

## SUBURBANISATION AND MIDDLE CLASS IMAGINAIRES IN THE POST-SOCIALIST CITY. A ROMANIAN CASE STUDY

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**ABSTRACT.** The article is a contribution to the debates on the topics of class divide and urban development in the ex-Socialist Bloc after the 1990 regime change. In the first part, it renders the roots and limitations of the middle class concept and shows the role the concept played in the transition narrative. After it elaborates on how the middle class can be understood within the broader discussion on contemporary global class restructuring under the neoliberal forces, in the second part the article provides, using qualitative data, a micro social and economic history of the city of Cluj-Napoca, which reveals and explains how flows of capital investments grant the economic conditions for a strata of people to embrace the middle class's ideal and values, and how this new material basis is reflected in the spatial restructuring of the city.

**Keywords:** middle class, post-socialist city, Cluj-Napoca, critical anthropology

The study explains how the recent urban development of a Romanian city has produced the conditions for a particular materialisation of the middle class ideal, as some of its inhabitants' aspirations met national and transnational capital interests, as part of regional and global processes associated with neoliberal politics. In this respect, it addresses the more general subject of class reconfiguration and social stratification specific to the countries of the former socialist bloc, but also relevant for other countries and regions enmeshed in the rapid neoliberal urban transformation world-wide. More narrowly, the study depicts, by using the methodological and rhetorical techniques particular to the field of social anthropology, a micro-history of suburbanisation as a central locus where class distinction and class solidarity became visible. This micro-history also provides the facts and the backdrop which enable both directions of class analysis - based on the labourers' place in production and on their patterns of consumption - to be engaged. The study is a contribution to the debates on the transformation of the post-socialist city, providing an analysis based on a world-system viewpoint on cities' development within the centre-periphery contemporary dynamic. Challenging the sociological line of thought that understands middle

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class through a culturalist perspective, which analyses and measures income levels, lifestyle typologies and consumption patterns within a local, regional, or national configuration (Mills, 1951; Bell, 1973; Low, 2003, etc.), my study focuses on objective material processes, related to the global capital flow in search of profit maximization, which produce opportunities for certain strata of workers to live and define themselves as successful social groups.

### **Middle class concept and the transition narrative**

Unsurprisingly, in the decades after 1990, the public concern for social classes in the former socialist countries has almost vanished, while in the academia it became "not very popular" (Buchowski, 2001:142). Ironic as it was, the class conflict, *nomina odiosa* belonging to the repertoire of the recently deceased official ideology, had just re-emerged in the open, with different groupings of the ex-socialist societies trying to impose themselves or to resist one another. Reviewed from a temporal distance, we cannot help but understand some of the events and movements of the '90s as class conflicts, as for instance the episodes of the Romanian miners' squads marching towards Bucharest when they were threatened to lose previous privileges and jobs, or the more widespread privatisation of large parts of public goods everywhere in the Eastern Bloc (Karnouuh; Drweski, 2005). It is well-known that the transition narrative had not described the emerging social order as a "capitalist society" (which would have raised class-related issues), but as a "market society", a model that would have allegedly conciliated (at "the end of history") most of the social conflicts that had previously justified ideological fights and societal proscensions. While this model was all that the citizens could have hoped for, the new society was to be neither equitable, nor classless. Yet, if talking about class was somehow still legitimate, the only class entitled to be talked about was the "middle class". In a Freudian slip, middle class talk inevitably reminded people that everything is, once again, about class, but, at the same time, obscured the plurality and predicaments of the class system. Above all, the middle class was not about class conflicts and class struggles, and while defining other classes has lingered as a fuzzy matter (or even "class" itself was to end up as a "fuzzy category", as Buchowski suggested, *op. cit.*:165), the clarity of the middle class has remained largely unquestioned.

This is not surprising if we comprehend the ideological role this concept was playing for the CEE societies' post-socialist transformations. Like elsewhere, the middle class ideal was also imposed here as an imagined panacea viewed in most political parties' and reformists' narratives<sup>2</sup> as the "solution for whatever

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<sup>2</sup> The largest Romanian political party, PSD (Social Democratic Party), which won the 2016 elections, opened the government program with the motto "More Romanians in the middle class" ([http://psd.ro/assets/pdf/Programul\\_de\\_guvernare\\_al\\_PSD\\_-Masuri\\_pentru\\_mediul\\_de\\_afaceri\\_-\\_16.11\\_2016\\_.pdf](http://psd.ro/assets/pdf/Programul_de_guvernare_al_PSD_-Masuri_pentru_mediul_de_afaceri_-_16.11_2016_.pdf)).

political, economic or social problems we face in the globalised present" (Lopez; Weinstein, 2012).<sup>3</sup>

The anthropology and sociology of post-socialism addressed the new social divide and the new social formations in a conceptual range intimately linked with the transition narrative: they described a "new feudalism" (Humphrey 1991), a "capitalism without capitalists" (Eyal; Szelenyi; Townsley 2001), emergent social formations dominated by local Mafias or by a re-centralising "predatory spoiler state" (Verdery 1996), a realm dominated by "epidemic crime and corruption" (Gustafson, 1999), or simply as a "chaos", dominated by "wild capitalism" (Nazpari, 2002), to mention just a few. The main actors of these analyses were the new elites, the former nomenklatura, the nouveaux riches, the civil society, the local "barons", the ethnic groups, the winners/losers of transition and other similar entities, all of them being enmeshed in a battle for imposing their values and for maintaining or gaining access to central material or symbolic resources.

Captive to the idea that the future of these societies is already written in the western societies' past (Buden, 2009), the focus and main questioning of the transition analyses was if, and what pace and variation, these societies would become true market societies, integrated in the liberal democratic order, highly productive and consumption oriented. And the by-product, main asset and sign of success of a society's healthy transition would have precisely been represented by the amplitude of its "middle class". This imposition to eastern countries was intimately linked with how western societies were imagined in the second half of the '80s. Precisely when the neoliberal turn had started to produce deep social fractures, the idea of the various classes (especially of the working class) being absorbed into a vast middle class became preeminent. The fact was in no way accidental: as Boltanski and Chiappello have shown, sociological imagination has gradually renounced to represent society in terms of collective socio-professional categories and identities (which was dominant from 1960 to 1980), mainly because the new form of capitalism diminished the power of the canonical classes' representatives (especially the labour unions) to make the classes visible (Boltanski; Chiappello, 2005: 302-311).

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to point out that "middle class" is not an indigenised term in Romania: it is not used by people to refer to themselves, to categorize others or to mark the social division. While during the '90s people addressed linguistically the recent social differentiations by using the term "employee" (*salariat, angajat*) versus "private employer" (*patron*), the latter term being applied to small entrepreneurs (mostly shopkeepers), and slightly maintaining the negative meaning of the officially criticized category during socialism of the "profiteer" (*speculant*), later on, after the private sphere of the economy was enlarged, people rather evaluated their own social and economic position with reference to an imagined "decency" of living, while they assessed others, fiercely in some groups, through standards of living incarnated in various valued material possessions. If class categorization is not a means for evaluating social position in common interaction today, occupation still is. However, if highly priced during socialism, in Romania, like in Russia (Patico, 2008), the occupational prestige ladder has been significantly blurred after socialism's hierarchies collapsed.

### **The roots and limitations of the middle class concept**

The historical avatar of the "middle class" concept is to be found in the category of the European "petite bourgeoisie" of the *Belle Époque*, which at the end of the 19th century developed a style of life based on material consumption and comfort, doubled by obeying social conventions and by having status concerns. The life of its members gravitated around the house, relocated from the city proper to its outskirts (in London, Vienna or Berlin), into detached streets and colonies situated in miniature parks or gardens, so planned as to recapture the small-town spirit, and which could both provide the tranquillity of the private living and the search for controlled social interactions. This class liberated itself from the puritan values of the bona fide bourgeoisie, and had the resources, if limited, and the knowledge, to spend for comfort, enjoyment and emancipation (Hobsbawm, 1987: 166-167). A significant occurrence of this category emerged in the United States, where its contemporary meaning had also been shaped, at the beginning of the 20th century (Moskowitz, 2012). Intimately linked with the American dream, which attracted millions of poor European migrants, the ideas that personal efforts and abilities searching to meet available opportunities would metamorphose into material success were, in fact, a reflection of the new place of the United States as economic hegemon (Arrighi, 2010). In contrast to the European society, still dominated by statuses, which at the time when Weber produced his view on class were still entities with rigid, legally ensured privileges (Carrier, 2015: 36), the American society provided the social mobility and material wealth that would later define the profile of the middle class: not based on inherited positions or income alone, but also on education, white-collar work, economic security, owning a home, and having certain social and political values. In Western Europe, on the other hand, this collective subject has been created not by an unleashed free market, as suggested to the Eastern Europeans by the transition narrative, but under the tutelage of the welfare state, in the first three decades after WWII, an epoch dominated by social-democratic policies informed by Keynesian economic principles (Judt, 2005).

Thus, what should be remarked in the light of this background is that the emergence of a middle class in Eastern Europe after 1990 mirrored neither the American historical conditions of economic affluence, nor the situation of states guided social policies, specific to post-war Western Europe. By imagining a middle class as a societal goal for the ex-socialist countries, the transition narrative imposed a new ideological landmark to replace old ends, defined previously in terms of culture ("civilisation") or economy ("development"). In doing so it falsely reinforced a particularistic, "national" ("country by country") outlook on the subject of social divide, in a historical moment when this divide was replayed on a global scale. On this larger scene, the social divide is resettled,

due to the neoliberal dislocations, both in “the West” and in “the East” or “South”, with affluent categories being dispossessed in the West, while new abundant strata, as well as new impoverished groups, emerged elsewhere.

Accordingly, the sociological search for depicting the emergence of a national middle class remains a futile statistical game of reporting medians (indebted to the transition narrative's delusional object of an everlasting western middle class), if not linked with larger processes related to how the contemporary mobility of capital and people reshapes local social relations within an international framework still defined by centres and peripheries. This focalisation asks for a more classical interrogation of the subject of class (rooted in the world-system theories, the new social history and Marxism), which seeks to contextualise the classical culturalist representations of the middle class (in terms of life-style, status and consumption), by looking after objective material processes that produce opportunities for certain segments of workers, clerks or small entrepreneurs from different locations to live and define themselves as successful social groups. This analytical perspective highlights the structural factors, determined by the new varieties and trajectories of capitalism, which put in opposition different groups of population, producing new forms of polarization and segregation. Embraced by anthropology as a “critical anthropological political economy” (Kalb, 2015), it is concerned with the full global dominance of the capitalist value regime and, consequentially, with the process of a global class formation, a process that could be researched ethnographically through the local manifestations of world-wide undertakings like urban development, de-industrialization or re-industrialization, production outsourcing, etc. Class, in this perspective, is less a stable contractual relation between capitalist employers and employees in a particular place, but more an unstable configuration of spatialized social relations of inequality, power and extraction and of the mythologies associated with them (Kalb, 2015: 14). Going beyond the poststructuralist and postmodernist explanations, this perspective seeks to bring back class as an identity linked both with labour per se, and with the present global reconfiguration of work.

Under these assumptions, in the following I will see the middle class as both a myth, an ideological ideal, and a social entity under construction. I will analyse how the recent urban development of a Romanian city has produced the conditions for a particular materialisation of the middle class myth, as some of its inhabitants' aspirations met national and transnational capital interests, as part of a regional and global process of class re-arrangement.

Methodologically, the study is based on various procedures for collecting qualitative data: in situ observation, informal and in-depth interviews, life histories and public information analysis. More than 80 semi-structured interviews and life histories were collected and analysed during the 2012-2016 period. Particularly resourceful data was openly available on a number of

Internet forums and chat rooms, which were built and administrated by the suburbs' residents, and whose thousands of threads and topics for discussions constituted genuine chronicles of the making of the suburban life.

### **The city: Cluj-Napoca**

Being the second-largest Romanian city after the capital, Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca also became, in the last few years, one of the most economically dynamic cities from the CEE<sup>4</sup>. Particularly interesting is its evolution after 1990, which can be divided into a period dominated by a nationalist ideology incarnated by a mayor who was in office between 1992 and 2004, who promoted an ethnic public agenda and kept the city closed to foreign investments (Brubaker et al, 2006), and a period of economic development, fostered by national and international investments, which started around 2002, grew rapidly<sup>5</sup> till the economic crisis hit the city in 2009, and experienced a renewed growth from 2012 up to the present.

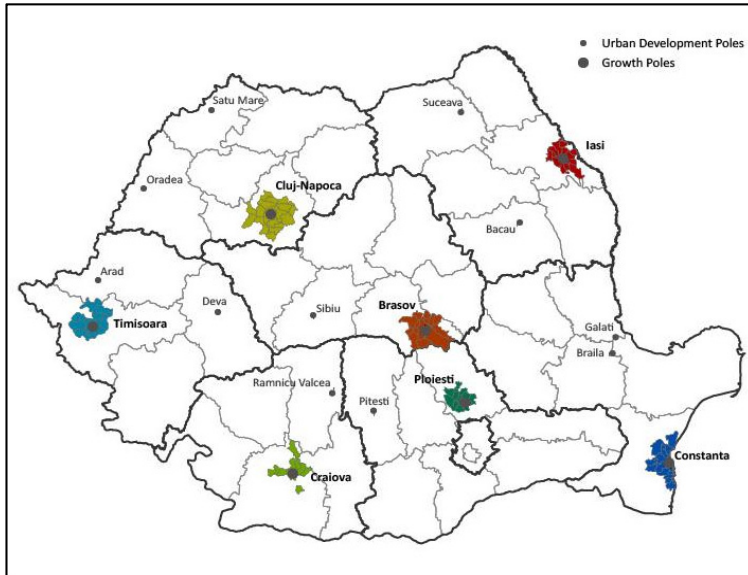
The city also embodies the present-day *modus operandi* of the neoliberal global economy and the type of development it produces: investments of different sorts (national, foreign, EU funds) flock to localities where business opportunities (in terms of legal regulations, quality and price of labour force, rate of capital return) are highly favourable, and avoid the localities with less favourable conditions. This produces noticeable regional discrepancies with regard to development and quality of life. With a constant influx of the younger population which attends its six universities, and its educated and skilled inhabitants inherited from the socialist era, Cluj-Napoca has become a regional centre that successfully attracts investments in relatively high paid sectors, especially in communications, finance, automotive, services and, more recently, and extensively, in computer programming.

In fact, the city "has succeeded in managing a transition from a predominantly manufacturing town to a city with a strong and balanced economic mix" (Ionescu-Heroiu et al, 2013: 122).

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<sup>4</sup> The population of the city at the last national census was 324,576 (National Statistical Institute [INS]); however, an important number of recent inhabitants did not register officially (a more truthful assessment would gravitate around 400,000). Notably, Cluj-Napoca is one of the few Romanian cities which has shown, in the last decade, a population growth. With an unemployment rate of 1,9% at the county level in 2016 (AJOFEM, Cluj), compared to a national average of 5,9% (INS), Cluj-Napoca represents, next to Timișoara, a growth pole that outpaced by far other larger Romanian cities with respect to attracting new investments and encouraging new firm formation. The city has succeeded in developing an eclectic economic base after 2000, with both large and small companies, in manufacture as well as in the services sector, with a tendency of constant growth of the latter after the economic crisis (Ionescu-Heroiu et al, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> The economic growth of the city was constant after 2000, with a boom around 2005 and with a quick recovery after the slowdown of the economic crisis of 2008 (Ionescu-Heroiu et al, 2013).



Source: Ionescu-Heroiu et al, 2013:5.

**Figure 1.** Growth poles and urban development in Romania (except Bucharest)

As a result, the city also became a magnet for qualified young inhabitants from inert smaller towns in North-Western Romania (Petrovici, 2012). The pressure on urban environment, as a result of this dynamic, steadily grew starting with 2005, and produced important consequences: increasing density in terms of habitation and transportation, increasing rent prices, expensive real estate market, high living costs. Rising salaries also made possible the emergence of a functional consumption market and consumption-oriented lifestyles.

The interconnections between class restructuring and urban development can be understood by analysing a) some of the main city's development trajectories and b) the recent transformations in residential patterns.

### Urban development

The urban post-1990 restructuring of Cluj-Napoca is intimately linked with its urban heritage: both with the pre-socialist strata, dominated by its rather typical Austro-Hungarian pattern of a central burg with narrow streets, and some baroque and neo-classical public and residential buildings raised in the 18th and 19th century (to which the Romanian administration added, after gaining Transylvania in 1918, a layer of symbolically meaningful buildings and a central residential area), and with the socialist strata, consisting mostly of large workers' block-of-flats neighbourhoods built from the '60s to the '80s,

which surround the central area in all directions, plus an industrial zone located in the North-Western part of the city, in the proximity of the railways. The gradualist economic policies of post-socialist Romanian governments allowed the city's economy to recede in the '90s without major disruptions, with the consequence that the city was neither depopulated, nor impoverished in particular areas, like other post-socialist towns (Stanilov, 2007). The extension of the city outside its socialist limits was rather slow at the time, with a few scattered individual housing projects being implemented on the outskirts. What happened, though, was a strong deregulation in construction, doubled by a decisive change in the property regime, both with regard to the huge housing stock belonging to the state, which was almost entirely privatised to their occupants at lower prices, and to the surrounding lands, which were claimed in court and generally gained by private actors using various legitimisations. These evolutions paved the way for a bold *laissez-faire* development in the next period.

The urban development that followed the economic boom of the mid-2000s had to answer to a number of crucial problems: a) to respond to the population pressure, namely to provide housing for people resulting from the natural growth of the city and for the newcomers; b) to find spatial solutions for new productive spaces, specific to the new economic profile, and c) to provide conditions of expression for the new life-styles enabled by the economic growth. Like elsewhere in Eastern Europe, the local administration faced these problems by embracing the market mythology (Bodnar, 2001), unleashing the mechanism of demand and supply in regard with most urban issues, and maintaining for itself a loose (but often partisan and corrupted) position of mediator between private actors. Ten years later, this policy has, as a result, a bundle of habitation predicaments: dysfunctional suburbs, traffic chaos, cramped city centre, poor public services.

### **Middle class residential patterns and their change in time**

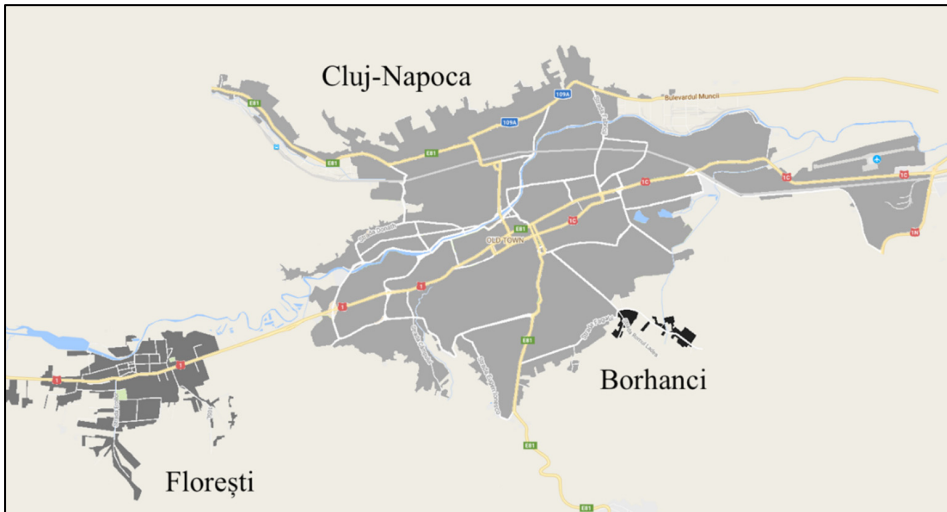
Appropriating spaces, raising borders, limiting access are all strategies in class segregation that can be found wherever the economic bases for class dividing are met. In Cluj-Napoca these processes were fostered by manoeuvres like thickening the city centre (with both productive units and residential buildings), appropriating the city's surrounding land for new industrial facilities, and the erection of suburbs on the city's margins.

I will discuss in the following the latter aspect, which I researched empirically on the cases of two new suburbs, and for which I provide an ethnographically informed perspective on the emergence and spatial dispersion of a local middle class.

The new suburbs are both entirely new structures, detached from the past city margins, and thus proper "post-socialist" enterprises. Compared to the



socialist neighbourhoods, which, at the time of their construction, were entwined with the city's previous structure, these districts, both located at a certain distance from the city on former agricultural lands, can count as suburbs. The first, and the largest one, Florești, is located about 4 km from the city's western end and, from an administrative point of view, is an independent commune (as part of an older locality it colonised). According to the censuses, the population here grew from 7.504 in 2002 to 22.813 in 2011, being the fastest growing suburb in Romania (Ionescu-Heroiu et al, 2013: 119). The unofficial estimations raise the numbers to over 40.000 in 2016. The second one, Borhanci, is located closer to the city, at its southern end on a hilly area, and consists in the present of about 3.000-4.000 inhabitants.



**Source:** Google Maps (edited).

**Figure 2.** Map of Cluj-Napoca with the locations of the analysed suburbs

The building of the first district started around 2000, while of the second began more recently, specifically after the effects of the economic crisis of 2008 has been alleviated. Both districts had similar patterns of evolution and passed through similar phases: it all started with individual initiatives of raising family houses, scattered here and there, often on pieces of land they privately owned beforehand. Later on, other individuals started to flock to the areas, buying parcels of land that became pricier by the day, and erected separate houses or duplexes, for themselves or for the market. Importantly, they connected their houses to the (rather poor) infrastructure (roads, gas, sewerage systems) already provided by the first inhabitants. Even later, private construction companies

penetrated the areas and started to build block-of-flats, wherever unoccupied terrains were available and setting a construction site was possible, and, in turn, modified the existing infrastructure.

We were among the first to build in the area. We bought the parcel in 2003; there was no infrastructure at the time. We brought ourselves the water pipes from an old colony from the hill, and we paid 500 \$ to a nearby group of houses to let us connect to their gas pipes. We brought electricity from a closer cottage that belonged to a former director of a state company. In 2006 we started to build the house on an almost bare landscape (C.V., female, 62, pensioner, former high clerk in the state aviation company; Borhanci, 10.10.2015).

There were few houses when the developers came. I asked my neighbours to apply to the town hall for a zoning plan (PUZ) that would restrict the tallness of constructions and types of buildings allowed. But that was costly and they didn't want to pay. Therefore, the developers ended up zoning the area as they pleased. They connected to our pipes without paying a dime and started to raise their buildings. (A.M., male, 58, entrepreneur; Borhanci, 16.11.2015).

Technically, the new districts are not suburbs in the typical (i.e. American) sense: they did not result out of an important growth in population, doubled by innovation in transportation technologies and by governmental investment in infrastructure (Baldassare, 1992), but out of the more general logic of post-socialist development, defined by a lack of regulations, ad-hoc solutions to population needs, corruption and by mythologizing the virtues of private property and private initiatives. In terms of city planning, the suburban development abandoned all tenets of the modern urbanism: an urban plan, which takes into consideration the collective habitation needs (public transportation, institutions, parks, etc.), a rationally conceived unit of collective habitation (as the canonical modernist "block-of-flats" used to be, with apartments rationally designed to meet all living necessities), and the spatial configuration of the buildings and places as to meet the imperatives of "utility, simple geometry and hygiene" (Le Corbusier, 1923). In contrast, Florești, in the first instance, became a cramped agglomeration of different types of buildings, from the individual house with garden, at one end of the spectrum, to the large ensemble of interlinked blocks, at the other. All in all, what has resulted out of this entirely private enterprise is a vast array of hybrid shapes, adornments and colours, a collectively inhabited urban area without public institutions and public spaces and few and poor public services. Because of the strict delimitation of properties with fences, roadblocks or other obstacles, the district is impenetrable for the pedestrians otherwise than along the driveways, constraining to a non-communitarian, enclosed inhabitancy.

We hadn't seen it at the beginning. Probably because I was raised in a different sort of neighbourhood, I assumed free access. We are like the mice in an experiment; because of all the fences, which I praised at the start, we cannot wander on the streets, and if I want to visit somebody I know, I have to make huge detours... (C.S., female, 26, sales assistant; Florești, 14.04.2014)

To make things worse, there is only one road that links the district to the city, where most of the inhabitants work or study, and where they have to commute daily mostly by their private cars, facing terrible traffic<sup>6</sup>.

If at present all these predicaments are obvious, this was not the case in 2005-2008, and going back in time to follow the objective facts and the subjectively-lived stories of the districts' manufacturing is providing a partial answer to the middle class formation and profile I am looking for.

The manufacturing formula was quite simple: a new optimism met the availability of mortgage, and the participating actors were mainly young professionals, as the inhabitants-to-be, the entrepreneurs-developers and the banks.

The material base for the new optimism, as I mentioned, was given by the new positioning of the city in the national and global circuits of capital. Not only the number of investments, the capital influx, the greenfield enterprises, the EU funds - which all produced new jobs -, but also emblematic investments like Nokia's enhanced the thrust into the future. The average salaries also grew steadily in Romania from 1999 to 2008, with a higher pace between 2005 and 2008<sup>7</sup>, which made possible in Cluj-Napoca, for a category of employees - banking clerks, middle managers in private companies, IT specialists, middle and higher public clerks etc. - to earn higher than average and to expect further increases in earnings. Subjectively this situation was perceived as stability and life predictability, a point of arrival on the society's transitional trajectory<sup>8</sup>, and a good moment to embark on long-term projects, both professionally and personally. For many successful individuals this perception, which expressed their new economic condition, was understood less as a moment in social

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<sup>6</sup> The road that links Florești to Cluj-Napoca is actually a national road, DN1, which, with its average workday traffic of 58,666 auto vehicles at the point of entrance in the city, was assessed in 2016 as the most crowded Romanian road (compared to București-Otopeni traffic of 54,135 cars) (Coraian Zoltan, 2016: 7).

<sup>7</sup> Counted in USD, the average salary doubled in this period: from 746 lei (257 USD) in 2005 to 1282 lei (534 USD) in 2008 (INS).

<sup>8</sup> In December 2004 the PM Calin Popescu Tariceanu declared that the post-communist transition has ended (*apud* Romulus Brincoveanu, 2005). The optimism was also fostered by Romania joining NATO in 2004 and being accepted as an EU member in 2007.

stratification, but more as a departure from the past. Already imbued with middle class expectations, the new condition was interpreted as what was already promised and, like elsewhere in ex-socialist countries, as the “normalcy” of a “decent life” (Fehérváry, 2002). In few instances was the desire to overcome the past more concrete and visible than in the realm of housing. Exiting the “grey” socialist workers’ districts was constantly invoked during the interviews as the first rationale for buying apartments or constructing houses in suburbia.

We used to own a really nice three-bedroom apartment in a socialist district, but we reached the conclusion that whatever refurbishment we would make (which we did; we invested a lot of money in it), it would still be an old, dysfunctional home, so in 2004 we decided to sell it. Then my husband got a promotion, and we lived for two years in Bucharest. When we came back, we judged that we could afford a better life, and we hoped that with the money from the old apartment and a bank loan we might buy a house in a different place, not in the old, greyish districts. Still, we didn’t have enough, so we opted for this row house, which appealed to us for its multi-storied structure and modern design. Florești was a logical option: they started it from the scratch as a house-only new district, very close to the city. (F.I., female, 35, high school teacher; M.I., male, 38, acquisition manager in a construction company; Florești, 22.10.2013).

It was not the invoked desire for a normal life, though, that made buying a new apartment possible and led to the construction boom of 2005-2008, but the availability of mortgages. This opportunity was also a new thing: having a rather short history in post-socialist Romania (it was made legally possible only in 1999<sup>9</sup>), the mortgage turned popular only after the banking system became dominated by foreign capital, following an extensive banking privatisation in 2000<sup>10</sup>. The foreign banks envisaged a great opportunity for value extraction through mortgages, due to a huge demand for consumption credits and by being allowed to practice a three to four-time higher mortgage interest than in their home countries<sup>11</sup>.

Thus, for many young professionals from Cluj-Napoca, be they clients or entrepreneurs, taking a mortgage was very much part of the new “normalcy” they expected, and of the long-time predictability they were hoping for. As an immediate consequence, the real estate market skyrocketed, and the sales made possible for construction developers to gain a high profit rate, which was reinvested in newer

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<sup>9</sup> Law 190/1999.

<sup>10</sup> 90% of the Romanian banking system belonged in 2015 to the foreign capital (Ziarul Financiar, <http://www.zf.ro/banci-si-asigurari/topul-integral-al-bancilor-cine-a-crescut-pe-o-piata-in-stagnare-14504025>).

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-arhiva-1242353-creditul-ipotecar-vedeta-anului-2005.htm>.

housing projects long before the already contracted constructions were completed. These new consumption opportunities opened the space for a whole range of new habitation ideals, for new tastes and new forms of expressing the self, and for an overall enhancement of the quality of life, which were not available before, but also for new forms of disappointments and failures. In the 2005-2008 period the suburbia became the privileged place for incarnating them<sup>12</sup>.

The creation of an imaginary of suburban lifestyle was a complex phenomenon, which mobilised different agents: future inhabitants, construction developers, home decoration magazines, bricolage stores, etc. Together they produced, expressed and fostered middle class expectations and tastes, a whole new lifestyle concentrated around the imagery of the home. First and foremost, suburban life was imagined as being further away from the crowded and noisy city and closer to nature. The clients who bought their homes in the floor plan stage, while waiting for their homes to be completed, narrated their experiences on online forums<sup>13</sup>, where they shared their expectations of a more serene future life, dreams of a new equilibrium, provided by a more ecologically integrated living space, plans for apartment's interior structuring and adornment, but also anguishes related to the quality of the constructions, deadlines of contracts being overcome and so on.

The weather was so beautiful Saturday, when I visited my future house... I was at the last block, just at the forest's edge, and the birds were singing... the wind was blowing lightly, there was a deep quiet and a smell of spring... I can't wait to see myself on the balcony, enjoying my morning coffee, away from the whirring sound of cars and dusty air, surrounded by greenery (Moxut<sup>14</sup>; Floreştionline, 2009).

The flat I chose has a gorgeous terrace where I will set up a rocking chair (FoxyLady; Floreştionline, 2009).

I will have a beautiful view, I really like to sit on the balcony and hear birds singing (Citroens22; Floreştionline, 2009).

That's why I like Floreşti, especially the area where the blocks of flats were built: it is more remote, far away from the stir, from cars, and because it will be a younger district (Furduioana; Floreştionline, 2010).

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<sup>12</sup> The quantitative data confirms this general enhancement of the quality of life and the assumed class positioning of the inhabitants of Floreşti: the suburbia was counted among the 20 Romanian localities with the highest LHDI (Local Human Development Index - an index that comprise an aggregation of statistical data regarding change in the levels of education, healthcare, welfare and demography) for the period 2002-2011 (Dumitru Sandu, in Ionescu-Heroiu et al, 2013: 76-77).

<sup>13</sup> I analysed the content of these forums in detail in another text (Troc, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Usernames of local residents on the Internet forums.

The developers meet those expectations by advertising the new collective housing projects (in reality groups of block-of-flats re-baptised as “ensembles”) under exuberant names, that evoke a natural, exclusive, holiday-like and tranquil existence: Sunny Valley, Emerald Garden, Sun City, Luxor, etc. Researching the new gated communities of Gdansk, Polanska (2010: 301) found similar names (Sunflower, Green Slope, etc.) - proof that they belong to the post-socialist middle class’s spirit more generally. The recent accessibility of private cars, especially of western second-hand automobiles, also contributed to the imagery of leaving the city behind.

Another aspect that seduced clients was the openness of the apartments. Being sold in a pre-finished phase (reasoning that this would enable the owners to imagine the interior structure as they wished, but in fact minimising the construction costs) the clients were charmed by the illusion of spare space, to which larger windows and opened terraces contributed too. Dreams of American kitchens, or large living rooms made at first unnoticeable the fact that the intermediary spaces, like lobbies, closets or larders were lacking.

We were very pleased that we could arrange the apartment as we wanted. The places we formerly lived in the city were always dark and crammed... after the child came we felt the [new] apartment as small; there are so many things a child needs and you don't have where to deposit them. Everything stays out in the open now. Is very hard to keep it neat (V.I., 32, female, business consultant; Floreşti, 02.04.2014).

As they moved in, the inhabitants of the suburbia discovered that they were very similar: they were rather young and educated, they had experiences of travelling or working abroad, they internalised the meritocratic values of the epoch, and they have similar jobs. Not unlike the socialist times, when the apartments were distributed according to workers' places in production (being allocated within the factories) to workers with similar rural background, and often coming from the same home villages, the middle class inhabitants of suburbia took notice that they graduated same schools, they have similar occupational tracks, they share same origins in Transylvanian small towns and they may work for the same company.

... we are all young and rather educated in this ensemble... (Baby\_mic; Floreştionline, 2009).

... I was also in Spain for a while, like everybody else from here... (Liviu; Floreştionline, 2009).

... half of my office colleagues reside in this ensemble... (Oneill; Floreştionline, 2009).

They also share the same vocabulary in common interactions, a proof of being tangled in the same social and economic praxis, and a good knowledge of the new cant - the "corporatist pidgin" - where words like *professional management*, *discount*, *echelon payment*, *bonus*, *quality-price ratio*, *teamwork* are part of the focal vocabulary.

One of the reasons why the 2005-2008 suburban boom was possible was precisely that the involved actors were part of the same class: as clients, notaries, lawyers, construction developers, real estate agents, or banking consultants, they share common interests, world views, languages and expectations, which differ from those of the working class strata, who in Cluj-Napoca makes sense to be identified as either less educated, less skilled and older than the previous group.

The interviews allow to identify in Cluj-Napoca the international conformist lifestyle that incarnates the present-day middle class ideal: like elsewhere, the new suburbia's inhabitants are ready to take risks and to overwork themselves; they feel constrained to marry and have children, they dream of a good education for their children (in private schools, if possible), they buy branded products, spend free time at the mall, go to the gym, buy holiday packages, take photos constantly, communicate online, and so on. However, they meet the working class in their local conformity: they practice canonically a religion, cultivate kinship relations, organise large ceremonies on the occasions of baptisms, weddings or funerals, give bribes where "it is appropriate to give". If economically they represent the most dynamic, progressive category (both as labourers and as consumers), culturally they are rather conservatives, many of their core values gravitating around the "traditional family", religion or spirituality<sup>15</sup>, folk culture and ethnic identity, and being less open to different forms of cultural diversity. Accordingly, they tend to embrace all the renewed waves of nationalist ideology and to actively support right-wing political parties.

In my free time I read a lot, mostly literature. I also enjoy watching movies; I go with my husband to the cinema quite often. Sometimes we eat out, checking out the new restaurants. On Sundays we go to church, and afterwards we often pay visits to my husband's relatives, who live in Apahida [another peri-urban locality in course of suburbanisation]. We sometimes go on small trips in the mountains, but also on city-breaks in Europe. During Christmas and Easter, we either stay at home or go to my husband's parents in the countryside, in the Western

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<sup>15</sup> "We can see among [the younger generation] a growing interest in different types of beliefs (that are syncretically accepted) and a more open attitude towards different types of religious traditions and spiritualities" (Gog, 2016:114). The young professionals' search for spirituality in connection with the personal development courses market, which has developed very strongly in the last decade in Romania, was analysed in detail in the special issue of *Studia UBB Sociologia*, vol. 61 (2).

Carpathian Mountains, where our nice traditions are still preserved (M.M., 32, female; together with her husband she owns and manages an international transportation company; Florești, 11.03. 2013).

All these values and lifestyles - which can be summed up by the paradox of being individualistic but also longing for the community - made young professionals the ideal actors of the suburbia manufacturing.

They were also its main victims when the economic crisis hit the city in 2009: because there were no new clients, housing projects already contracted could not be completed; construction sites were abandoned, ruining the landscape for years to come; completed buildings remained poorly finished.

Unfortunately, we are not the only ones who paid all the money and still didn't get the apartment. The gas pipe is not installed yet, and the real estate agency recommended to install it ourselves, because the builder is bankrupt. Even worse, the lot the block is built on is apparently mortgaged! So we cannot inhabit as legal owners until the mortgage is redeemed (Aeknaton; Florești, 2010).

The market value of the real estate in Cluj-Napoca dropped with 30-35%<sup>16</sup> and in Florești even with 50-55%. With their incomes diminished, competing on a weaker labour market, and indebted to the banks for decades to come, the residents found themselves trapped outside the city, in a suburban area with major urban problems. Suddenly, the socialist neighbourhoods, with their standardised but rationally conceived apartments, their available public transport and institutions and their open public spaces became, by contrast, more desirable. And while construction in Florești had not stopped entirely, the simplest block-of-flats with smaller apartments became dominant<sup>17</sup>, being bought mainly by a poorer working class strata<sup>18</sup>.

I would move back to the city by tomorrow. But it is so hard to make plans when you have a mortgage for 30 years. I was so content when I bought the apartment, but now I realise the neighbourhood life is not improving. It is dirty and crowded. In fact, it is changing for the worse (A.I, 27, male, HR specialist; Florești, 2014).

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<sup>16</sup> [http://www.imobiliare.ro/vanzare-apartamente/cu-cat-s-au-ieftinit-locuintele-in-aproape-5-ani-de-criza-topul-oraselor-cu-cele-mai-mari-scaderi\\_db/](http://www.imobiliare.ro/vanzare-apartamente/cu-cat-s-au-ieftinit-locuintele-in-aproape-5-ani-de-criza-topul-oraselor-cu-cele-mai-mari-scaderi_db/).

<sup>17</sup> This trend has increased after the crisis, producing a population density (27 p/ha) comparable to that of the city's centre (Ionescu-Heroiu et al, 2013: 56).

<sup>18</sup> The pressure for buying against renting should be addressed briefly: in the absence of a significant stock of social houses, and due to the lack of a renting-control legislation, the pro-business policy dominates the housing issue. A state-endorsed form of mortgage, *Prima Casă* (The First House), allows (but also constrains) people to buy house properties.



When the city's economic engines restarted in 2012, the residential patterns of the middle class changed substantially. The obvious failure of the suburban projects, coupled with worsening traffic, put new pressure on the city centre. Decrepit courtyards, bleak back streets, areas inhabited by a poorer (often elder Hungarians or Roma) population, have entered a gentrifying phase, being gradually populated by middle and upper-middle class members. The city-council's massive investments in the central area, while justified as preserving the heritage and attracting tourists, responded, in fact, to the newer residential and lifestyle needs of these classes.

However, the suburbia middle class dream has not died out entirely, either because the imagery of possessing an individual house with garden remains as strong as ever, because economic gaining opportunities have become available again, or because the influx in the city of successful young professionals has resumed, due to the high-end services sectors' development. The IT sector, in particular, grew spectacularly after the crisis, attracting skilled people from all over Romania and becoming the largest employer sector of the city (Ionescu-Heroiu et al, 2013: 122).

The suburb of Borhanci came out of these factors. Closer to the city, as I mentioned, it differs from Florești in many respects. Hypotheses for how vicinities may develop are carefully weighted now by the inhabitants-to-be when planning to build a house; developers offer individual houses or duplexes that are in the final stage of construction (as nobody would buy a house in the floor plan stage any longer) and with various amenities; the infrastructures are better designed; gated communities are preferred and searched for. The profile of the inhabitants is also different: most of them used to own other housing properties in the past, and, accordingly, they have the experience of inhabiting other places of the city. They have, therefore, a clear mental map of the city, with the advantages and disadvantages of each place, and thus opting for Borhanci is the result of a long process of reflection.

I came in the city as a student, in 1998, from Mediaș [a small Transylvanian town] and I lived in Cluj ever since. I stayed with rent, after I graduated, in different [socialist] districts, mostly in Mănăstur and Mărăști. Later on, in 2006, after I got married, we bought an apartment in Grigorescu [one of the first built socialist districts]. It was convenient there; it is one of the best neighbourhoods. Still, we longed for a house of our own, with a garden. I searched all over the city to find a lot to built on, but I realised it was really difficult to find, within the city margins, a place of at least 600 sqm to build what I had in mind. And living in the city became more unpleasant, anyway, because of pollution and noise. Borhanci appeared as the best option, due to its closeness to the city, and relatively good access to work, to schools and shops (N.T., 37, male, engineer; Borhanci, 20.03. 2016).

They are also less fragile economically. Due to the high incidence of jobs in the service sector that offer better salaries, they afford higher living costs. However, they are more cautious, as a result of the experience of the economic crisis: they buy what they can pay for in a shorter run and with less credit money. They also adapt to the city's cramped development: they reconsider automobiles as the only option for accessing the city: they pressed the town hall successfully for public transportation, and they experiment with bicycle mobility. For some, moving to Borhanci is not perceived necessarily as "the final destination", "the fulfilment of the dream", as used to be the case for the first inhabitants of Floreşti. Being more mobile in their work life, they also seem to be more mobile in their housing options. They want and they afford a quality habitation, but they are also ready to change places if the environment changes as well.

We only have a small bank loan of 10,000 euros, and we hope we'll pay it in four years. We preferred to buy this row house, which we found convenient, well designed and built, and a good investment, even though we wanted an independent house. Who knows, maybe in the future this will be also possible, here or somewhere else (F.I., 32, female, entrepreneur; Borhanci, 22.03.2016).

Still, however cautious and experimental they proved to be, they challenged in no crucial respect the developmental logic of *laissez faire*. Thus, the more desirable the district seems to be, the more investments come in, with blocks replacing houses in the developers' search for greater profits and, in the absence of legal restrictions, agglomerating the neighbourhood and producing the same difficulties other suburban projects have run into.

It was really quiet when we moved here [in 2013]. But now, early in the morning and in the evening the traffic is jammed. They should make a roundabout at the neighbourhood entrance, it is not possible to go on like this (N.I. 29, male, IT specialist; Borhanci, 22.03. 2016).

## **Conclusions**

Limited as it is, ethnographical research on class formation through people's spatial dispersion in the post-socialist city can reveal some tenets of the contemporary global class divide. Entering the global circuits of capital, some cities in the CEE became part of the larger scene of value production, accumulation and extraction which produces wealth in localities that momentarily provide the best conditions for capital reproduction, and deprives of wealth and opportunities other localities and regions. Along this process groups of people

may temporarily take advantage of it. Various ideologies - the mythology of the middle class among them - go along the material factors of social action, providing the needed motivation and required subjectivity. With their dreams and aspirations, work ethic and competitive proclivity, educational background and skills, economic autonomy and individual initiative - all these elements being modelled during the "transition" to match the values of the dominant ideology of neoliberalism - the suburban inhabitants analysed here incarnated the successful strata that, being neither simple proletarians, nor petite bourgeois proper (and making these categories unusable in the present altogether), could temporarily benefit - even if exploited in a very classical sense (through production, consumption, credit) - from the new social arrangements. Even if not expressing it explicitly, they constitute a class for itself, the class that seeks to impose its political views, which actively promotes at the local and national level its interests and whose culture is the dominant culture. Still, however proactive and influential it may be, its action range remains fatally limited by the fluctuant influxes of the great capital, which belonged to or is controlled by higher classes linked with the global metropolises.

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