratification within the labour classes. These manifest as inequalities between its various segments (low-paid workers, better-off middle classes, informal labourers) and between the labourers occupying different positions on the housing markets (such as homeowners without loans, homeowners with loans, and private or public renters).

Financialization of the real estate sector

Real estate financialization refers to the growing role of financial actors in producing and trading real estate assets, utilizing this sector as part of the secondary circuit of capital (Harvey, 1985; Aalbers, 2016). Financialization links actual dwellings in various local geographies to global real estate and financial capital flows (Gotham, 2006). As a result, homes embedded in physical space, with both social and use value, are transformed into financial assets or goods with a financial value, increasingly identified by the markets as an “asset class” of its own (Gabor & Kohl, 2022).

The advancement of real estate development and its financialization in Romania was facilitated by public policies transferring the risks from private investors to the state and, more or less directly, to the population. Transnational actors (World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and European Commission) and Romanian state actors (at national and local levels) complemented each other in making the collapsed state socialist country attractive for real estate and financial capital. International lending institutions pressured the Romanian state to create the conditions for the free movement of capital across borders. The central state established the institutions and instruments to achieve this aim. All state-owned banks were privatized, and legal frameworks for establishing new commercial banks and investment funds were created (Florea & Vincze, 2024). Fiscal facilities were also introduced to provide incentives to the construction sector, as well as to contribute to the creation of a middle class with adequate financial means to consume the real estate goods provided by the private investors and developers.

Urbanistic regulations established at the national and local levels facilitated capital investments in real estate. Entrepreneurial approaches to urban development and planning have created business-friendly local environments, driven by the ideology of competitive cities (Vlad, 2024), urban regeneration plans (Gog, 2024), and ambitions of urban rebranding (Vincze, 2024c). They have been implemented through the practices of privatized spatial planning (Sandu-Dumitriu, 2024) and have been naturalized via a large social consensus built up by the urban growth machine (Mironica, 2024).

In our housing activism, we highlight that public authorities are failing to fulfill their responsibility for ensuring adequate housing conditions for all, as they choose not to intervene in the residential market with a consistent stock of public housing. We demonstrate that they instead invest public funds into facilitating for-profit private real estate investments, enhancing the market. Based on our analysis of real estate financialization, the immediate demands of our housing movements are for increasing public funds for public housing. However, we acknowledge that, as a long-term praxis, this requires the creation of a non-profit financial system as a means to challenge the assetization and financialization of housing, which are core features of the capitalist system in Romania and globally.

Conclusion

Our paper elaborates on a Marxist understanding of the politics of research, drawing on the authors' own experiences in research and activism.

We defined this politics as a praxis created by the dialectical relation between theory and action. We went beyond militant research, participatory action research, and militant epistemologies, while sharing with them the conviction that the basic assumptions of the capitalist system need to be questioned from the perspective of the exploited class. Through this analysis, we nurture the potential of anticapitalist critique to become part of revolutionary praxis, in which collective actions inform theory, complex research results inform actions, and, together, they inspire further ideas and actions regarding a postcapitalist future.

The sections of the article focused on the following: 1) the dynamic connections of research to collective actions in housing activism; 2) the embeddedness of the researchers in the realities they study; 3) theoretical insights on real estate development viewed as part of the formation of capitalism on the ruins of the destroyed socialist economy in Romania. To conclude, we synthesize our contribution to thinking about the politics of research in these three steps.

Firstly, through our research on real estate development in Romania and its connections to political struggles, we have demonstrated how knowledge is created within a network of social relations that evolves over time, pursuing actions for housing justice. We contend that, if it critically reveals the structural features of capitalism, such research has the potential to be utilized as a tool that contributes to broader socioeconomic changes, serving people rather than profit, in their endeavor to inhabit cities.

Secondly, we have disclosed that the knowledge generated by research is shaped by the material conditions of the realities in which researchers are immersed. Investigating how real estate development is part of a capitalist political economy regime, we situated ourselves in a critical standpoint to the ruling classes, including developers, investors, and policymakers. We denounce the latter as committed to creating and maintaining real estate markets that are intertwined with financial markets, making them profitable sources for capital accumulation. This enables our research to inform actions aimed at addressing systemic issues that need to be changed, and increase consciousness about the fact that the issue-specific actions of activist collectives should be part of revolutionary struggles targeting the capitalist political economy regime as a whole.

Thirdly, through theorizing on real estate development in the context of capitalist transformations in Romania, we revealed that knowledge, as a social process, sometimes precedes, other times parallels, and at times follows collective actions, constantly evolving through these relationships. Knowledge and actions mutually inspire each other, forming a spiral of praxis that advances through their dialectical relationship. On the one hand, actions underscore the

need for extended, empirically grounded, and theoretically informed knowledge, which, in turn, serves as the foundation for further actions that have the potential to contribute to broader political struggles. On the other hand, actions can also work as frames for knowledge production, and the analytical reflections on the latter become part of a pool of knowledge about systemic issues that underpins transformative actions. In this vein, we hope our reflections encourage students, researchers, practitioners and activists to collectively envisage further transformative praxis.

Acknowledgements

Work on this paper was made possible by Östersjöstiftelsen, under grant number DNR 22-GP-0001, and due to the research funded by UEFISCDI's "Exploratory research projects" PN-III-P4-ID-PCE-2020-1730.

REFERENCES

- Aalbers, M.B. (2016). *The Financialization of Housing: A Political Economy Approach*. London: Routledge.
- Aalbers, M. B. (2017). The variegated financialization of housing. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 41(4), pp. 542–554.
- Aalbers, M.B. (2022). Comparative urban studies beyond the city. In Le Gales, P. and Robinson, J. (eds.) *Handbook of Comparative Urban Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Aalbers, M.B., Cristophers, B. (2014). Centring housing in political economy. *Housing, Theory and Society*, 31(4), pp. 373–394.
- Adams, J. (2008). Militant Research. In Rodekirchen, M. et al. (Eds.), *Methods for Change*. University of Manchester.
- Bell, D. M. & K. Pahl (2018). Co-production: towards a utopian approach. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 21(1), 105-117.
- Blocul pentru Locuire (2019). *Report on forced evictions in Romania between 2008 and 2017*, <https://bloculpentrulocuire.ro/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/research-on-eviction.pdf>.
- Blocul pentru Locuire (2020). *Action against Labour Exploitation and Housing Deprivation*, <https://bloculpentrulocuire.ro/2020/01/13/action-against-labour-exploitation-and-housing-deprivation/>.
- Büdenbender, M., Aalbers, M.B. (2019). How Subordinate Financialization Shapes Urban Development: The Rise and Fall of Warsaw's Służewiec Business District. *IJURR*, 43(4), pp. 666–684.

- Burawoy, M. (1998). The Extended Case Method. *Sociological Theory*, 16(1), pp. 4–33.
- Burawoy, M. (2009). *The Extended Case Method: Four Countries, Four Decades, Four Great Transformations, and One Theoretical Tradition*. University of California Press.
- Castell, M. (1972). *La Question Urbaine*, Paris: Maspero (The Urban Question: A Marxist Approach, Edward Arnold, 1977).
- Căși Sociale ACUM! (2019) *Locuirea în Cluj-Napoca. Fondul locativ, dezvoltare imobiliară și evacuări*, https://casisocialeacum.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Locuirea-in-cluj-napoca_sept2020.pdf.
- Căși Sociale ACUM! (2021) *Muncă și locuire. Salarii și costurile locuirii în pandemie la Cluj*, <https://casisocialeacum.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Munca-si-locuire-v3-spreads.pdf>.
- Căși Sociale ACUM! (2023) Handbook of Resistance Tactics Against Evictions. Collection of tactics from housing justice and anti-racist movements in Romania, Hungary, Serbia, Germany, Portugal, and Spain.
- European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and the City (2018) *Housing Financialization: trends, actors and processes*.
- Florea, I., Dumitriu, M. (2022). Different Debtors, Different Struggles: Foreign-Currency Housing Loans and Class Tensions in Romania. *Critical Housing Analysis*, 9(1), pp. 68–77.
- Florea, I., Pancu, L., Bobu, F. (2024). Putting “the fix” in the “spatial fix”. Restructuring class alliances and financialized real estate in the city of Bârlad. In *Uneven Real Estate Development in Romania at the Intersection of Deindustrialization and Financialization*. Routledge, pp.105–123.
- Florea, I., Vincze, E. (2024). De-risking in a context of uneven development and deindustrialized spaces: the advancement and financialization of real estate as business in Romania. In *Uneven Real Estate Development in Romania at the Intersection of Deindustrialization and Financialization*. Routledge, pp. 69–103.
- Gotham, K.F. (2006). The secondary circuit of capital reconsidered: globalization and the US real estate sector, *American Journal of Sociology*, 112(1), pp. 231–275.
- Harvey, D. (1985). *The urbanization of capital: studies in the history and theory of capitalist urbanization*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Harvey, D. (1989). From managerialism to entrepreneurialism: the transformation in urban governance in late capitalism. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 71(1), pp. 3–17.
- Harvey, D. (2001). Globalization and the “spatial fix.” *Geographische Revue*, 2, pp. 23–30.
- Harvey, D. (2003). The Right to the City. *IJURR*, 27(4), pp. 939-941.
- Harvey, D. (2005). *Spaces of neoliberalization: towards a theory of uneven geographical development*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.
- Jessop, B. (2002). Liberalism, Neoliberalism, and Urban Governance: A State-Theoretical Perspective. In Brenner, N., Theodore, N. (Eds.) *Spaces of neoliberalism. Urban restructuring in North America and Western Europe*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 105–125.
- Kuymulu, M.B. (2013). The Vortex of Rights: ‘Right to the City ’at a Crossroads. *IJURR*, 37(3), pp. 923-940.

- Lefebvre, H. (1968). *Le Droit à la ville*, Paris: Anthropos (The right to the City, Blackwell, 1996)
- Lefebvre, H. (1970) *La révolution urbaine*, Gallimard (The Urban Revolution, University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
- Marx, K. (1845). Theses On Feuerbach. In *Marx/Engels Selected Works*, Volume One, pp. 13–15.
- Marx, K. (1887/1999) *Capital Volume One*. Part VIII: Primitive Accumulation. Chapter Twenty-Six: The Secret of Primitive Accumulation, Marx/Engels Internet Archive.
- Marx, K., Engels, F. (1845). *The German Ideology*, Marx/Engels Internet Archive.
- Mercille, J., Murphy, E. (2018). What is privatization? A political economy framework. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 49(5), pp. 1040–1059.
- Mironica, M. (2024). Challenged by real estate-driven development: the urban growth machine in Cluj. In *Uneven Real Estate Development in Romania at the Intersection of Deindustrialization and Financialization*. Routledge, pp. 159–179.
- Peck, J., Tickell, A. (2002). Neoliberalizing space. In Brenner, N., Theodore, N. (Eds.) *Spaces of neoliberalism. Urban restructuring in North America and Western Europe*. London: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 33–58.
- Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (Eds.). (2008) *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Rodrigues, J., Santos, C. A., Teles, N. (2016). Semi-peripheral financialization: the case of Portugal. *Review of International Political Economy*, 23(3), pp. 480–510.
- Ross, A. (2013). Research for whom? In *Militant Research Handbook*, New York University.
- Sandu-Dumitriu, M. (2024). Spatial planning at the fringes: land fragmentation and sprawling in Bragadiru. In *Uneven Real Estate Development in Romania at the Intersection of Deindustrialization and Financialization*. Routledge, pp. 138–159.
- Sorin, G. (2024). Urban regeneration and transnational capital investments in Reșița brownfields: from the “city of fire” to the “boutique city”. In *Uneven Real Estate Development in Romania at the Intersection of Deindustrialization and Financialization*. Routledge, pp. 201–219.
- Sustain Action Method Lab et al. (2025) The kitchen-work of collaborative research: recipes for transformative methodologies, *Antipode*.
- Vilenica, A., Florea, I., Popovici, V., Pósfai, Z. (2021). Urban struggles and theorising from Eastern European cities. In M. Lancione, M. & C. McFarlane (Eds.). *Global Urbanism. Knowledge, Power and the City*. Routledge, pp. 306-316.
- Vincze, E. (2023). Deindustrialization and the Real-Estate–Development–Driven Housing Regime. The Case of Romania in Global Context. *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai Sociologia*, 68(1), pp. 25–73.
- Vincze, E. (2024a). *Epistemologii Militante*. Fractalia.
- Vincze, E. (2024b) Disrupting the Social Reproduction of Capitalism Through a Transitional Program in the Housing System. *Berliner Gazette*, 24.10.2024.
- Vincze, E. (2024c). The political economy of city rebranding: Brașov, from an industrial center to the “El Dorado” of real estate development. In *Uneven Real Estate Development in Romania at the Intersection of Deindustrialization and Financialization*. Routledge, pp. 219–240.

- Vincze, E., Florea, I. (2020). Homeownership, poverty, and legislative pitfalls in Romania. *Housing Rights Watch*, <https://www.housingrightswatch.org/content/homeownership-poverty-and-legislative-pitfalls-romania>.
- Vincze, E., Florea, I., Aalbers, M. (Eds.) (2024). *Uneven Real Estate Development in Romania at the Intersection of Deindustrialization and Financialization*. Routledge.
- Vincze, E., Harbula, H., Sepródi, A., Máthé, P. (2019) *Şantier în lucru pentru profit: redevoltare urbană în Cluj: zona Ploieşti- Someşului-Anton Pann-Abator-Parcul Feroviarilor*. Editura Fundaţiei Desire.
- Vincze, E., Vlad, I. (2024). The winding road of privatization: a path for real estate development into former state socialist economies. In *Uneven Real Estate Development in Romania at the Intersection of Deindustrialization and Financialization*. Routledge, pp. 41–69.
- Vişan, N., FCDL (2019). *Jurnalul din Vulturilor 50*. IDEA Publishing.
- Vlad, I. (2024). The pressure of inter-urban competition on entrepreneurial governance aspirations. The case of Craiova. In *Uneven Real Estate Development in Romania at the Intersection of Deindustrialization and Financialization*. Routledge, pp. 181–201.
- Zamfir, G. (2024). Coal-based energy, urbanization, and real estate development in Târgu Jiu. In *Uneven Real Estate Development in Romania at the Intersection of Deindustrialization and Financialization*. Routledge, pp. 124–138.
- Zamfir, G. et al. (2020). Housing struggles in Romania and in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). *Radical Housing Journal*, 2(1), pp 149-162.