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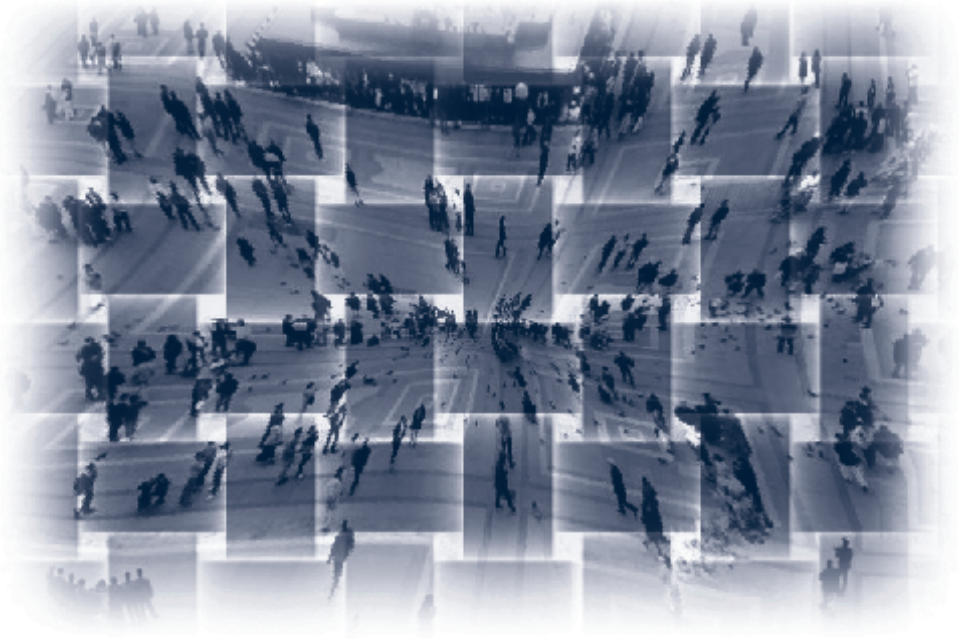

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THE SYMBOLIC TRANSFORMATION OF INDUSTRIAL SPACE INTO AN ASPIRATIONAL PROJECT: THE IMAGINARY OF THE MIDDLE CLASS IN THE CONVERSION OF THE FORMER CARBOCHIM INDUSTRIAL PLATFORM IN CLUJ-NAPOCA

Milo-Ivan KAJCSA[1] and Irina-Ioana CRISTIAN[2]

ABSTRACT. This research investigates how the gentrifying actor Rivus, a real estate project that encompasses the urban regeneration of the former Carbochim industrial platform, reinforces the middle-class imaginary in Cluj-Napoca by manufacturing consent through its communication strategies. The study examines how the urban regeneration project influences public perception of the middle class and legitimizes the middle-class imaginary by exploring the instrumentalization of nature, cultural identity, practicability, unity, work, and innovation in Rivus digital narratives. Through qualitative content analysis, the research examines a series of materials from the Rivus project s social media platforms to identify recurring themes and discursive patterns. The research results illustrate Rivus strategy of helping to construct, strengthen, and reinforce the idea of the middle-class imaginary, capitalizing on the real estate and innovation ideals characteristic of the city of Cluj-Napoca. By doing this, the project not only normalises and complies with the neoliberal views of prosperity and those entitled to it but also undermines the inequality, exclusion, and social costs associated with gentrification. As a consequence, based on the Rivus project case study, the current paper identifies and highlights some of the techniques used by real estate developers in modeling the middle-class imaginary and its public acceptance.

Keywords: middle class, neoliberalism, gentrification, Cluj-Napoca, manufacturing consent.

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Introduction

Urban development is not only about a simple modification of physical spaces, but also about an alteration of social hierarchies, power dynamics, and the way urban resources are allocated. In Romania, especially in Cluj-Napoca, gentrification has intensified at a rapid pace over the last twenty years. Although the gentrification processes in Romania have been approached from diverse angles in academic research, the specific study of the Rivus urban regeneration project, the largest urban regeneration project in Romania, remains neglected.

The real estate project exemplifies how urban regeneration initiatives go beyond interventions at the material level and are transformed into tools with cultural, social, and ideological impact. The communication strategies employed by Rivus reinforce the middle-class imaginary by curating an image of Cluj-Napoca designed to elicit consent from the middle class and its imaginary. Therefore, the analysis of this real estate project is essential for understanding the concrete ways in which urban transformation initiatives alter the perceptions, attitudes, and values of the inhabitants.

Gentrification is a multidimensional process where social, economic, and cultural transformations are interconnected. In addition to the changes in urban infrastructure, gentrification also consists of building narratives that legitimize the presence of middle-class residents, marginalizing people who are not in the group (Ley, 1994; Watt, 2008). An essential factor in this process is the middle-class imaginary. Therefore, the values, aspirations, and lifestyle of the middle class are presented as normative, desirable, and achievable, fabricating criteria of who is perceived as a legitimate urban resident and under what conditions (Watt, 2008).

Media and communication strategies form key mechanisms by which the middle-class imaginary is built and presented (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Tolfo & Doucet, 2020). Urban regeneration projects manufacture consent regarding urban transformation and shape its desired appearance through media and various channels of communication and advertisement (Gonzalez & Waley, 2012; Guerrero, 2021). Framing gentrification as effective, necessary, and innovative completely ignores its social, cultural, and economic consequences, such as rising housing prices, increasing inequality, and displacement (Watt, 2008). Therefore, the symbolic dimension of gentrification cannot be separated from its material consequences, the first one being a factor that impacts perceptions of the process of gentrification and also one that creates exclusion patterns in the city (Atkinson, 2003).

This research provides a first case study of the Rivus urban conversion project. Consisting of both the most wide-ranging mixed-use urban regeneration project in Romania and the urban regeneration project with the highest investment in the country, Rivus serves as a unique research opportunity for comprehending how such projects manifest themselves at a material level, but even more importantly, at a symbolic level. The study aims to address the gap in the academic literature, analyzing the project not only as a real estate project, but also as a cultural, social, and political phenomenon that plays an active role in fabricating and legitimizing a vision of the middle class of Cluj.

In addition, this study is based on an interdisciplinary perspective that combines sociology and communication sciences. The analysis and understanding of class dynamics and social imaginaries are achieved through the sociological component, while the examination of the way media narratives and communication strategies shape perceptions and manufacture consent is done through the communication sciences component. By combining these approaches, the research analyzes how Rivus consolidates the imaginary of the middle class in Cluj-Napoca and fabricates public consent for it, thus transforming the urban regeneration project from the material plane into a symbolic one that legitimizes the middle-class domination in Cluj-Napoca.

This study provides a first case study of the Rivus urban conversion project. Given its distinctive magnitude, size, and cost, Rivus serves as a unique example for researching how massive projects like this manifest themselves at a material level, but even more importantly, at a symbolic level. The study aims to bridge the gap in the academic literature, analyzing the project not only as a real estate project, but also as a cultural, social, and political phenomenon that plays an active role in fabricating and legitimizing a vision of the middle class of Cluj.

Last but not least, by placing the real estate project at the intersection of urban regeneration, media, and social stratification, this research contributes to the field of urban sociology with an interdisciplinary perspective. Spotlighting the way in which Rivus fabricates, normalizes, and reinforces the imaginary of the middle class, the paper shows how the process of gentrification is not only correlated to economic and spatial conditions of the individuals, but also to political and ideological inclinations. Through its communication strategies, Rivus transforms urban regeneration into a means of legitimizing urban transformation as a project focused on the middle-class aspirations and desires, fabricating and manufacturing consent of the middle-class imaginary of Cluj-Napoca, framing gentrification as beneficial, innovative, and inevitable, all while avoiding the exclusion, inequality, and social and economic costs of the residents of the city.

Literature review

Gentrification

Gentrification is defined mainly as the sum of physical, economic, cultural, and social transformations that result in displacement (Atkinson, 2003). One definition that presents gentrification in this manner is:

> an economic and social process whereby private capital (real estate firms, developers) and individual homeowners and renters reinvest in fiscally neglected neighborhoods through housing rehabilitation, loft conversions, and the construction of new housing stock. Unlike urban renewal, gentrification is a gradual process, occurring one building or block at a time, slowly reconfiguring the neighborhood landscape of consumption and residence by displacing poor and working class residents unable to afford to live in revitalized" neighborhoods with rising rents, property taxes, and new businesses catering to an upscale clientele. (Pérez, 2004: 139)

In addition, gentrification can also be defined as a process involving a change in the population of land-users such that the new user are of a high socio-economic status than the previous users, together with an associated change in the built environment through a reinvestment in fixed capital" (Clark, 2005: 258). Thus, the researcher includes businesses, corporations, governments, and individuals as potential gentrifiers".

The current neoliberal urban policies not only fail to address urgent issues with significant ramifications but also create an environment that intensifies the ignored problems. Part of the criticisms of these policies in the context of gentrification is: the lack of concrete measures on the level of poverty, the prioritization of the private system over the state, the displacement and devaluation of certain areas based on the profile of their inhabitants (Davidson, 2018; Hepburn et al., 2023; Hochstenbach & Sako, 2021). Thus, the current urbanization policies put at the forefront the interests of real estate developers, corporations, and capital owners in general, against the needs of existing residents (Davidson, 2018; Hepburn et al., 2023). Urban regeneration projects based on this type of policy lead to the displacement of low-income communities toward peripheral areas (Hochstenbach & Sako, 2021; Smith, 1996). At the same time, by devaluing certain areas of the city and turning them into potential reinvestment projects, urban neoliberal policies create the ideal conditions for gentrification (Atkinson, 2003; Crack, 2005). As a result, neoliberal urbanization policies became complicit in the creation of urban wilderness" and the formation of public consent that gentrification is the only solution to taming" the urban (Smith, 1996).

Cluj-Napoca city

Since the early 2000s, Cluj-Napoca has experienced continuous investment growth (Florea & Vincze, 2024). The year 2017 represents a peak in the establishment of new companies, with 45% more firms being founded compared to the previous year (Petrovici & Codruța, 2020). The significant growth was a result of the introduction of the Start-Up Nation" programme, with Cluj-Napoca being the city with the most submissions in the country (ibid). Even though in 2018 the population of the Cluj metropolitan area represented only 2% of the country s population, the number of commercial companies in the area constituted 4% of the total in Romania (Petrovici & Codruța, 2020). Thus, in the Cluj Metropolitan Area, over 21 thousand commercial companies were active (ibid), meaning 48.2 firms per thousand inhabitants, much higher than the national average of 27.7 firms per thousand inhabitants" (ibid: 11). Emil Boc, the mayor of Cluj-Napoca Municipality from 2004 to the present (except for the period between 2008 and 2012, when he held the position of Prime Minister of Romania), stated that the Cluj Innovation City project was launched by the Cluj-Napoca City Hall in 2007 (European Committee of the Regions, 2017a). Over half a billion euros were invested in the project, resulting in a city within a city, a kind of Cluj Silicon Valley based on research, development, innovation, and IT" (ibid). In 2014, the redefinition of Cluj-Napoca as Romania s Silicon Valley" became increasingly visible (Dobre, 2014; Florea & Vincze, 2024), with a clear desire to transform the city s image into a Romanian Silicon Valley. Gradually, through media narratives, policies, and discourses focused on business and innovation, the city s image has been consolidated based on the values and imagination of this city (Coroș & Coroș, 2010; Florea & Vincze, 2024).

A key factor in the city s branding process was the ICT (Information and Communication Technology) sector (Petrovici & Codruța, 2020). Thus, in 2014, the Cluj IT Innovation Cluster project was launched by individuals from the business environment, the public administration environment, and the academic environment (Florea & Vincze, 2024). As a result, residential real estate development began to focus precisely on members of the ICT sectors and their needs (Petrovici & Codruța, 2020). The ICT sector has become a major hub not only in the city s infrastructure but also in its development strategies. The local mayor describes the relationship between the local public administration and the ICT sector as follows: We have two strong IT clusters in the city and we are using them (...) to shape the innovation strategy, the IT strategy for the city (...) to bring all the resources together to have a single strategy" (European Committee of the Regions, 2017b).

The private sector is both an essential pillar in creating the smart city brand and a priority member within the context of the city s administration, urbanization, and public policies (PRIA Events, 2017). The mayor states that the city of Cluj-Napoca is based on the vision of a smart city, where connection with innovation, research, development, and IT are the most important" (European Committee of the Regions, 2017a; European Committee of the Regions, 2017b). Innovation is both a central element in creating the Cluj-Napoca brand and a primary reason that motivates the city administration s adoption of various measures or actions. Boc describes two of the public administration s priorities aimed at stimulating innovation: attracting as many foreign investors as possible and smart collaboration with all the city s main stakeholders" (European Committee of the Regions, 2017b).

Gentrification in Cluj-Napoca

Cluj-Napoca is the city with the most expensive real estate market in Romania (Investropa, 2025). In 2018, 52% of the total profit generated by the entire economic sectors in Cluj-Napoca was a result of the services sector, 13% of this amount representing profit produced by the real estate sector (Petrovici & Codruța, 2020). Although the real estate category had the lowest number of employees in the services sector (2,127 employees, with the average being 9,135 employees), it recorded the highest profit per employee in the services sector (284,523) and the second highest profit in relation to any economic sector (ibid).

The significant increase in housing prices in Cluj-Napoca coincided with the moment when the ICT sector began its rapid expansion (Dubois & Sanna, 2023). Between 2015 and 2020, housing prices recorded a 76% increase (Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration, 2022). Currently, the average price per square meter in Cluj-Napoca has reached approximately 2900 euros (Investropa, 2025), a scandalous price considering that the net minimum wage is 2575 lei per month (Ministry of Labor, Family, Youth, and Social Solidarity, 2024). The discrepancy between the two in Cluj-Napoca, compared to other cities in Romania, is alarming. In the capital of the country, Bucharest, where salaries are higher than in Cluj-Napoca, housing prices are 20%-25% lower, and their increase has not been as dynamic as in the case of real estate in Cluj-Napoca (Dubois & Sanna, 2023).

A consequence of the high cost of housing in Cluj-Napoca is the marketing of the city as an attractive location for investment. As a result, individuals are encouraged to rent out their second or third property, or to purchase a new property with the subsequent purpose of renting it out for additional income.

In addition to the high prices mentioned as an incentive for investing in Cluj-Napoca, the attitude of the City Hall leadership regarding cultural heritage and industrial platforms represents another way in which the city is promoted as an ideal location for investments. This attitude is conspicuous in speeches and statements made by the city mayor, who consistently chooses to distinguish the city from the industrial platforms within it, the factories, and the lands on which they are located (European Committee of the Regions, 2017b; PRIA Events, 2017). Emil Boc justifies the removal of the socialist-era industry from Cluj by stating that we did not have the opportunity to sell our assets, so we had to change our strategy" (European Committee of the Regions, 2017b).

The hostile attitude of the local public administration is also noticeable in the projects approved, endorsed, or even co-financed by the City Hall. After 2015, the number of new real estate projects and their emergence increased at an accelerated rate (Florea & Vincze, 2024). For instance, in 2015, the former Napochim factory was transformed into the Scala Center; in 2017, the former Ursus Brewery platform became Platinia Mall, with other Platinia buildings in Cluj to be associated with it; in 2019, one of the plots of land belonging to the former Clujana factory became Riverside Residence; in 2020, the former Feleacu factory became CBS Apartments Feleacul Residence (ibid). The examples provided represent only a part of the city s real estate projects, but they serve as an indicator of the importance and protection that the local administration gives to former industrial platforms and the locality s heritage.

In 2022, the Rivus real estate development project was publicly announced, with urban plans already approved by the Cluj-Napoca local council (Ghira, 2022). Rivus is an urban redevelopment project on the former Carbochim industrial platform. It covers a vast area of 14 hectares (Agenda Construcțiilor, 2025), which includes 5 hectares of urban gardens, an office building, residential apartments, a performing arts center, 400 shops, and more (Rivus, 2024a). The project stands out because it is the largest urban regeneration investment in Romania, with an investment of half a billion euros (Rivus, 2024b). The Carbochim factory is still active and is owned by Iulian Dascălu, the initiator of the Iulius Group and its affiliated companies (Ghira, 2022). The factory was moved outside the city, and the land was sold to Rivus Investments, owned by Iulius Group (ibid; Turp, 2024a).

The middle class

Marxist theory divides the population into social classes based on their role in the economic process of producing goods and services, which determines the position of the classes and the relationship between them: the bourgeoisie and

the proletariat, or the workers, capitalists, and owners (Marx, 1975). The European bourgeoisie of the 19th century was characterized by a comfortable, consumerist lifestyle that involved adherence to social status and norms (Troc, 2019). This style combined knowledge, emancipation, and entertainment (Hobsbawm, 1987), while social classes were seen as rigid entities with regulated privileges for their members (Carrier & Kalb, 2015). On the other hand, Weber introduces the idea of social stratification, defining social class by combining status class, dividing them into upper, middle, and lower classes, thus indicating an individual s position in the economic market and their life chances for accessible goods or services depending on their class (Weber, 2010). He also proposed the theory of the radicalization of polarization and the simplification of the social class structure, according to which capitalism results in the forced absorption of intermediate groups into a homogeneous and militant working class (Wacquant, 2019).

The middle class emerged in the context of the modernization and industrialization of Western societies (López, 2012). According to Birdsall (2010), people living on the equivalent of 10$ or more per day and who are at or below the 95% limit of the income distribution in their own country constitute the middle class in a developing country. Today, the global middle class is also relevant, consisting of individuals from developing countries with living standards close to those in the West (Koo, 2016).

Currently, the middle class makes up more than half of the global population of individuals, primarily in developing countries (The Economist, 2009), but researchers say that it is shrinking. This means that a smaller number of the population earns the traditional" income for the class, experiencing declines between 1971 and 2011 in the United States of America (Kochhar, 2018), with the total aggregate income decreasing from 62% in 1970 to 42% in 2020 (Kochhar & Sechopoulos, 2022). There is a significant income disparity between classes, with 47.5% of global wealth held by just 1.5% of the population, equivalent to 214 trillion dollars (UBS, 2023).

In his study, Troc (2019) views the middle class both as a myth, an ideological ideal, and a social entity under construction" (ibid: 93). He notes that in Romania and in other countries from the former communist bloc, the transition was not made toward a capitalist society, but toward a free market economy, reestablishing and expanding fragmentation within society (Troc, 2019). Thus, in contemporary urban environments, the opportunities certain segments of the population have due to objective material processes determine both individuals degree of access to resources and inequalities in society, as well as phenomena like polarization and segregation (ibid).

The middle class in Cluj-Napoca

The city-level interviews conducted in Troc s written work (2019) revealed a conformist lifestyle among Cluj s middle class, integrating the class ideal: excessive work, risk-taking, spending leisure time at the mall, going to the gym, and the perceived pressure to marry and have children. They also share common ground with the working class in terms of religion or ceremonial customs such as marriages and baptisms, being culturally conservative, holding traditional values, and supporting right-wing political parties (ibid). Troc describes their lifestyle as contradictory, juxtaposing their individualism with the felt need for community in the context of middle-class suburbs and the ideal of homeownership (ibid).

Regardless of their social class, individuals share the desire to live in a modern, developed, and safe city where they have the security of their own home, access to educational and employment opportunities, and leisure activities, all within a family-friendly environment that embraces nature, sports, and culture. Further, the middle class has additional demands centered around mobility, comfort, and consumption: access to private healthcare clinics, coworking spaces, shopping centres with specialty cafes, fitness centers, restaurants, high-quality private educational institutions for children, efficient travel in traffic by personal car, and easily accessible parking spaces. Urban projects, well-maintained pedestrian areas, and clean parks are highly valued, enabling a comfortable life spent with family members in the heart of the city.

Today, living and working in Cluj implies high-quality private services, numerous neoliberal investments in the city, an ultra-developed real estate market, a high number of entrepreneurial initiatives, multiple corporations, and a very active construction sector. At the same time, the lives of residents born in the county or in the vicinity of Cluj-Napoca Municipality have undergone significant changes in the last 30 years, with some of them being economically and socially vulnerable today, even facing the imminent danger of displacement, as is the case of Pata Rât:

> No one knows where the name Pata Rât comes from; it doesn t appear on any map, but it means the location of the landfill on the outskirts of one of the richest cities in Romania, Cluj-Napoca. Here is where the authorities pushed the poor. In one of the largest ghettos in our country, where over 70% of the population is Roma, nearly 2,000 people, including hundreds of children, live their daily lives. (Călian & Rostaș, 2019)

A study presents a comparison between the binaries of inferiority and superiority between the Canton colony, near Pata Rât, and the nearby Maurer Panoramic real estate project, highlighting racialization, urban branding, and the contrasts of the neoliberal city of Cluj-Napoca (Vincze & Zamfir, 2019). The problem is the affordability of the new cost of living in the city, overpopulation in specific neighbourhoods, institutionalized racism, limited or unstable jobs, and the risks associated with the city s gentrification, driven by a wide range of neoliberal investments.

Gentrification of the Iris neighbourhood

Various neighbourhoods, especially peripheral ones, have suffered as a result of the gentrification process. In the Iris neighbourhood, gentrification is evident due to its strong impact on various segments of the local population. The previously industrialized neighbourhood has been gradually transformed through multiple real estate development projects. At the same time, the gentrifying actor Rivus is planning the largest transformation of the former Carbochim industrial platform. The former Iris factory met a similar fate:

> Founded in 1920, it once exported throughout the East, as well as to the West. However, after 1989, the factory met the fate of many other enterprises: it was privatized, no investments were made in retooling, it reduced its activity, and went bankrupt. Currently, in its place is a residential complex of the same name, with ten-story buildings, commercial spaces, and offices. (Gizdavu, 2025)

In Cluj-Napoca, especially in the Iris district, the understanding of residents perspectives and the impact generated by real estate projects is completely neglected in favor of capital and those who own it. Valentin Rațiu, coordinator of the Cluj Metropolitan Green Ring" research on behalf of Active Research, believes that Cluj s gentrification can be well exemplified by the specific case of the Iris neighbourhood:

> What surprised me a lot is the way the neighbourhood is gentrifying. (...) is the only neighbourhood in the north where incomes are very close to the average. If 10 years ago, when I first went there to do questionnaires, poorer families lived on Byron Street, now in those studio apartments you also see younger people with higher education and better-paying jobs. (ibid)

Furthermore, projections for the low-income population in the neighbourhood indicate a typical case of gentrification through the inability to pay for rented housing, resulting in people being displaced to the outskirts of the city in favor of investments that will take over Iris and increase the cost of living:

> The future looks bleak from the perspective of the Rivus construction because (...) it will lead to an increase in rents, which will particularly affect vulnerable families on Byron Street who rent 11-square-meter studios and will soon no longer be able to afford even that. (ibid)

The Zonal Urban Plan (PUZ) has received a favourable opinion from the Cluj-Napoca City Hall for another project that would transform another industrial area. This concerns the Sanex platform area at 1 Beiușului Street and a private investment of 213.6 million lei, which would transform the area into a mixed urban complex with collective housing, a shopping center, office spaces, and services" (Silea, 2024). Similar to Rivus, the project would consolidate and accelerate gentrification in even more areas of Cluj. In this way, Iris will lose its identity as a representative working-class place and transform into a neoliberal hub" for the middle class.

Manufacturing consent

The concept of manufacturing consent, introduced by Noam Chomsky in 1988 as a form of propaganda, explains how the discourse of capital owners shapes public perception favorably in order to implement specific projects (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). More specifically, the media conforms to the demands of investors, multiplying their messages through key phrases and words or by reiterating glorified ideas or meanings that underpin the project, artificially manufacturing opinions, behaviors, or values desired by capital holders. The aim is to integrate the investor into the institutional structure (ibid) in a non-transparent manner. This is possible due to the lack of objectivity among media actors within the context of a rigid system without alternative standards of rigor in journalism:

> The elite domination of the media and marginalization of dissidents that results from the operation of these filters occurs so naturally that media news people, frequently operating with complete integrity and goodwill, are able to convince themselves that they choose and interpret the news objectively" and on the basis of professional news values. (…) the constraints are so powerful, and are built into the system in such a fundamental way, that alternative bases of news choices are hardly imaginable. (Herman & Chomsky, 1988: 62)

The Rivus project encompasses all the fundamental elements of propaganda, as theorized and defined by Herman and Chomsky (1988), which utilize capital and power to shape the choices, opinions, and interests of the mass media:

a) the capital owner profits from propaganda; b) paid advertising is a significant source of income for the press; c) mass media copies the information provided by the investor(s); d) criticism of mass media; e) the marginalization of critical voices as a mechanism of control (ibid).

Specifically, the media s promotion of Rivus presents ideas taken directly from the project sources, repeated multiple times with no criticism, indicating discursive propaganda with the intention of creating media consensus within public opinion. Rivus project manager Sorin Guttman stated that the project adds 14 hectares to the city, which until now were inaccessible to the community" (Cîmpean, 2024). A press release stated the idea of returning to the city a grey area that was previously completely inaccessible to the people of Cluj" (News.ro, 2024). These were reported in the media as returning 14 hectares of former industrial land to the city" in publications such as Ziarul Financiar, Forbes, Hotnews, Romania24, Radio Cluj (Agenda Construcţiilor, 2025; Alecu, 2024; Cluj24, 2024; HotNews, 2024; Ionescu, 2024; Media 9, 2024; Romania24, 2024; Şuşanu, 2024; Turda Info, 2025; Turp, 2024b).

In the meantime, local voices from Cluj speaking out against Rivus are being silenced or ignored by the authorities, maintaining the city s pro-free market, anti-communist status quo, where there is a lack of interest from the authorities and submission to private capital. Rivus has sparked numerous reactions and criticism among activists, experts, and residents of the municipality, ranging from the failure to meet the minimum 30% green space requirement in the General Urban Plan (Transilvania Press, 2024), which is being covered by calculating green spaces over the underground, to the pollution generated by the demolition of the former industrial platform, the impact on the biodiversity along the Someş River, and the traffic that will be generated by the complex s operation (Gizdavu, 2025). Furthermore, issues raised also included gentrification (ibid), the rising cost of living in the city, particularly housing prices, as well as the inaccessibility of spaces within the complex for all citizens, given the luxurious nature promoted by the project and the type of culture and art accepted and promoted within the complex.

Despite the existence of critics from the Cluj community, the media is actively participating in the media consensus surrounding the project, motivated by the massive investment of capital in Cluj, as well as by the power and influence of neoliberal economic actors. Simultaneously, the Cluj-Napoca City Hall is becoming a private actor, offering preferential treatment and prioritizing private investors. The manufactured consent in relation to the Rivus project, as well as the positioning of the local administration, led to the exclusion of a significant number of people from the Iris area, by replacing former existing

opportunities and services with ones that are inaccessible to those who do not belong to the middle class. Consequently, the Rivus project not only changes public opinion and attitude toward urban regeneration processes, but also toward the middle-class s imagination and dream.

Methodology

Our research focuses on how urban regeneration projects in Cluj-Napoca and their communication strategies contribute to the consolidation of a middle-class imaginary. We chose the Rivus project initiated by IULIUS and Atterbury Europe as the research topic as it is the largest urban regeneration project in Romania, located on the former Carbochim industrial platform. It is described as the mixed project with the greatest functional diversity in Romania" (Rivus, 2024c). Our research focuses on the ways in which the middle-class imaginary is consolidated and reinforced on social media platforms through manufacturing consent, starting from the following research question (RQ): How does the Rivus project contribute to the consolidation of a middle-class imaginary in Cluj-Napoca through its social media communication?".

To answer this, we used content analysis as a research method, tracking a total of 145 materials posted on the Instagram page of the real estate project (@rivus) over the course of 17 months, specifically those posted between August 2023 and December 2024. We chose to limit ourselves to the Instagram platform because most of the posts made by the communication team of the Rivus project are identical regardless of the platform. Based on the existing research on the subject, we created the analysis grid through which we observed the following variables related to the communication of Rivus in the social media space: nature, cultural identity, practicability, unity, work, and innovation.

The nature" variable was coded as present in the following circumstances: a) the mention of words symbolizing nature, such as trees", greenery", garden", etc., in the text, and b) the visual representation of nature. The cultural identity" dimension was coded as present if: a) the material contains words like Cluj", Cluj-Napoca", from Cluj", etc., and b) the visual representation of the city. Regarding the dimension of practicality", it was coded as present in the context where, regardless of the form of communication, the project was presented as offering something practical. The unity variable was coded as present when the material transmits, regardless of form, directly or indirectly, that the project provides unity, for example, the existence of shared spaces. The variable work" was positively coded in the following scenarios: a) terms like labor", work", or similar forms are mentioned in writing, b) terms like

entrepreneurship" are mentioned at the text level, c) labor is visually represented by an office, laptop, construction site, etc. The innovation" variable was coded as present in the visual representation or through text of a space, object, or action that was innovated by the Rivus intervention.

Results and discussions

Nature

Nature, within the context of gentrification and urban development projects, is more than just a form of urban design. It becomes a symbolic tool that helps sell and propose a particular version of the good life associated with middle-class aspirations. In addition, nature is used in the dream narrative of the middle class as a symbol of escapism, control, and self-care (Zukin, 2014). More than half of the materials investigated (≈ approximately 65%, n = 94) use nature as a means to promote the Rivus project. In most of the materials analyzed, nature is carefully curated, wild" nature being transformed into a domesticated, tidy, and consumable nature. This phenomenon reflects what Zukin (1991) calls the aestheticization of everyday life". Some examples of the practice of manufacturing or training" of nature in the urban regeneration project are project renderings that show structured, well-defined, and arranged green areas. We can find the following quotes that signal the curating of nature in the project: This process involves the conversion of abandoned industrial spaces, the arrangement of green spaces, as well as encouraging entrepreneurship and local creativity.", and Parks and green areas are not just an aesthetic addition, but an extension of healthy lifestyle.".

We observe in the Rivus materials how nature is reimagined and commodified to align itself with the aspirations and imagery of the middle class. Additional examples illustrating the nature function in the project are Green as far as the eyes can see (...) Quiet (...) An oasis of tranquility in the nursery", The 5.2 hectares of green spaces will be an oasis of tranquility and relaxation.", (...) this space becomes an oasis of tranquility, with the sound of flowing water and the beauty of nature around.", and (...) turn the Someş bank into an urban refuge.".

Related to gentrification-based urban developments, nature often plays a major and ideologically charged role, being political and interconnected with the dream of the middle class (Zukin, 1991; Zukin, 2014). In the case of Rivus, the project actively builds a narrative in which nature is central to a good life", marked by balance and health. Representation leads to the justification of the gentrification process and the creation and propagation of the dream of the middle class.

Practicability

In urban sociology, practicability refers to how space, time, and daily routine are organized to allow for the most comfortable and obstacle-free life with effective mobility, reduced stress, and maximized comfort (De Certeau, 1984; Lefebvre, 2013). This concept is not neutral or universal, but reflects middle-class priorities such as predictability and time management, functional aesthetics, quick access to various facilities or services, and urban dynamics that are ordered and goal-oriented. The Rivus project s complex will include facilities such as 400 stores and a Fresh Market, advertised in various forms, making the number of promotional materials emphasizing the project s practicability significant (≈ 39%, n=56). Part of the examples are: Educational, sports, cultural and entertainment activities for families with children and adolescents are at the heart of the project", [Rivus] Is a combination of efficiency, fun, relaxation and time for oneself", Rivus combines refinement and functionality in a modern and sophisticated space.", and The project is bike friendly, so you can explore the urban garden on two wheels or go to the mall for a shopping session.".

In our analysis, we noticed that Rivus often calls for accessibility and social inclusion as key points of the project, found the above-mentioned in quotes, such as: in a part of Cluj rediscovered, inclusive and accessible to all." and The former Carbochim industrial platform will be the place where innovation will meet nature and create a space for the whole community.". From the way in which accessibility and social inclusion are used in the given context, we infer that these concepts do not refer to the true definition of terms, but to a variant that applies to a specific group of middle-class people who can afford certain services and opportunities offered by the project. Approaching the terms of accessibility and social inclusion from a perspective aimed at the forefront of the middle class has the effect of strengthening both the imagination of the middle class and the manufacture of consent in relation to the project.

Cultural identity

Developers of gentrification projects, especially those who build in post-socialist spaces, sell more than just real estate. They conceive and promote a specific image of prosperity, define what a good and valuable life looks like, and sketch what kind of people have access to live in specific spaces, all of which are based on the cultural identity of the space (Sykora & Bouzarovski, 2012). Based on the literature at the beginning of the study, we notice that the city of

Cluj-Napoca is associated with values such as education, entrepreneurship, innovation, and development. Thus, the culture and cultural identity of the city reflect the middle class and intertwine with its imaginary. Consequently, the gentrification of the city also proposes an ideological transformation, in which the identity and lifestyle of the middle class are fabricated as part of urbanism.

In the case of Rivus, the Cluj cultural identity plays a vital role in how they promote the project and the values behind it. All analyzed materials mention the city in any way (100%, n=145), either by terms such as Cluj-Napoca" and from Cluj-Napoca" [*clujeni*], or by (or together with) hashtags such as: #partedinCluj, #weareCluj, and #clujlife. The Rivus promotion evokes the identity of the city, while aligning with the values that constitute the identity itself. A few examples are: Together we continue to build the story of Cluj.", We keep the identity of the place and offer it a new meaning that vibrates with the spirit of the Cluj-Napoca community.", For 16 years, we, IULIUS, have also been a Part of Cluj, and we want to continue the story, dictated by the voices of the Cluj community, where people have written chapters for the story of the city.", and Get ready to become part of the cultural story of the city!".

Unity

In Rivus s communication strategy, the element of unity plays a subtle but powerful role in building and legitimizing a specific vision of the middle-class dream in Cluj-Napoca. Although the spheres of cultural identity and unity may seem similar at first glance, they manifest differently in the urban regeneration project. The component of unity is present in more than a quarter of the materials analyzed (≈ 37%, n=54), being promised and described by Rivus in one of two situations; it either alludes to the concept of a common goal around the same ideals through shared spaces or the real estate project begins to be humanized as an entity that actively participates in the community and has common goals with them. The second scenario is the most common one, Rivus being depicted as a dystopian member of the local community with a unique purpose: protecting the development and connection of others, sometimes taking on the role of community representative. Some of the examples are: it is our turn to make the community happy through a new project.", The new project concept has at its core their people, desires, expectations, and passions.", Be part of the Rivus story, be part of Cluj!", Together, we create a warm and welcoming community.", and [Rivus] where family and friends come together for unforgettable moments.".

The unity proposed by Rivus formulates a specific way of belonging, one that is educated, aspirational, and aligned with the city s values and the values of consumerism. This version of unity becomes a cultural" glue for the current and emerging middle class. It is stated that the lifestyle proposed by the project is not limited only to material conditions, but also to belonging to a specific community of people, made up of people who share the same values, tastes, and aspirations. Rivus imagines a class-based community collective and its associated aspirations, suggesting that unity is only suitable for those who meet certain material and social conditions.

Work

The dream of the middle class is reinforced by the idea that the only barriers standing between individuals and achieving success are hard work and self-sufficiency, making the socio-economic, political, or cultural factors irrelevant in attaining this goal. In most cases, Rivus portrays work as a symbol of meritocracy. In the examined materials, work is present in less than a quarter of cases (≈ 17%, n=25). There are two scenarios in which the project uses the work element: a) it emphasizes how Rivus facilitates an ideal work environment (a scenario used in the majority of circumstances), and b) it shows the level of labor resources that have been utilized towards the completion of the real estate project. Some examples meant to illustrate the first scenario are: With the move of the Carbochim platform, came the modernization of the new platform (...) but also a more friendly workspace.", This architectural gem will soon become a vibrant entrepreneurial hub, the place where ideas come to life and the future is being built.", (...) vibrant entrepreneurial hub (...) these buildings will be revitalized to support creativity, innovation and collaboration.", and (...) this space will become a place dedicated to new ideas and entrepreneurship.". For the second scenario, the quote Before the holidays, everyone works hard, even the machines on the construction site!" and the multiple visual representations of the construction site are particularly noteworthy. As can be seen in the examples provided, white-collar workers are the central focus of the real estate project. In contrast, blue-collar workers are used as intermediaries who facilitate the lifestyle promised by Rivus to middle class white-collar workers.

In addition, the first scenario not only expresses a favorable work environment proposed by Rivus but also appropriates the values attached to labor through the middle class s perspective. The project manufactures consent for this appropriation and a distorted view of labor, while also presenting itself as a result of meritocracy, becoming, in its own way, an entrepreneur, innovating and providing opportunities for innovation.

Innovation

Similar to work, innovation in the middle-class imagination is connected to the ideal that any individual, regardless of the socio-economic, political, or cultural factors to which they are subjected, can create something innovative if they really want to and take concrete actions in that direction. In the context of the city of Cluj-Napoca, innovation is not only a signifier of hard work and success, but it is also a prominent pillar in Cluj-Napoca s brand. Thus, innovation and the process of working go beyond mere economic labels, as they are fundamentally ideologically loaded and contribute to the formation of socio-economic classes.

Innovation is a component repeatedly employed in the materials analyzed (≈ 64%, n=93), urban regeneration being the central element through which the real estate project presents itself as an innovator. Some examples of the innovative character of the project are: We give a new life to the Carbochim platform through an urban conversion project", the old Carbochim arcade hall will be converted into a performing arts", part of the history of Cluj by developing the largest investment in urban conversion in Romania.", The IULIUS Project, Part of Cluj, will open a new chapter in the history of the city, transforming an industrial area into a vibrant hub of energy and innovation.", The new project targets the Carbochim platform, which will become a major urban conversion project, landmark for the Romanian market.", A reinvented space: Where only shades of grey and unforgettable stories remain, Rivus flourishes.", and (...) bringing an innovative concept to RIVUS!".

Moreover, Rivus represents a global vision of modernism, one that aligns with the branding of the tech hub and the Silicon Valley of Eastern Europe, already associated with the city. This framing makes innovation more than a technical aspect, transforming it into a moral and inspiring characteristic. Therefore, for Rivus, innovation constitutes a symbolic tool used to build and legitimize a specific vision of urban life and the middle class.

Conclusions

The present research studied themes related to the issues of gentrification, the middle class, neoliberal urban real estate and development, online promotion, and real estate investment in Cluj-Napoca, around the Rivus investment project. Starting from the research question (RQ), How does the Rivus project contribute to the consolidation of a middle-class image in Cluj-Napoca through its social media communication?", the study used content analysis as a research method and the analysis grid as a tool, consisting of six relevant dimensions: nature, practicability, cultural identity, unity, work, and innovation.

The results indicate the use of key topics relevant to the middle class in Cluj, intended both to attract the Cluj audience and to create a good image in the community, utilizing manufactured consent in both mass media and social media communication. Nature (65%) becomes a symbol of escape, control, and self-care, commodified and domesticated to fit the ideal of the class imagination. Practicability (39%) indicates an appeal to accessibility and social inclusion through the project s facilities, paradoxically conditioned by belonging to the middle class. Cultural identity (100%) is found in all the Rivus posts analyzed, highlighting Rivus s identification with the city s values (entrepreneurship, education, innovation), and their use to ideologically transform the middle-class lifestyle. The unity (37%) refers to belonging to an educated and superior community of people with good material conditions, with Rivus even assuming the role of a member and representative of the community. Work (17%) is approached through a meritocratic lens and highlights the project s focus on the middle class and white-collar workers. Innovation (64%) is associated with the city brand and transforms value into a symbol used to legitimize a comfortable, luxurious, relaxed urban lifestyle.

Therefore, this study reveals how the Rivus urban regeneration project participates in the symbolic construction of a middle-class imaginary in Cluj-Napoca, transforming post-industrial space into a consumable vision of urban progress. By strategically appealing to nature, practicability, cultural identity, unity, work, and innovation, Rivus does more than just sell houses; it legitimizes class-based patterns of urban transformation. By unpacking these communication strategies, the present research contributes to a broader understanding of urban transformation, not only in its material state but also in its symbolic one.

The future perspective for the city of Cluj-Napoca is concerning, considering the numerous real estate investment projects and the risks associated with the city s accelerated gentrification. Consequently, the study urges a closer and more detailed examination of the ways in which projects, developers, and real estate agencies manufacture consent regarding the middle-class image and the gentrification process itself, especially in the context of former industrial sites. Additionally, we recommend that future research on this topic focus on the discourse of public authorities and the media subject to private capital.

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

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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

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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; Căşi Sociale ACUM!, 2019, 2021, 2023; Vişan & 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 academia[3]. 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, Iaşi, Braşov, and Craiova, and, respectively, Reşiţa, 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 business[5]; Real estate development for profit suffocates us! We demand social housing![6]; City tour: desiring social housing[7]; 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 all[10]. 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-Someș: vrem mediu construit verde, spații & locuințe 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 multiscalar 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.

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REPAIR CAFÉS – APPLYING THE ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY (ANT) TO UNDERSTAND REPAIR INITIATIVES AS ELEMENTS OF SOCIAL INNOVATION

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ABSTRACT. As civil society initiatives, repair cafés make an important contribution to the circular economy and to social change. With more than 3,500 worldwide, the number of repair cafés in practice is high, but the conceptual basis for their analysis is still underdeveloped. Actor-Network Theory (ANT), which emerged in the 1980s from the sociology of science and technology, is today one of the key theories of the knowledge society. It differs from other theories in its close conceptual interweaving of human and technical elements, and its focus on relationships and constellations that make an actor act. However, ANT has so far given little attention to the topic of repair. This paper explores the potential of ANT for the analysis of repair cafés as technology-related social phenomena. With its lens on changing constellations of actors that mutually influence each other, ANT is found to be a powerful analytical approach for understanding the characteristics of specific repair initiatives, their challenges and success factors. This is relevant more broadly to the relationship between technology and society, including with view to the adoption of circular economy practices across society.

Keywords: Repairing, circular economy, social innovation, analytical framework, technology and society

Introduction and aim of the work

Repair of consumer goods is now prominently placed on many policy agendas, including the Circular Economy Action Plan for the European Union

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(EU) as one of the building blocks of the European Green Deal (European Commission, 2025). Repairing can manifest through different solutions, such as professional commercial repair services carried out by dedicated businesses or independent repairers, activities performed by repair communities or groups, unpaid repair offered in an informal setting (e.g. by relatives or friends) or do-it-yourself repair (Lundberg et al., 2024).

Repair cafés (also known as repair bars, repair meetings or similar) are civil society initiatives that bring people together to repair everyday consumer goods that no longer work, often technical devices such as radios, kitchen appliances or communication devices, and the repairing is typically accompanied by the opportunity to enjoy drinks, cakes or other refreshments and snacks (hence the reference to a 'café'). Repair cafés combine technological and social aspects. In such a setting, the repair is either done by the owner of the defective device or it is performed together with or solely by (self-declared) experts, who often make available their expertise on a pro bono basis or in exchange to a relatively small (often flexible) financial contribution, at a rate that is significantly below the costs charged by regular commercial repair services. Usually, repair cafés are established as free community repair events or meetings (Luukkonen and Van den Broek, 2024). As civil society initiatives, repair cafés contribute to the conservation of resources and a more sustainable use of products, while in parallel they promote social participation and new forms of collaborative interactions across society and different communities (Grewe, 2017; Pesch et al., 2019). Repair cafés have been recognised as examples of social innovation (Keiller and Charter, 2018; Rabadjieva and Butzin, 2000), where social innovation is understood as the introduction of new practices for shaping social interactions and lifestyles.

With several hundred facilities in Germany alone (Kannengießer, 2018) and more than 3,500 worldwide (Repair Café International, 2025), the number of repair cafés is now remarkably high. If their operation is sustained over longer periods of time, repair cafés make important contributions to a circular economy by promoting practices that preserve the value of products and resources and by instilling respect for goods, including long-lasting and repaired items, thus counteracting throw-away attitudes and wasteful affluence (Lazzarin and Kusch, 2015; Madon, 2021). At the same time, the conceptual basis for analysing the social phenomenon of repair initiatives initiated and supported by civil society is underdeveloped (Jaeger-Erben et al., 2019; Luukkonen and Van den Broek, 2024), making it difficult to understand why such initiatives exist at all, what their typical and atypical characteristics in practice are, how they evolve over time, what main challenges they face and which factors contribute to their success or failure.

Repair cafés represent elements of social change in which the direct handling of technology and the response of individuals to defective devices are essential components. Within the canon of sociological theories, the actor-network theory (ANT) stands out through the fact that it sees activities as embedded in a network in which both human and non-human entities interact and may collectively act together (Aka, 2024; Akrich, 2023). This means that technical devices can also take on the role of actors and consequently be the originators of effects in social actions (Latour, 2005), i.e. any actions in a social context or a social environment. Social in this context, in line with the sociological thinking, is understood as the setting where people live, interact and relate to each other. ANT conceptualises a technological solution as an at least temporarily stabilised network carrier of technical and social relations between human and non-human actors, and it seeks to disclose why and how a specific technological solution, i.e. a specific actor-network has been created (Latour, 1987). Due to the close conceptual interweaving of human and technical elements, the actor-network theory appears suitable for analysing the social phenomenon of the Repair Café. The aim of this paper is to test this hypothesis. The research question to be investigated is: What are the central characteristics of the actor-network theory and what potential does this approach have for analysing repair cafés from a sociological, more precisely a socio-technical perspective?

Section 2 of this paper presents the actor-network theory. Section 3 relates the theory to the social phenomenon of the Repair Café, evaluating the explanatory power of this approach when used as an analytical framework for sociological research in this area. The final section summarises the results of the work. The paper applies a theoretical lens in so far that it does not analyse a case study in the form of a specific repair café. Instead, the goal is to explore ANT as a conceptual analytical framework that integrates technical and non-technical aspects of repair cafés, thus offering a methodological approach to capture the complex relationships between a defective technical object and its surrounding on one hand and the technical and social relationships that constitute a Repair Café on the other hand. This also enables insights more broadly to the relationship between technology and society, including with view to the adoption of circular economy practices across society.

Actor-Network Theory (ANT)

The actor-network theory (ANT) was founded in the 1980s by Bruno Latour, John Law and Michel Callon out of the sociology of science and technology (Peuker, 2010) and has since then been developed into a

comprehensive and widely applied social theory (Akrich, 2023). Today, it is one of the key theories of the knowledge society (Bellinger and Krieger, 2016). This section in the following introduces actor-network theory and explains key concepts such as actor, network, translation and hybrid. Since this paper ultimately aims to clarify whether ANT can be used fruitfully to analyse repair initiatives, i.e. initiatives that deal with defective devices, the presentation below will focus in particular on how ANT conceptualises technical devices as potential actors. To portray ANT, this work is primarily guided by the work of Bruno Latour and utilises primary and secondary literature for this purpose. Bruno Latour, French sociologist and philosopher and co-founder of ANT, is still one of the most important representatives of this approach.

Core elements and key terms

The core idea of the ANT approach is an understanding on action as the result of the alignment of a heterogeneous collective (network) of human and non-human entities, which can include material elements, such as technical artefacts, and non-material elements, such as discursive concepts or special knowledge (Peuker, 2010). According to this, a society is not only constituted through social relationships between human actors, but also through the influence of material things and non-material entities (Latour, 2005). Consequently, objects and other non-human elements do not form a passive background for human action, but directly influence courses of action (Kneer, 2013). The entities associated in a network, their connections and the types of their links are relevant for explaining social phenomena. Latour also refers to ANT as the 'sociology of associations' (Latour, 2005), thus emphasising the need to adopt an analytical perspective that traces associations, as a type of connection between things that are not themselves social.

Actor and actant

In the ANT approach, the originators of effects in social actions and thus actors can be a variety of concrete or abstract things in addition to people, such as a coronavirus, a book on ANT or a technical device like a radio or a coffee machine. The actor-network theory thus categorises any element that acts as an agent of action under the concept of the actor, regardless of the physical characteristics of the actor. In the context of a Repair Café, this would be, for example, the operator of the facility, the knowledgeable expert with her supportive offers, the pensioner as a customer, the coffee counter where customers start a conversation, the defective radio, the spare part, the collection of instructions for use and repair, the city's subsidies, legal regulations, and many more.

An actor, however, is not an isolated, self-determined entity whose activities directly reflect an intrinsic motivation and achieve self-defined goals. Rather, an actor is a unit that is 'brought to action by many other entities' (Latour, 2005). An actor's ability to act is therefore not an autonomous potential of his or her own, but an expression of a complex potential for action that is enabled and limited by a multitude of other entities (Kneer, 2013), i.e. by the network of actors described below. The creation of reality takes place through the network.

As the term 'actor' is commonly used to refer to people (human beings), it is sometimes replaced by the term 'actant' in ANT studies in order to emphasise that agency is not exclusively attributed to people (Latour, 1999; Peuker, 2010). Actor and actant are generally used as synonymous terms in ANT. Latour himself has worked out particular nuances of both terms by characterising the actant as an entity capable of acting, but which has a prefigurative effect in a given case (remains without a concrete appearance in a particular narration), while the actor is a distinctive agent who takes on a concrete configuration of distinct identity and characteristics in a narration (distinct figuration) (Kneer, 2013; Latour, 2005, 2006). The reception of this nuance is rather restrained and limited in ANT-related literature (compare for example in Wieser (2012)). The term 'actor' is also already woven into the term 'actor-network theory', which may explain why it is often favoured in publications. This paper also uses the term actor in the following.

Network, collective, hybrid

Actors represent the nodes of a network. Here, the formation of the network reflects the processes in which actors indeed become actors, i.e. bearers of agency in social actions. Entities form relations (connections) that are modified in a context-specific manner and under the mutual influence of the involved units, so that heterogeneous associations, i.e. various types of links, arise between actors with potential for action.

Actor and network form a unit (the 'actor-network'). The formation of the actor-network is based on the connection of actors, but these actors do not precede the network (Peuker, 2010), rather they themselves are modified in their characteristics in the networking process and are thus first constituted in their function and characteristics. The actors are both agents and the result of network formation (Schulz-Schaeffer, 2000a). Attributions of characteristics to actors only emerge within (during) the network formation process (Peuker, 2010). The construction of an actor-network is thus a transformation process that integrates elements with their characteristics in a contextualised manner and changes them at the same time. Actor-networks are pre-structured by the

elements present in a given situation (Peuker, 2010), but they are not determined. Nor is an actor-network an unchangeable entity. Rather, a rearrangement of the elements involved leads to changes in the characteristics of the actors and thus to modifications of the links between the network nodes and, accordingly, their potential for action (Philipp, 2017).

An actor-network brings together a collective of heterogeneous units. Latour (2005) assigns the term collective a similarity to 'society', understood as an assembly of entities with the capacity to act. At the same time, ANT rejects the idea of including only humans here – hence Latour's criticism of the common use of the term 'society' in sociology, which usually refers only to humans, and the introduction of the alternative 'collective' (Latour, 1999). Since ANT does not distinguish between human and non-human actors, the assembly of a collective typically involves the appearance of hybrids: 'hybrid beings between nature and culture' (Latour, 1993), in the form of entanglements of human and non-human, often material elements (Schimank, 2000). A facility established as a Repair Café would bring together a collective consisting of employees, customers, defective devices, functioning devices, furniture, printed matter, tools, drinks, the rental agreement for the premises, tax regulations and many other elements.

In addition to the heterogeneity of the elements of an actor-network, their non-equality is a central attribute (Peuker, 2010). While ANT fundamentally grants each entity the ability to act, it also postulates that each entity is also part of an asymmetry of the network that distinguishes between nodes at the centre and nodes that belong more to the periphery. In the course of the stabilisation and alignment of the network, actors will crystallise whose perspective is more assertive and to whom more influence is attributed. There is a moment of power here (Peuker, 2010), which is less intentional and more the result of network dynamics (Conradi et al., 2013; Röhle, 2013). The concept of translation (see below) is crucial for the occurrence of network dynamics and the shaping of the processes that take place.

Translation, black-boxing, punctualisation

The central process for the creation and alignment of actor-networks is the progression of translation operations that mediate content between entities, i.e. delegate information from one actor to other actors. Only those who are involved in such operations are actors in the network, and only what is passed on (mediated), i.e. translated, exists as content here. Translation is the endeavour to create two equivalent expressions, but this is inevitably also accompanied by a change in content (transformation), as there are generally no two completely equivalent expressions (Law, 2013). Consequently, in the act of communication (i.e. moving content from one entity to another), change and

narrowing also occur (Schmidgen, 2011). Translations are prone to error and can also fail (Law, 2013). At the same time, they are the basis not only for connecting actors but also for organising the network and enabling action. Through translations, actors are defined and redefined, groupings are created and dissolved again (Kneer, 2013). This takes place in multi-stage processes. Figure 1 shows the phases of translation according to Latour (1987, 1999, 2005).

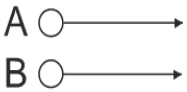
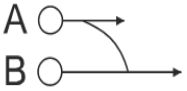
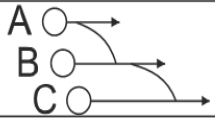
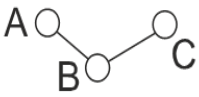
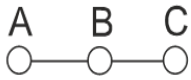
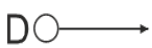
	Step 1: Disinterest	Individual actors act without mutual interest in line with their own programme of action
	Step 2: Interest (Disruption, diversions, recruitment)	Actor A encounters a problem and becomes interested in Actor B, influencing Actor B's power to act
	Step 3: Composition of a new goal	Different actors involved recognise a common goal
	Step 4: Obligatory point of passage	Actors come together to interact by dynamically assigning their roles, which creates the nodes of the network
	Step 5: Alignment	The collective of actors assumes a common ability to act, with a common programme of action
	Step 6: Blackboxing	The aligned collective functions as one unit (one actor) and can also be addressed so by other actors (regardless of inner complexity)
	Step 7: Punctualisation	A given input reliably leads to a specific output, i.e. the elements contained in a black box act as one stabilised, predictable actor

Figure 1: Progression of translation operations in actor-networks
Source: based on Latour (1987, 1999, 2005) – modified; A, B, C, D indicate actors (human or non-human)

Initially, the actions of individual actors are without mutual interest and their activities follow their individual programme of action. A programme of action characterises what makes an actor act, i.e. goals or intentions in the case of human actors and functions in the case of technical actors (Wieser, 2012).

When an actor encounters a problem, interest in another actor arises and the identity and power to act of individual actors is influenced. Based on this, different entities recognise a common goal. At the obligatory point of passage, the actors come together, and roles are dynamically assigned – the nodes of the network are formed. With the alignment, the collective forms a common ability to act, and a common programme of action emerges. A collective aligned in this way acts as a functional unit (as one actor with its own identity) and can also be treated as such by other actors, namely as a black box whose inner complexity is of no interest. Of interest is only which input is supplied to the black box actor and which output is delivered by this actor. With the punctualisation, the output is defined for a given input. The elements contained in a black box then act as a stabilised actor that acts predictably. In the example of the Repair Café, this would for example be the institution with its catalogue of services, the prices for repairs and drinks, the opening times, the working hours of the employees, etc. Parts (sub-sections) of the Repair Café can also themselves represent a black box, e.g. the food and drinks service, the handling of costs and the procurement of spare parts.

Black-boxing and punctualisation shorten the chain of translation operations, and the resulting reduction in the number of transformations also reduces the risk of translation errors. This stabilises the internal order of the network, simplifies interaction with other actors and thus enables the expansion of the network (Schulz-Schaeffer, 2000b; Wieser, 2012). The Repair Café becomes available to customers, it can be obliged to pay taxes, it can receive subsidies, it can network with other repair initiatives, it can enter into co-operations with recycling centres, etc.

At the same time, collectives and thus the direction of action of actor-networks, even after black-boxing, never achieve a final, unchangeable form, but instead remain in a state of constant change to a greater or lesser extent (Schmidgen, 2011). For example, the Repair Café will start working with new companies or give up existing collaborations, may digitise repair instructions and make them available to its customer base online, may specialise in certain product ranges or might change its legal form from an association to a commercial enterprise. It is precisely the presence of technical things and infrastructure, i.e. non-human actors, that leads to a certain stabilisation and permanence that goes beyond the current situation (Schroer, 2017).

Unique features of ANT compared to other sociological theories

The systematic comparison of different social theories is not part of this work. However, in order to facilitate an assessment of the extent to which actor-

network theory enables an independent approach to analysing social phenomena such as repair cafés, this section highlights key features that fundamentally distinguish ANT from other social theories. Identifying such distinguishing features forms an integral element of the presentation of this theory, as the ANT founders themselves and their representatives clearly distance themselves in key aspects from the prevailing concepts in sociology. ANT presents itself as a radically different social theory (Kneer, 2013).

One of the most striking unique features of ANT is the dissolution of the boundaries of the social (Höhne and Umlauf, 2014; Kneer, 2013), negating the meaningfulness of a dichotomy between social (human) actors and non-social (non-human) elements that is typical of other social theories. In the ANT perspective, society is not an area to be separated from other areas such as nature and technology, but rather the social world is made up of a wide variety of elements, including people, but also animals, things and non-material entities, all of which can be actors with agency (see Section 2.1 above). The social is not bound to a specific physical basic type of participant (namely people), but rather it is the types of links between the heterogeneous nodes (actors) of the hybrid actor-network that describe the social in ANT (Latour, 2005). The social is thus conceived as a fabric of associations between human and non-human entities. Ultimately, the social is a complex assemblage of networks (Höhne and Umlauf, 2014). Latour (2005) argues that other social theories take a selective view of the 'sociology of the social', whereas ANT takes a holistic approach as a 'sociology of associations'. Correspondingly, one of the central questions of other social theories is not even on the agenda of ANT, namely the question of the relationship between the individual and society (Schroer, 2017); rather, it centres on the exploration of interdependencies between people, nature, technology, etc.

By rejecting the separation between human social actors and non-human non-social entities, the dichotomy of subject and object is also declared to be incoherent. ANT counters the usual hierarchisation (i.e. asymmetrical conceptualisation) between thinking subjects (humans) and passive objects used by the intentionally acting subjects to carry out actions with the principle of generalised symmetry (Latour, 1993). According to this principle of generalised symmetry, the natural, technical or other aspects of a phenomenon are all to be analysed using the same terminology and the same categories (Kneer, 2013). However, the symmetry principle does not imply an equal ranking of elements of an actor-network; rather, the non-equal ranking of the elements (asymmetry in the force of action between more central and more peripheral nodes of the network) is a specific feature of the ANT network concept (Peuker, 2010) (see also Section 2.1).

The distinction between action and structure also becomes obsolete in ANT (Kneer, 2013). Action and structure are a unit, as action is understood as the orientation and alignment of the network. An actor/system dilemma does not even arise in the ANT perspective, as an actor only exists if the entity indeed has links to other entities, and it is always the individual network of links 'that makes an actor act' (Latour, 2005).

ANT also overcomes the separation of micro, macro and meso levels postulated in other sociological theories, as such boundaries cannot be drawn coherently within the ANT theoretical architecture. In contextualised micro-processes, actors in a network enable and limit each other's activities (Peuker, 2010), but at the same time, actors can maintain connections at various far-reaching levels (Latour, 1993, 2005), and the resulting actor networks can certainly also operate as actors in macro-phenomena (Peuker, 2010), so that a wide variety of local and global phenomena overlap and modify each other.

ANT also differs from other social theories in that it does not claim to present a theoretical framework that can explain social phenomena by referring back to consistent statements on the organisation and functioning of society (Kneer, 2013). ANT leaves behind the common paradigmatic approach to apply a clearly delineated theory-grounded perspective to explain social phenomena. Instead, ANT focuses on the diversity of actors and their interlinkages in a given setting, and in doing so it seeks to capture the genesis of networks in their complexity and to clarify the associated emergence of characteristics of the entities involved (Peuker, 2010).

Network analysis as a research aspiration

ANT, which has integrated the term network into its name, has often aroused the interest of (structural) network research (Höhne and Umlauf, 2014). Latour himself has a critical view of the inflationary use of the term network and diagnoses that the term has become blunt (Latour, 2005). He points to the problematic ambiguity of the network term and thus the risk of confusion between research directions and the appropriation of ANT (Latour, 2005). While network research refers either to technical networks (electricity, railways, internet, etc.) or networks between human actors (Latour, 2005) in order to capture and organise something that already exists (Höhne and Umlauf, 2014), the ANT network is very different from this. As Latour puts it, under the ANT perspective a network does not refer to a thing in practice that would roughly have the form of interconnected points, such as a telephone, motorway or sewer network (Latour, 2005). Instead, network is a concept. It is a tool that can be used to describe something, not the thing described (Latour, 2005).

ANT considers the manifold and multifaceted interconnections between technical artefacts, scientific knowledge, natural phenomena and human action (Höhne and Umlauf, 2014). Beyond this, ANT is specifically not attempting to organise or classify an existing network, but rather to reveal the constitutive function of the links between the actors. The aim is not to reconstruct the structures of society that lie behind the actors' backs (Höhne and Umlauf, 2014), but to capture the energies and movements of the actors as well as the flows of translations and transformations within their network (Latour, 2005). As a fundamental principle for describing social phenomena, ANT postulates following the actors themselves and not bringing in a theoretical perspective from outside (Kneer, 2013). Following the actors means letting them 'unfold their own worlds' and letting them define the social themselves (Latour, 2005).

Sociological analysis of repair cafés from the perspective of the actor-network theory

Having presented the ANT in the previous section, this section focuses on the applicability of the approach for sociological research on the topic of repair cafés. In the following, important analytical strengths of the approach are recognised, and general limitations of its explanatory power are outlined. As described above in Section 2, a socio-technical phenomenon such as a Repair Café can as a whole or in its sub-structures and performances be understood as an actor network that has been created as a unique, complex web of aligned interests, including different types of people, public entities, companies, regulatory elements, technical standards.

ANT is also seen as a concept for explaining innovation (Schulz-Schaeffer, 2000a), and Latour also refers to it as the 'sociology of innovation' (Latour, 2005). Repair cafés have been recognised as important examples of social innovation (Keiller and Charter, 2018; Rabadjieva and Butzin, 2000). Despite this, ANT has so far paid comparatively little attention to the topic of repair (Denis, 2020). Bertling and Leggewie (2016) have pointed out a potentially productive connection between ANT and repair initiatives, as preserving products and raw materials through repair involves establishing complex relationships with both things and other people. Krebs et al. (2018) have also made a connection between repair movements and ANT in order to emphasise the interconnectedness of human action with the material and symbolic order. The authors highlight that practices of repairing are always integrated into socio-technical-discursive infrastructures of heterogeneous actors (Krebs et al., 2018).

Sociological research and ANT - what is it actually all about?

In developing and refining the ANT, Latour himself has called for a redefinition of what is meant by the discipline of sociology (Latour, 2005). It is therefore pertinent to attempt to clarify what is meant at all by sociological research. Looking at the neologism 'sociology' (from Latin and Greek), its immediate meaning would be 'the science of the social' (Latour, 2005). As explained in Section 2.2, a widespread approach of sociologists is to locate the social purely in interpersonal actions and to examine society under this premise, which ANT rejects. As a redefinition of sociology, Latour proposes 'the tracing of associations' (Latour, 2005), i.e. the capturing of types of connections between heterogeneous, often hybrid actors.

Understood in this sense, sociological research, and consequently also socio-technological research, would be the systematic search for associations between different types of actors and the identification of complex actor-networks. However, ANT certainly takes an anthropocentric view as well. Associations are always traced by a human actor. In addition, Latour explicitly wants to show how ANT can be used to reassemble social connections (Latour, 2005). Regardless of how sociology is being defined, the focus of sociological research can also be on human actors when using ANT, in particular on how they act in situations and what effects this produces in configurations of actors. Understanding human action as being embedded in a complexly networked collective of hybrids enriches the sociological research perspective, but it does not as such conflict with examining people within and as part of their society. Even though Latour himself struggles with the concept of society (see above), sociological research can use ANT to investigate the social relevance of social practices, and also to explore the societal significance of the social phenomenon of the Repair Café.

The defective appliance and the Repair Café from the ANT's perspective and entry points for sociological research to support repair initiatives

In everyday use, technical devices function as black boxes: stable elements whose composition is largely unknown and also not of interest (Denis, 2020). It is precisely this stability and everyday presence, as well as the routinised use, that give technical objects the power to act (Denis, 2020). A technical device that becomes defective has lost its actual function, i.e. its programme of action in the understanding of ANT. The black box is shattered. This also changes the integration of the device as a node in a network of actors, i.e. in the actor-network. The existing attributions of properties by other

entities are no longer realised and the defective device can no longer be prompted to act by other actors as before. The previous orientation and alignment of the actor-network is cancelled, action routines are interrupted and the network experiences dynamic shifts and changes in its associations.

It is precisely here that there are promising entry points for sociological research. For Latour and the ANT, the collective or society is constantly changing, whereby it is precisely the technical elements that ensure a certain constancy and stability (Schroer, 2017). The shattering of the black box through the occurrence of the defect and the associated disruption of routines and irritations of what was previously taken for granted can potentially reveal numerous previously unnoticed components and their socio-technical relevance. Denis (2020) has formulated: "Breakdown, in contrast to routine, brings the sociotechnical depth of technologies into light".

A central role that Latour ascribes to ANT is the determination of the quality and stability of links and bonds, especially between people and things (Schroer, 2017). Dealing with a defective device can provide extensive insights into the nature of such connections. For example, a defective appliance can be repaired and then made available for use again (the same type of use or a different one), it can be taken to a recyclables collection centre, or it can simply end up in the residual household waste. If the defective appliance is taken for repair, an additional connection to a Repair Café is created, for example, which not only modifies but also expands the earlier actor-network, and at the time reveals a bond between the device and involved people.

The relevant actors in the context of repair cafés are highly diverse (Moalem and Mosgaard, 2021). This applies to the question in what form the actors are engaged (e.g. running the repair initiative on a regular basis, ad-hoc user with a defective item) and perhaps even more importantly to the differing purposes and differing drivers to engage. As a result, it can be assumed that expectations, linkages among actors, contributions to the circular economy, embeddedness into broader social innovation movements will strongly vary for different repair cafés and the engaged actors, and here the ANT approach is very well positioned to gain valuable insights by looking at the type of actors, their individual programmes of actions, the type and strengths of their interlinkages including with technical elements, the alignment of actors to create outcomes that classify as repairing, the attribution of roles to different actors, the stability and routines of established networks, capacities to attract additional actors.

Under an ANT perspective, the Repair Café as such can also be addressed as representing a black box, namely when it provides its services in a stable, predictable manner in the perception of other entities (e.g. users) (see Section 2.1). Compared to an everyday device (e.g. a radio) as a black box, a 'Repair Café'

black box is much more complex, and its stability is subject to constant vulnerability. As a black box, the Repair Café represents a stabilised, very heterogeneous network in which human and non-human actors interact. Sub-areas can in turn represent a black box themselves (Section 2.1). The genesis of such a stabilised network requires role acceptance on the part of the actors and support for the jointly developed programme of action. If the network is stable, it defines the identities, competences and options for action of the actors involved in a committed manner, although this can be broken at any time (Kneer, 2013). Connections and role attributions can be called into question, which can open up the black box (Peuker, 2010). In order to ensure the stability of the network and thus guarantee the implementation of the programme of action in the longer term, the aim is to expand the network by integrating further entities (Kneer, 2013).

There are again important entry points for sociological research when the black box is opened. Breaking open the black box can reveal which areas of a Repair Café, i.e. which individual actors or actor constellations are particularly vulnerable when it comes to questioning role attributions. The resilience of the actor-network with view to the defined programme of action also deserves attention. With regard to the expansion of a network and any associated enhancement of network stability, the patterns of local and extended associations appear interesting. However, when assessing the societal relevance of repair cafés, it is not only the stability of the network structure that is of interest, but in particular also which actors establish themselves as central nodes and by means of which types of connections they can assert their perspective in a dominant way. It is not only the number of links that determines the identity, agency and decision-making power of actors, but also the types of connections and relationships that enable or prevent individual development and unfolding of their potential. In other words, it is also about the quality of bonds and connections. Latour (2005) points out that to be bound and connected means both to hold and to be held; the threads convey either autonomy or enslavement depending on how they are held, and autonomy and emancipation does not mean being 'freed from ties', but being well connected.

By observing the types of connections and distortions within actor-networks, it becomes especially possible to identify which factors (including legal, financial, ideational) are beneficial for the stability, orientation and operation of a network. This will allow conclusions to be drawn about suitable measures to support existing repair cafés and to promote the establishment of further repair initiatives.

Limitations to the explanatory power

In the previous section, ANT was demonstrated to be a conceptual analytical approach that enables productive sociological research on the topic of repair cafés. However, there are also factors that limit the explanatory power of this approach. ANT is primarily centred around existing actor-networks as they change and transform themselves. This approach does not as such aim to adequately account for actors who have dropped out or have been excluded, or for networks that have failed completely. Successful innovations may be effectively traced through the ANT methodology, but the factors that have reduced and continue to reduce innovation capacity are not necessarily identified. Since failed initiatives in particular can be a rich source of substantial learning, an important potential resource remains inaccessible through the use of ANT.

In addition, some criticisers of ANT have argued that it lacks sufficient analytical and methodological tools to actually capture and analyse non-human entities in a sociologically meaningful way, and in particular to reliably determine the quality of relationships in heterogeneous, hybrid actor-networks (Kneer, 2013). This may limit the applicability of ANT as a stand-alone element and instead calls for ANT to be combined with appropriate social science methods, which can be a very complex task itself. ANT therefore is not a ready-made, out-of-the-box analytical tool to analyse socio-technical research questions, but a conceptual framework that needs to be enriched case specific by appropriate methods. As an example, such methods may include qualitative methods such as expert interviews with policy makers or repair café managers, or quantitative methods such as surveys among earlier and current users of a repair café. The explanatory power of ANT for analysing repair cafés therefore also depends on the appropriate choice and integration of sociological methods.

Summary and outlook

The actor-network theory is firmly established as a concept in the scientific sociology and is frequently used in technology research in particular. As this is generally concerned with the new formation of objects, refinements to devices or the use of technology. The aspect of repair has received comparatively little attention to date. At the same time, repair movements such as repair cafés are now recognised as phenomena of social change, or social innovation. The aim of this paper was to work out the central characteristics of the actor-network theory and, building on this, to explore the potential of ANT for the sociological analysis of repair cafés.

A key unique feature of ANT compared to other social theories is its view of social action. From an ANT perspective, it is not only human actors who shape social action and thus society, but the social arises as a result of complex webs of relationships between human activities, technical elements, natural phenomena and non-material components. This approach offers very promising entry points for sociological research on the topic of repair cafés. Actors involved in such repair movements practise a special form of social interaction with technical devices by attempting to restore defective devices to their original function. With its focus on constantly changing constellations of actors who mutually influence each other, as well as the consistent consideration of non-human entities with an effect on action, ANT is very well suited to identify elements that condition and promote innovation, including new forms of social practices or lifestyles, and thus social innovation. This means that the actor-network theory has a very high potential for advancing the understanding of the societal relevance of repair cafés. The extent to which the use of ANT can also make it possible to coherently analyse the innovation capacities of individual actors must be clarified by further research.

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TEACHING ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE TIK-TOK AND AI ERA. ON TRANSFERABLE SKILLS BUILT THROUGH PRACTICAL EXERCISES AND FILMMAKING PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT. This paper examines methods of teaching introductory anthropology to non-anthropology students in the context of digital culture and post-pandemic social realities. Drawing on courses taught between 2018 and 2025 within the Documentary Filmmaking master's program at Babeş-Bolyai University, it explores how anthropology can be made relevant to film students shaped by constant online interaction, social media, and artificial intelligence. The study presents a pedagogical model based on experiential learning, interdisciplinary collaboration, and international filmmaking teamwork involving students from Romania, the United States, and Italy. Emphasis is placed on "hands-on" projects that encourage direct engagement with people and communities beyond digital environments. Student feedback indicates that anthropological methods and skills were transferable to filmmaking practice and other professional contexts. The paper argues that experiential and collaborative approaches can make anthropology accessible and meaningful for digital-native film students.

Keywords: anthropology education; experiential learning; digital natives; interdisciplinary collaboration; documentary filmmaking.

Introduction

"When I was your age, I used to read hundreds of pages of monography and anthropological theories" is the first line I have in mind when I talk to my students, but then I quickly suppress the words mainly for two reasons. When I was a student, I really disliked anything that started with "when I was your

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age" and mostly important, today, students who were born and raised in a digital world, are learning in a completely different era than mine, although we are only twenty years apart.

Trying to build up a syllabus that would make the students not necessarily fall in love with anthropology but at least get them excited about the topic and finding it relevant in their world, I remembered why I chose anthropology in the first place. It was the fascination with the people, culture, various ways of living, communities, sights and languages. The idea of going away from my home and experiencing how other people live, understanding the diversity while understanding my own culture kept my energy alive all these years.

With this in mind, I started to think of ways of teaching anthropology to students who live in the tik-tok and AI era. The main question was "How can I teach the basics of anthropology to students who are not majoring in anthropology, who are surrounded by screens 24/7, connected to the internet all the time but who were physically so disconnected from their peers and the rest of the people during the pandemic years?" In a world of thousands of digital interactions each day, where students are positioned in the role of heavy consumers of digital products that requires very little (if any) initiative from them, where physical interaction seems to pose challenges, making the students lament that "it is difficult to talk to people in real life, I don't know how to start", the question is "how can anthropology make a difference"?

Relying on examples drawn from anthropology courses taught between 2018-2025 to students enrolled in Documentary Filmmaking master program within Faculty of Theatre and Film, Babes-Bolyai University, this paper presents and discusses methods of teaching the basics of anthropology to students who are not majoring in anthropology, highlighting "the hands on" experience and the need to involve students in interdisciplinary, collaborative projects. As described in the paper, the feedback from students emphasized that methods and approaches learned in these anthropological projects helped them significantly in other cases, successfully transferring the skills in other assignments and jobs.

In the first part, the paper offers details on the pedagogical model employed for teaching the basic concepts of anthropology to students who are not majoring in this field and who are preparing for a career in documentary filmmaking. The second part of the paper describes the way students from documentary filmmaking program (Romania) worked in international, interdisciplinary and collaborative teams with students enrolled in anthropology (USA) and communication and film students (Italy). As we are living in a world permanently connected to internet and to artificial intelligence chatbots, with everything

reachable just one click away, the paper aims to show a version on how to tailor a basic anthropology class to digital natives, encouraging critical thinking while exposing the students to real life experience, beyond the blue screens.

Framework and theoretical approach

Anthropology's distinctive contribution to higher education lies in its ability to cultivate cultural relativity, deepen understanding of human diversity, foster critical thinking, and employ ethnographic methods to engage students with alternative worldviews. Scholars consistently argue that anthropology's greatest value does not lie solely in training professional anthropologists, but in cultivating perspectives that are broadly applicable across disciplines and careers. Across recent scholarship (Stein et al. 2016, Hernandez Sanchez 2013, Hoag 2024, Copeland and Dengah II 2016, Demerath 2019), educators have argued that anthropology should be widely taught beyond the discipline itself, especially to non-anthropology majors, as a way of equipping students with the interpretive frameworks and methodological tools necessary to navigate a multicultural world and to critically engage with cultural difference, question ethnocentric assumptions, and recognize the variability of human experience.

This relativistic perspective is particularly important in increasingly globalized and multicultural societies, where misunderstanding and stereotyping can reinforce social inequalities, promoting instead empathy and analytical rigor rather than judgment. This article draws from these frameworks and the approaches employed by the authors mentioned above, while this concise section briefly discusses the key contributions that address *why* and *how* anthropology education benefits students from diverse academic backgrounds, focusing on three main key points: (a) critical thinking, (b) ethnographic methods and (c) interdisciplinary/ collaborative, hands-on experiences.

Critical thinking

Anthropological pedagogy challenges students to interrogate dominant narratives, question claims of objectivity, and reflect on the relationship between power, knowledge, and representation. This intellectual practice is particularly beneficial for non-majors, who may have limited exposure to qualitative reasoning or reflexive analysis in their home disciplines. By confronting unfamiliar cultural logics, students are compelled to examine their own assumptions and recognize the partiality of their viewpoints. This process strengthens analytical reasoning and promotes intellectual humility, both of

which are essential skills beyond the classroom. Anthropology thus contributes not only disciplinary knowledge but also transferable competencies valued in professional and civic life.

Ethnographic methods

The use of ethnographic methods plays a critical role in helping non-anthropology majors engage meaningfully with cultural difference. Ethnography, with its emphasis on participant observation, interviewing, and contextual interpretation, allows students to encounter culture as lived experience rather than abstract theory. Stein et al. (2016) critique the traditional image of ethnography as an isolated, individual endeavour and instead advocate collaborative and locally grounded research models that are more accessible to undergraduates.

Students who conduct small-scale ethnographic projects—such as observing community spaces, interviewing peers, or reflecting on everyday practices—gain firsthand insight into how culture shapes behaviour and meaning. This experiential approach has been shown to increase student engagement and deepen understanding, particularly for non-majors who may initially view anthropology as distant from their primary fields of study.

Interdisciplinary/collaborative, hands-on experiences

Collaborative projects further promote dialogue among students from different disciplinary backgrounds helping them acquire essential transferable skills such as teamwork, communication across difference, and ethical decision-making. Stein et al. (2016) argue that presenting anthropology as inherently collaborative and interdisciplinary helps students recognize its relevance to a wide range of careers. By integrating teaching, research, and service, anthropological pedagogy demonstrates how ethnographic thinking can be applied to real-world problems, from healthcare and education to business and public policy.

Pedagogical models that prioritize experiential learning and applied engagement further demonstrate the advantages of anthropology for non-majors. Copeland and Dengah's *"Involve Me and I Learn"* (Copeland & Dengah, 2016), articulates a pedagogical shift toward collaborative, applied anthropology that engages students directly in research and community-based projects. They argue that mentorship, collaborative fieldwork, and applied projects help students move from passive learners to active participants in knowledge production.

Generative AI in teaching anthropology

Probably like many other anthropologists, right now I find it impossible to assess how is AI shaping our domain, let alone our world, and this paper is not trying to open a debate on this matter. However, discussing pedagogical approaches for Gen Z, the "elephant in room" should be addressed, but not in terms of how and if we could detect the use of generative AI in students' assessments, as it is a fact that they are using it (Fukuzawa 2025). Beyond it, questions such as "Where does the student's work end and ChatGPT begin? Can we, and should we, create generative-AI proofed assessments? How do we make assessments 'fair' for those students not using generative AI? Are these new academic offences or does generative AI amount to plagiarism and collusion?" mentioned by Weston and Djohari (2025, p. 76) are probably in the mind of many anthropology pedagogists, me included. In addition, the questions of students are equally important: "What AI relevant skills do I need to become competitive in a changing marketplace? What jobs will remain as AI takes on more and more tasks?" (Weston and Djohari, 2025, p. 76).

The study of the impact of Generative AI is in its very incipient phase and like many others in the domain of technology, the answers become more often than not, obsolete, with the fast advancement of the information technology. However, the few attempts to shed some light should be briefly mentioned here, as the technique of "hiding the head in the sand" is definitely not an option, while the history of anthropological pedagogy proves that this domain has always been adapting to the technological development (Weston and Djohari 2025).

In the special issue dedicated to teaching anthropology and AI published in RAI's journal "Teaching Anthropology", Weston and Djohari conclude that the five essays on the matter "offer pragmatic paths for engaging with AI to enhance learning, but with a healthy critical eye" (Weston and Djohari 2025, p. 78). Hornbeck and Lin address concerns about the negative impact of generative AI on essay writing as a pedagogical practice by exploring more constructive applications of AI in learning contexts. Drawing on analyses of AI chat logs from students, their findings indicate that students who approached these conversations through reflection on their own personal experiences were better able to ground abstract theoretical concepts than those who adopted more straightforwardly explanatory approaches. The study highlights both the limitations and affordances of AI as a learning tool, while suggesting that more reflexive and exploratory uses can foster deeper intellectual engagement.

Krause-Jensen and Hau situate the emergence of AI chatbots and large language models within a broader disciplinary trajectory, comparing their impact on anthropology to the crisis of representation of the 1980s. Focusing

on the use of AI in academic writing, theoretical application, and fieldwork analysis, they examine the challenges generative AI poses to experiential research. While acknowledging the risks involved, the authors advocate for a cautious and strategic adoption of AI that builds on existing disciplinary strengths, emphasising the importance of AI literacy among teaching staff.

Finally, Longkumer explores how students engage with generative AI in taught anthropology courses. Using classroom-based case studies—including simulated interviews, co-created fictional fieldnotes, and analyses of AI-generated essays—he demonstrates how AI can function as a source of distributed knowledge that supports creative and critical learning. The article argues that, when approached with ethical and critical care, generative AI can productively augment traditional anthropological methods.

As this summary shows, chatbots can enhance the learning outcomes, could stimulate the students in simulated conversations or create fictional fieldnotes. As the ban on the use of AI is not an option and the incipient studies suggest that the chatbots are doing a good job in training students with false ethnographic accounts and made-up interviews, I find Weston and Djohari's (2025) question "What Now for Anthropology?" very relevant. Reflecting upon this paradigm shift in anthropological pedagogy and upon the role of us, the educators, in a generative AI world, my intuition is taking back to where I started: to humans and to our real, living culture. Furthermore, to the students' questions regarding the future jobs in an AI world and the skills they should learn in school, the answer seems to me to be the same: human skills.

Learning to see, listen, understand, and collaborate with other humans, will probably be the key skill in an ever-technologized world, with endless virtual interactions and anthropology should be taught in schools starting with elementary level. However, for now, this paper is concerned with the present, and the following sections describes and discusses how the syllabus for students not majoring in anthropology was built around the concepts of critical thinking, ethnographical methods, "hands on" and collaboration, with the aim of creating a set of transferable skills that help the graduates navigate the world of flesh and bones, not of bytes and binary numbers.

Teaching anthropology to documentary filmmaking students

This paper discusses the methods employed for teaching anthropology between 2019 and 2025 to students enrolled in the first year of documentary filmmaking master program at Faculty of Theatre and Film, at Babes-Bolyai University, Romania. Around 50% of the students have graduated a film school,

while the others have a degree in majors such as journalism, philology, psychology, management, IT and so on. After two years, the graduation exam consists in making a documentary on the topic chosen by the student. The idea of being taught and guided on how to make their voice heard through making their own documentary seem to be very appealing especially to candidates outside the film schools. Within the large aim of the master program, anthropology was introduced as a compulsory course with the aim of training students with concepts of objectivity/ subjectivity, understanding the other and ethnographic methods in the first semester, and anthropological documentary approaches, in the second semester. The master program was launched in 2015 and I was the first to teach anthropology here, starting with 2016.

Anthropology and Documentary filmmaking class- fall semester

The first semester, the name of the course is Anthropology and Documentary filmmaking and it is focused on the following objectives: understanding the anthropology's main concepts, research methods and the ways they can be used in building a visual project; Understanding the concept of subjective-objective, cultural stereotype and cultural relativism that occur when meeting "the Other"; Learning about the main anthropological theories to understand the context that produces the visual projects. The course has 2 hours of lecture and 2 hours of seminar each week, over a period of 14 weeks.

There were three main key points that guided the syllabus construction: the need to introducing basic anthropology concepts to non-anthropology students, especially focused on applying in documentary filmmaking, the need to engage students in hands-on exercises to be able to understand the notion of culture, objectivity/ subjectivity, stereotyping, etc in everyday interactions, and the need to teach ethnographic methods in a way that is relevant for their non-anthropological, short-term projects, while interacting with real human beings and not generative AI chatbots. Consequently, the 2-hour lecture focused on specific topics, would be followed by a 2-hour seminar where students would leave their laptops, tablets and phones to go out of the classroom and take a look for an hour, at the world around them, and would come back to discuss it in class, for another hour.

Hoping that other anthropology pedagogists would find it helpful in their own endeavours, the following paragraphs describe the approach to each topic, with an emphasis on the practical part. This section offers suggestions on how students can be involved in short exercises that cut them off the chat bots and screens and connect them to the palpable world around them, to start reflecting

upon it, upon their own assumptions while building transferable skills applicable in their future projects.

The introduction lecture discusses the concepts of anthropology, cultural anthropology, culture with an emphasis on material and non-material products of a culture, especially sign and symbol. After offering the definitions and a few examples, the students are being asked to go outside the classroom, in the downtown streets and squares, nearby the department's location, to look around for an hour and to identify symbols of Romanian, Hungarian and European culture. This exercise is meant to make them become aware of the use of everyday symbols, the way they are surrounding us and create meaning. I am offering here a few results from this exercise. Students immediately identify Romanian, Hungarian and European flags as symbols of the cultures, but they have troubles finding more, as they usually associate the culture with the dominant religion. Therefore, some say that the Orthodox church is a Romanian symbol while the Catholic church is a symbol of Hungarian culture. "A green gate is a Hungarian gate" is an example of extreme generalisation coming from a student who explained that to him a gate painted in green means Hungarian, as it is one of the three colours of Hungarian flag. In terms of European symbols, the most common symbol recognized in the street is the Euro sign in the exchange office window. Again, students have difficult time in finding other symbols and they find for example Italian, Spanish, or German symbols and they generalize them calling European symbols. The discussions upon their return in the classroom evolves around decodifying the symbols and being aware of the generalizations in everyday use.

The second lecture discusses the concepts of race, ethnicity and stereotyping, emphasising how our perceptions are being moulded by our cultural background and upbringing. For the practical part, the students go outside the classroom for an hour to count how many Germans, Muslims, Orthodox, Ukrainians, Roma, Italians, etc they meet in the street. I am selecting here only a few of their answers to emphasise how based on their perceptions, we are trying to de-construct the stereotypes and become aware of our biases and preconceived models of seeing the world. " I saw two Germans, they were speaking German". I asked the student "How do you know they were not Austrians? or maybe one of them was Romanian speaking to a German? Or even two Romanians (or other ethnicity) practicing German among themselves?, etc". This way we are discussing how the use of a language and ethnicity is many times a false overlapping that we take for granted. The student in charge with counting the Ortodox, went near an Orthodox church, and counted the people going in and out of the church. When I asked whether we could assume all the people in a church are followers of that religion, maybe some are just visiting and accompanying other Orthodox,

etc, the students reflected upon this and also on the possibility of other Orthodox believers that were passing by, without going to church and therefore not being counted.

The same happened in the case of Hungarians, when another student counted the people in a Catholic church as being all Hungarians, opening the discussion on stereotypes on ethnicity and religious practices. One student said she could not count any Muslim in the street, and this added up to the conversation that many times we recognize members of a certain congregation only if they display visible signs but in the everyday Romanian streets, these are not so visible. In terms of Roma, as the most prevalent stereotype is a negative one, a student considered as being Roma the street sweepers he met in his way. The class debate was mostly around de-constructing this stereotype, trying to understand how it was formed, after 500 years of Roma slavery, passed on through generations and how it is still persistent today in various cultural forms.

The third lecture on language is focused on relationship between culture and language and the way language shapes our understanding of the world. During the lecture, I presented cases of gendered nouns in Romanian and their non-gendered equivalent nouns in English, nouns that are feminine in Romanian but masculine in French or German, pronouns that suggest social status in Romanian while in English carry no load, phrases that have no meaning in other languages or in other cultural context, etc. At the same time, as students are mostly Romanians but some of them of Hungarian ethnicity, the discussion is being enriched as they point Hungarian examples, or with cases from Portuguese, Turkish or German offered by the international Erasmus students attending the class.

After the lecture, the students go outside the classroom, to look at the streets, buildings and actions and to identify things, situations or actions that in English (or other language they speak) have different meaning or interpretation than in Romanian. The examples identified by students refer to the gendered way Romanian see the world due to the gendered nouns, the impossibility of translation some actions in English as the Romanian cultural context is very different, the distortion of the meaning through word-by-word translation and so on. Through discussion, students admit that they take a lot of linguistic aspects for granted and they discover how a simple walk through the downtown could mean different experience for people of different languages, as the language offer particular lens through which we see the world.

For the world-view class, the students watch a documentary of their choice and then they discuss in pairs, the filmmaker's view of the world, in comparison with the one of their own and their pair. This way, they have three world views or parts of them to relate to and spot the differences or the

similarities. This reflexive exercise helps the students be aware of the own world view, how the ethnic, linguistic, geographic, cultural, religious, etc background is shaping their view on the world. Furthermore, discussing it in relation to their peers and the film, students analyse how the world view is playing an important part in everyday interactions and how it is portrayed in a documentary film. There are some examples when students have a difficult time recognizing their subjectivity saying that "this is how the world is" instead of understanding that it is a view formed in certain cultural context. When discussing with their peers, when spotting and comparing the differences, the students understand better the subjective approach. In relation to film, some also have difficulties in de-constructing the visual message and finding the world view that is shaping it. Again, discussing with their peers, hearing their thoughts and suggestions, and reflecting upon their own, is an important step in acknowledging the subjectivity and accepting the alternative ways of seeing the world.

The lecture on ethics is built around colonialism and the "colonial gaze" that created for centuries so many visual products dramatically shaping our perception about "the exotic other". After a brief tour through the history of colonial gaze, the discussion is centred on present days visual representations. For the practical part, students need to find documentaries or social media posts that display unethical approaches or representations. Especially in the past 2-3 years, students become quite aware of the unethical approaches, while earlier I find it sometimes challenging to make them spot them, as they said "that is the reality, they only filmed it, that is not unethical. What, we should not film the reality anymore?". In response to that, we de-construct the term "reality", try to see whose reality is actually portrayed and from what angle. Moreover, I ask them the question. "Would you be comfortable with that video if the person exposed was someone from your family?", triggering an "aha moment". It is only when the students imagine their kin in the same situation that they take a different stance, and I think this is a pivotal point. Unethical methods and approaches seem to be more difficult to spot as they are applied to "the other", while the reversed angle, the "own example" brings back into discussion the fairness and the ethical issues.

After familiarizing the students with the basic concepts of cultural anthropology, the lectures are focused on ethnographic methods. Over a few weeks period, students learn about observation, participant observation and interview, while in seminar they practice with their peers. In the following paragraph I will discuss the exercises students need to do outside the classroom, as homework. They are asked to choose a group that they are not necessarily part of, such as sport club, book club, student association, volunteer group, etc.

After informing the participants about their presence and getting access, the student needs to attend their meetings and do an ethnographic description, for the term exam, at the end of semester.

During the seminars, the students mention that in the beginning they felt awkward and uncomfortable at the groups' meetings, as they were outsiders, felt estranged and most of all, they lacked a video camera. Further discussion reveals how they are used to be in unfamiliar places/ groups as filmmakers and the camera provided them a shield. Without it, they felt exposed, especially if the group consisted in less than 6-7 members.

The main reasons I ask the film students to do observation without a camera was, first to experience how to get in touch with people they do not know, in flesh and bones, with no technological layer between them. And secondly, to understand how the camera empowers them, putting them in a privileged position and to reflect upon how it changes the perspective from the very beginning.

Furthermore, through this exercise students acknowledge how as filmmakers in new context, they are concerned with technical aspects such as lights, angles of shooting, framing, etc, while being without a camera, they were able to observe far more details and let the events unfold for themselves. This way they recognize how their attention is very selective and guided by the technical priorities and how their understanding of the new context is distorted even more in the process. The goal here is not to get the naïve and utopic "biased free" look, but to train students in documentary filmmaking to let the people and the environment "do the talk", paying attention to details, relationships and actions and only after that, to bring the camera in.

The pieces of ethnographies created by students have one thing in common. Although for the past few years the situation has improved, the students are very challenged by the emphasis on "description", stating facts, describing people, places, actions. Their ethnographies have a very subjective tone, the writing is a constant mix between some descriptive fragments and personal explanations, assumptions and opinions presented as "ethnographic description". It seems that describing just what they see, hear and smell, there and then, is a real challenge. One student mentioned at some point that she felt strange not to offer any analysis the way she was taught to do all the gymnasium and high school years in Romanian literature classes, while the other students nodded their heads in approval.

The seminar discussions are usually carried around the topic of objectivity-subjectivity and de-constructing the idea of "100% objective look". The purpose of ethnographic exercise, among others, is to make them aware of

the distinction between facts developing before their eyes and their opinion or assumption on those facts. The discussion at seminars provokes them to see that as filmmakers of documentary films, their subjectivity is part of the artistic process and is central to the visual project. The anthropology class does not try to erase their subjectivity and force them to create "objective" accounts, but rather to be able to have an objective look, separate facts from opinions, understand how their own cultural background offers them a lens through which they perceive reality, and reflect upon their own subjectivity.

Although the ethnographic exercise created many relevant discussions, in this paper I will focus my conclusion on the feed back provided by the students when they were asked to reflect upon it. "It gave me a brief moment of joy to realize that for the first time I got out of my comfort zone and went somewhere where I knew absolutely no one, I was not sure I would find people who would be open with me or if I would be welcomed, because I have not experienced in my life too many interactions with communities." (student, female, 24 years old). "This whole experience really pushed me to step out of my comfort zone [...]. The hardest part was learning how to resist the urge to jump in or voice my opinion when things weren't going in the way I thought they should" (student, female, 25 years old). "Most importantly, my interaction with the group transformed my scepticism into appreciation, my anxiety into openness, and my detachment into a real desire to participate" (student, male, 24 years old). These three examples are not an exception as most of the student feed-back gravitates around the idea of breaking out of their bubble, overcoming the fear of meeting new people and being open to new communities.

Social and anthropological documentary- spring semester

The second semester is focused on social and anthropological documentary, for the same students who attended the first semester "Anthropology and documentary filmmaking" class. Having in mind the necessity of collaborative and interdisciplinary projects where students would develop transferable skills, this class witnessed various forms or collaborations. This paper discusses the spring 2023 class, which has a few particularities while at the same time does not represent a unique, "a one of its kind" class, as it stands in line with the other classes taught between 2020-2025. This class represents an example of international, interdisciplinary, hands-on experience as detailed in the following section.

The class of 2021 and 2022, Faculty of Theatre and Film, Babes-Bolyai University, Romania (UBB) students collaborated with other students enrolled

in anthropology programs at University of Wyoming or elsewhere (Europe, Asia and Africa). Based on these previous experiences, the class of 2023 brought together online, documentary filmmaking students from UBB (coordinated by the author), master level anthropology students from University of Wyoming (USA, coordinated by Dr. Michael Harkin) and communication students from Universita Cattolica (Italy, coordinated by Dr. Alice Cati).

Hoping that other anthropology pedagogists would find it useful while encouraging them to take this path, this section describes the logistics and some of the projects resulted from this encounter. The aim of this class was to offer the students possibility of developing teamwork skill by working in international, interdisciplinary teams, to break the language barrier while developing video projects that include three perspectives from three different countries. The syllabus was built after online meetings between the three coordinators, and it would comprise topics relevant to all the programs as it follows: teamwork in filmmaking, international collaborative documentaries, objectivity, subjectivity and reflexivity in filmmaking, ethics in filmmaking, representing "the other" in films, international collaborative ethnographies, social documentary and participatory video making. Each topic would be taught online, by one of the three coordinators, through rotation, followed by a 2-hour seminar.

Organizing and preparing the class was quite challenging especially due to the time zones and academic calendars. As University of Wyoming spring semester started in January and ended in May, while Babes Bolyai University and Universita Cattolica started in March and ended in June, first we had to overlap the 3 academic calendars, taking into account different spring breaks and Easter vacations. We were able to identify March, April, May available to everyone and consequently the online class were taught during these months. Next, we were able to set the time for the class between a very small window due to the 9-hour difference between Romania and USA. So, we had the class at 6 pm in Romania, 5 pm in Italy and 9 am in USA.

The introductive lecture presented the general aim of the class: ways of collaboration through anthropology filmmaking in international and interdisciplinary context, emphasising that present work system and the future one (in all domains, not only in filmmaking and anthropology) is based on teams with members scattered all over the world, speaking different languages, living in different cultures. Acquiring skills in teamwork, communication, interdisciplinary approaches is a must for the future jobs and students have the chance to practise them within this international class.

After all participants introduced themselves, we created teams of 3 (one student from each university): One American, one Romanian and one Italian get together to make a film, sounding like the beginning of a joke. The teams would

work together until the end of the semester, with the goal of creating a 10-minute video project on an anthropological topic of their choice, approached from 3 cultural angles. War in Ukraine, death, religion, home, etc were some of the topics proposed by students. The class meetings were twice a week, following the schedule presented above, while students would organize themselves and meet online to discuss the project according to their chosen topic. The instruction language was English, known and spoken by everyone.

During the first meeting we presented the work method, we offered them guidelines on how to organize their teams and coordinate their work, we emphasised the focus of the class on the collaboration itself, rather than solving technical filmmaking shortages. We discussed especially how to perceive the differences in languages, approaches and cultures as a great opportunity for learning essential skills for working in international and interdisciplinary teams and creating short films that would offer three perspectives on the same topic.

Prior to the class and during the first meeting, there was a strong sense of excitement among students, with lots of anticipation, curiosity and energy, which unfortunately turned quickly in frustration. It seems that students had a difficult time in organizing themselves, first of all. "I don't know his email address", "She doesn't answer my messages", "When I want to talk about the project, it is too late in the day for the others, while it is still morning in my time zone", "Two of us are talking but our third member does not get involved", etc were few of the complains mentioned. Furthermore, it seems that Italian students had an inferiority complex regarding the use of English, feeling embarrassed that it might not be good enough.

Discussing openly these issues during the seminars helped fixing the communication and management issues. American students said that they were impressed with the high level of English of their Romanian and Italian teammates and how they were able to develop a project in their non-native language, making them more confident and surpassing the language barrier. Also, the cultural differences were visible during the class interactions. It seems that American students had a more relaxed and casual approach, easily offering their opinions, being outgoing, while the Romanian and Italians were formal, answering mostly only when specifically asked. However, at the student team level, while meeting only among themselves, it seems that the collaboration was improved and all students contributed equally, regardless of their cultural background. After choosing a topic, each team developed its own visual project with all the members involved in brainstorming on script writing, filming and taking interviews in their own country, discussing editing choices.

At the end of semester, there were ten short documentaries produced by the student teams on various anthropologic or social topics, approached from

three perspectives. As the students had different technical skills in filmmaking, some documentaries were less articulated while the lack of student involvement in some projects were visible in the results. On the other hand, some films managed to convey a strong message while successfully debate the topic from various angles.

My opinion (in agreement with Dr. Harkin and Dr. Cati) is that the class reached its aim. Through anthropologic documentary film production, the students from three different countries were exposed to different cultures, managed to build up essential skills in teamwork, listen to opinions and perspectives from their international peers, turning them into a documentary script and a collaborative video. A totally hands-in experience, while dealing with 3 different time zones and cultural backgrounds.

In support of my argument, here are two feed-backs received from our students: "The joint course with other two universities opened my perspective to new ways of approaching the world and art. It made me much more open and tolerant toward other cultures. I realized that documentary film is a universal language and that the desire to create something beautiful is a shared goal. I developed my leadership and communication skills. I would like future students, not only those in the documentary film master's program, to have similar opportunities (Romanian students, 42 years old); "Having different cultural reference points, two people can read the same message and understand two different things. To be honest, my teammates did not collaborate very well, but we made the film in the end. It was very interesting to see the perspective from another country" (Romanian student, 24 years old). At the other end, one student said that he really hated the class and he would never work again with people he did not know, he would only work with his friends, highlighting the frustration he felt when working with strangers and inability to find a common language.

It is worth mentioning that after class ended, two of the projects were further developed by film students from Babes-Bolyai University, who turned them into two short documentaries. "One Click Away" (directed by Janine Grun), on how students perceive death, and "Morning Routine" (directed by Robert Kocsis), about war in Ukraine and its representation on tik-tok, were selected to multiple international film festivals.

Discussion and conclusion

"How can an anthropology class make a difference" for the Generation Z in the context of an ever growing technologized and digitalized world? was one of the main questions that I asked myself a few years ago and I tried to offer

parts of my answer through this paper. Research in the anthropology of education and pedagogical studies has emphasized that anthropology's value in higher education lies in its role as a *liberalizing* discipline—one that sharpens critical thinking, ethical reflexivity, and interpretive skill rather than merely transmitting content knowledge (Demerath 2019; Copeland and Dengah II 2016). From this perspective, anthropology's methodological emphasis on participant observation and ethnographic reasoning offers students practical tools for engaging with unfamiliar social worlds, encouraging empathy while simultaneously demanding analytical distance (Spradley 1980; Bernard 2017). These skills are increasingly recognized as essential in a globalized, pluralistic society, and as recently, AI driven, particularly for students pursuing careers outside the academy.

Educators have therefore argued that anthropology should be positioned as a foundational component of undergraduate curricula, especially for non-anthropology majors (Stein et al. 2016; Hernández Sánchez 2013). Introductory anthropology courses, in particular, serve as critical sites for challenging ethnocentrism and destabilizing taken-for-granted cultural assumptions, a pedagogical outcome that has been identified as central to anthropology's public relevance (Eriksen 2017). Within this line of reasoning, the present paper discussed various ways of engaging students, developing their critical thinking through practical exercises that call them to take a different look at their familiar places. Inviting the students outside the classroom, for a simple walk around the university's building and asking them to find examples of signs and symbols, to look at the surrounding through the lens of different languages, to identify members of various ethnicities or religious congregations, challenged their assumption and created space for de-construction of stereotypes. By exposing students to these simple yet effective cross-cultural comparison embedded in everyday practices, they were encouraged to recognize both the contingency of their own worldviews and the legitimacy of alternative ways of being.

The use of ethnographic methods plays a significant role in enabling non-anthropology majors to engage meaningfully with cultural difference. Ethnography's core practices—participant observation, interviewing, and attention to social context—encourage students to encounter culture as a lived and relational process rather than as an abstract or static body of knowledge (Geertz, 1973; Spradley, 1980). When students undertake small-scale ethnographic projects—such as observing community spaces, conducting peer interviews, or reflecting on routine social practices—they gain firsthand insight into the ways culture operates in everyday life. Research on experiential learning suggests that these hands-on approaches promote deeper understanding and sustained engagement, particularly among students outside the discipline (Kolb, 1984;

Kuh, 2008). In anthropology classrooms, field-based assignments have been shown to enhance critical thinking, cultural awareness, and reflexivity, even among non-majors who may initially perceive anthropology as distant from their primary fields of study (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011; Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013).

Besides gaining cultural awareness and reflexivity, the examples from our class of anthropology emphasises some points that brings conversation to the very beginning: before talking about applying ethnographic methods, we need to talk about how to support students to start a simple conversation with someone they don't know, how to encourage them to break their own bubbles, how to navigate the anxiety of meet a new group. Before teaching how to apply ethnographic methods, we need first to get off the screens and into real life, to meet real people.

I believe this discussion requires further research, and it is even more timely now with the rise of generative AI. While some studies show how chatbots could stimulate engaged dialogue and help students with false field notes, the present paper shows how students should be engaged in real life experiences. Chatting with bots that are simulating an open dialogue with others, could offer the student a sense of comfort and ease in dialogue, creating the false impression that the student is acquiring and eventually is mastering the necessary skills to engage with other people and other cultural groups. "I have not experienced in my life too many interactions with communities", "This whole experience really pushed me to step out of my comfort zone", "My interaction with the group transformed my scepticism into appreciation, my anxiety into openness, and my detachment into a real desire to participate" are some of the feed back received from the students. I do not believe that any chatbot would have been able to trigger these reactions. After learning the lesson from Plato's allegoric cave (2004), where prisoners mistook shadows on the wall as real people, and later on, from Baudrillard's (1994) simulacra pointing to the copies without originals, completely replacing reality, why would we teach our students today about human interactions through practicing with generative AI? Teach them about reality through simulacrum of a simulacrum?

After years of lockdown, thousands of digital interactions per day, extreme polarization through social media, the anxiety, the scepticism, the fear of rejection are real and leaving a deep imprint. When teaching ethnographic methods, first of all, we need to encourage and support students to meet new people, to take the first step into the real life. Simulated dialogues with chatbots could offer some fictional ethnographic information based on algorithms, taking the students even farther away from what it means to be in the field. Years of practice show that students today have a real difficult time to start an

interaction with the others and in this sense, this paper presented ways in which they can be involved in short ethnographic exercises, interacting with people in various off-screen contexts.

"What jobs are still relevant in an AI world" is one of the most frequent questions coming from students these days, regardless of the field of study. This paper does not have an answer for this question, but it has some suggestions regarding the transferable skills. Team work, collaboration with other humans, interdisciplinary approach and communication are already crucial and they will probably be key assets in the future as well. Collaborative pedagogical projects play an important role in fostering dialogue among students from diverse disciplinary backgrounds while supporting the development of transferable skills such as teamwork, communication across difference, and ethical decision-making.

Framing anthropology as an inherently collaborative and interdisciplinary field has been shown to increase its accessibility and relevance for non-majors, helping students recognise the applicability of anthropological perspectives across a wide range of professional contexts (Stein et al., 2016). By integrating teaching, research, and service, anthropology courses demonstrate how ethnographic thinking can be applied to real-world challenges in areas such as healthcare, education, business, and public policy (Lassiter, 2005; Rylko-Bauer et al., 2006). Pedagogical models that prioritise experiential and applied learning further highlight the value of anthropology for students outside the discipline (Copeland & Dengah, 2016). These approaches align with broader research on experiential learning, which shows that active participation enhances engagement, critical thinking, and students' capacity to apply knowledge beyond the classroom (Kolb, 1984; Kuh, 2008). The anthropologic documentary class developed in collaboration with University of Wyoming and Universita Cattolica, engaging students from three different languages, cultures, study majors and academic traditions offers evidence in line with the main framework.

As teamwork, collaboration and interdisciplinarity are concepts whose value had been proved over the decades, the present research was focused on how they actually work between the walls of classrooms and online meetings. Challenges like synchronizing three time zones with 9-hour difference between them, overlapping academic calendars with different structures and breaks, coordinating syllabuses from three different disciplines into one, were overcame through patience and many hours of discussions between the coordinating professors. At the student level, the initial excitement turned quite fast into frustration, and much time was allocated to simply find ways of communicating outside the common lectures, managing false expectations, and encouraging open dialogue. Cultural, linguistic and personal barriers have been eventually broken through documentary filmmaking, as the class offered a real hand in

experience, where students from film, communication and anthropology managed to write a script, film and edit together, following a common goal. Consequently, this research argues that collaborative and interdisciplinary approaches should not be taken for granted or implied just because they have been around for decades. The experience shows that time, efforts and patience are required, especially in the case of generation z, born and raised in social media bubbles.

Teaching anthropology in tik tok and AI era? From the multitude of pedagogical approaches, in my case, practical exercises investigating everyday encounters and the streets near university, short ethnographic research, collaboration and interdisciplinarity through filmmaking seem to get students' attention and engagement. Instead of a concluding, final line, I end this paper with a quote from my student's essay. "You can't truly understand the 'true' spirit of a community if you are too afraid to participate in their activities. This group taught me that authenticity is better than aesthetics. Because of them, I am returning to my studies with a new goal: to stop trying to make everything look perfect and start trying to make it feel real".

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ADDRESSING THE ISSUE OF GENERALIZABILITY OF ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK

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ABSTRACT. This essay offers a concise review of ethnographers 'longstanding concern with the geographically and temporally bounded character of classical participant-observation fieldwork. It begins by outlining the archetypal construction of fieldwork before examining two contrasting positions on the generalizability of ethnographic data, positions that illustrate the wide spectrum of attitudes held within the discipline. Building on a Geertzian perspective, the essay reconceptualizes generalizability as a mode of theory production aimed at rendering intelligible the conceptual structures that organize social action. I argue that this form of theoretical generalizability is best advanced by engaging three influential critiques of ethnographic practice focusing on the deconstruction of fieldwork's taken-for-granted premises, the challenge to single-site generalization, and the move beyond reductive inductive–deductive dichotomies.

Keywords: Ethnography; Fieldwork; Generalizability; Geertz; Theory Production; Methodology

The ethnographic method was born as a way of focusing the attention of the researcher on the experiences, actions, and understandings of the members of the social world he or she attempts to study(Atkinson 2001). In order to record these elements, and attempt to give them meaning, ethnographers are committed to the method of participant observation, regarded the royal road to achieving their scholarly objectives. Of course, I do not mean to imply here that the ethnographic method is limited to, or should be reduced to, participant observation, but the concept provides the Aristotelian *differentia specifica* that allows me to define and position it alongside other ways of studying the social world.

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Going “into the field” for a couple of months had become more or less synonymous with doing ethnography (Emerson 2001; Emerson et al. 1995) . This led the first practitioners of the ethnographic method to conceive their approach to the object of their study as inherently bounded in space. The need for in-depth analysis seemed to require a focus on a bordered location, as well as a moderately long period of immersion in the lifeworlds of those construed as targets of scholarly attention.

A clear example of this tendency to actively cut out a bounded “piece of land” and attribute to it a sense of wholeness and completeness usually associated with autonomous and distinct social phenomena is offered by Evans-Pritchard’s classical study *The Nuer* (Evans-Pritchard and Alexander Street Press. 1969). To support my claim that the beginnings of ethnography as a method of research involved a vision of fieldwork that is spatially bounded, it is revealing to note that Evans-Pritchard defined the object of his study as an “ethnographic area.” The classic (in both senses of the term) ethnographer, focusing on uncovering, classifying, and making intelligible the internal relations structuring his ‘field,’ tended to neglect, or worse, actively disregard as irrelevant and biased, the relationships between the group under study and anything that existed outside the narrowly defined ‘ethnographic area.’

> I do not make far-reaching claims. I believe that I have understood the chief values of the Nuer and am able to present a true outline of their social structure, but I regard, and have designed, this volume as a contribution to the ethnology of a particular area rather than as a detailed sociological study, and I shall be content if it is accepted as such.”(Evans-Pritchard and Alexander Street Press. 1969, 15).

This is highly significant for the limited perspective the author had on the social phenomena that constituted his object of study. It reveals a propensity on the part of the ethnographer to avoid, exclude, or diminish the influence of any social phenomena not located within the perimeter he had imagined to be his ‘field’ —in a word, anything that was not local.

If the fieldwork of the ethnographer was bounded in space, it was not at all so in terms of time. Quite on the contrary, the ethnographer’s work seemed to have taken place in the framework of a timeless time. Keeping with quoting with the classics I will appeal to the introduction to Edmund Leach’s *Political Systems in Highland Burma*, (1970) where he meditates on the time-reference of classical anthropological literature.

> This prejudice in favour of 'equilibrium' interpretations arises from the nature of the anthropologist's materials and from the conditions under which he does his work. The social anthropologist normally studies the population of a

> particular place at a particular point in time and does not concern himself greatly with whether or not the same locality is likely to be studied again by other anthropologist at a later date. In the result we get studies of Trobriand society, Tikopia society, Nuer society, not 'Trobriand society in 1914', 'Tikopia society in 1929', 'Nuer society in 1935'. When anthropological societies are lifted out of time and space in this way in the interpretation that is given to the material is necessarily an equilibrium analysis, for if it were not so, it would certainly appear to the reader that the analysis was incomplete. (Leach 1970, 7).

The 'classic' approach of ethnography toward time seems to have been grounded in the assumption that the 'natives' are not part of the contemporary, progressive, linear timeline. Instead, they are assigned to cyclical, immobile time structures, that is, before the advent of 'history' and its vicissitudes and never-ending alterations of the 'today.' Classical anthropologists do not think they analyze a culture at a specific point in time, say, this year or that decade, but rather that culture in general.

We have established by now that the method of participant observation was connected to strong assumptions about the boundedness and strict demarcation of its object of study, in comparison to other methodologies of social research. This fact raised the issue of the generalizability of findings and theories that arise out of the (allegedly limited relevance and scope of the) study of local groups conceived as distinct and isolated societies and cultures.

In the following section, I will cover three ways which I found exemplary in which ethnographers have answered concerns related to generalizability. At one extreme of the continuum constituted by the possible ways in which ethnography has reacted to these critiques lies the attempt to question the meaningfulness of the very concept of 'generalizability,' usually alongside the two other terms that accompany it: 'validity' and 'reliability.' To illustrate this stance, I chose the passionate article by Valerie J. Janesick: "*The Dance of Qualitative Research Design*" (2000). Janesick's position is exemplary in its rejection of quantitative methods of scientific inquiry. Her stance is perhaps best defined by the concept of "methodolatry," which she coined to oppose "a slavish attachment and devotion to method" (2000, 215). Over-focusing on the method of research at the expense of the actual substance of the story being told, the researcher runs the risk of losing "the human and passionate element of the research." Methodolatry is operationalized by the author in the "trinity" of validity, reliability, and generalizability, which tends to be fetishized by a number of social scientists.

The substance of Janesick's critique is directed against traditional notions of generalizability. She claims that for the researcher interested in "questions of meaning and interpretation in individual cases," the traditional way of

thinking about generalizability is inadequate. The value of a case study lies exactly in its uniqueness, and the ethnographer should celebrate that instead of attempting, in vain, to generalize it using "psychometrics that rule our research and (...) decontextualize the individual." (Janesick 2000, 217) The alternative favored by Janesick stresses the "presentation of solid descriptive data, so that the researcher leads the reader to an understanding of the meaning of the experience under study" (2000, 215). I beg to differ. While one should cherish the specificity of one's method of research, and indeed the work of an ethnographer does open to her the richness of local or individual settings, abandoning all theoretical pretension and indulging in "solid description" harms more than helps the status of the practitioner of the ethnographic method among other social scientists.

At the other end of the spectrum I locate the theories of Clifford Geertz, who managed to produce perhaps the most brilliant reformulation of the generalizability of the research results grounded in participant observation. In his "*Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture*" (Geertz 1973, 55–77), Geertz addresses the need to generalize in the study of cultures:

"(...) the essential task of theory building here is not to codify abstract generalities but to make thick description possible, not to generalize across cases but to generalize within them." (Geertz 1973, 72).

Thus, Geertz reformulates the epistemological objective of participant observation. Rather than inductively generalizing the trends observed in the social world in order to come up with increased accuracy of predictive statements, participant observation may be better apprehended using a challenging analogy with clinical inference:

"Rather than beginning with a set of observations and attempting to subsume them under a governing law, such inference begins with a set of (presumptive) signifiers and attempts to place them within an intelligible frame." (Geertz 1973, 72)

Thus, the work of the ethnographer should be, from an epistemological point of view, more similar to the active scan of the clinician analyzing a set of symptoms in order to diagnose the family resemblance that connects them (the illness), rather than to that of a physicist in search of the regular patterns governing his object of analysis. As ethnographers:

> (...) our double task is to uncover the conceptual structures that inform our subjects' acts, (...) and to construct a system of analysis in whose terms what is generic to those structures (...) will stand out against other determinants of social behavior. (Geertz 1973, 73).

This new way of defining the theoretical body that is the product of the ethnographic method does not reject the idea of generalizability as useless. Instead, it re-conceptualizes its meaning. Yet, this does not mean that, after giving up the pretension of uncovering general laws, the ethnographer is left with a self-celebratory enjoyment of the richness of the field—and even less so with the Sisyphic task of starting from theoretical scratch with every new study. Theories and concepts do circulate and are refined from one study to the next, but in this case: "progress is marked less by a perfection of consensus, than by a refinement of debate."

The post-Geertzian era brought about new insights into the relationship between the local, bounded character of the fieldwork and the general or limited usage of its findings. In a reflexive effort, scholars re-analyzed the conceptual core of their discipline, and these critical stances bore interesting fruits on the issue of generalizability. In the following section, I will address three stances: Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson's "Discipline and Practice: The 'Field' as Site, Method and Location in Anthropology" (1997), George Marcus' article "Ethnography In/Of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography." (1995) and of Stefan Timmermans and Iddo Tavory's "Theory Construction in Qualitative Research: From Grounded Theory to Abductive Analysis" (2012). To my mind, these are still the most relevant contributions to the topic.

"Discipline and Practice" is the opening chapter of *Anthropological Locations* (1997) and lays its conceptual and epistemological foundations. In an original fashion, the article takes a reflexive perspective on the intellectual history of the method of participant observation and questions the way in which the idea of 'working in the field' was constructed and modified over time. The dichotomy 'field'/'home' is undermined through the analysis of their alleged spatial separation, of the rituals of 'entry' and 'exit,' and of the 'hierarchy of purity' of field sites. The authors question the types of knowledge provided by the Geertzian "study in villages," not "study of villages." Their question, "Why do we study 'in villages'?" reveals an unacknowledged hierarchy of topics, based on the unfamiliar, the different, and the local—"read: not like at (First World) home"—as topics of ethnographic inquiry. In the same vein, the "real anthropologist" seems to be judged according to a yardstick that tends to eliminate women, minorities, or non-Western researchers writing about the societies in which they grew up. Thus, according to Gupta and Ferguson, the field of participant observation research has to be re-invented.

The two authors advocate the abandonment of the commitment to the 'local' and its replacement with "attentiveness to epistemological and political issues of location." Instead of a vision of discrete, separate cultures (fields conceived geographically), they support a perspective shaped by fields of

unequal power relations. The researcher thus ceases to be the privileged and unique "expert" solely enabled to uncover a specific form of knowledge. Instead, they are assigned the task of:

> (...) forging links between different knowledges that are possible from different locations and tracing lines of possible alliance and common purpose between them. (...) we view a research area less as a 'field' for the collection of data than as a site for strategic intervention. (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 39)

Thus, according to Gupta and Ferguson, the debate on the generalizability of ethnographic research is grounded in a false assumption. It begins with the idea that participant observation is a method that can be applied only in geographically limited cultural areas, by a specific archetype of researcher, and that it yields expert and specialized forms of knowledge. By deconstructing these unacknowledged premises of 'fieldwork,' they succeed in relocating the debate onto promising new grounds.

Another perspective that shares a critical stance toward the classical way of conceiving the 'field' and 'fieldwork' was offered by Marcus in "*Ethnography In/Of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography*" (1995). As indicated in the title, the article offers a perspective on ethnographic fieldwork, exploring the methodological implications of the conceptual and practical shift from conventional single-site locations to multiple sites of observation and participation. Placing this conceptual shift within the intellectual tradition of what he calls "the intellectual capital of so-called postmodernism" (Marcus 1995, 97), Marcus begins by asserting that ethnography consists essentially of a search for cultural logics that are "always multiply produced" (Marcus 1995, 97), and therefore are ideally suited to analysis not only through the classical study of a geographically bounded locus, but through strategies that involve following connections and associations across multiple sites and locations.

Acknowledging the disintegration of grand narratives such as global capitalism or the world system, the author highlights the collapse of the distinction between the lifeworlds of ethnographic subjects and larger systems. He advocates the need to rediscover:

"new paths of connection and association by which traditional ethnographic concerns with agency, symbolism, and everyday practices can continue to be expressed on a differently configured spatial canvas." (Marcus 1995, 98)

Marcus acknowledges the risk of attenuating the power of fieldwork by losing "some of the mystique and reality of conventional fieldwork" (Marcus 1995, 100) in the shift toward multi-sited ethnography. Yet, what is not lost—and is, in fact, enhanced by the new perspective—is the capacity of participant

observation to produce translations "from one cultural idiom to another" (Marcus 1995, 100). This is achieved by abandoning the simplistic dualism opposing the researcher to the 'native,' in favor of a richer analysis of multiple social locations and the need to relate them. The researcher undertakes the sensitive task of mapping themself and renegotiating their identity as the research landscape changes. The writing of this type of ethnography emerges as a particular mode of publication in its own right.

The movement of the researcher through multiple sites—following people, things, metaphors, stories, biographies, or conflicts—enables them to bypass the simplistic debate over the generalizability of findings anchored in a single, spatially and temporally bounded location. By shifting the frame of reference and transposing fieldwork into new coordinates, the perspective suggested by Marcus allows the ethnographer to conceptually and practically move forward—not only closing the debate on generalizability, but also opening a range of new ones.

Last but not least, I address the contribution of Timmermans and Tavory in "*Theory Construction in Qualitative Research: From Grounded Theory to Abductive Analysis*" (2012) Here, generalizability is related to the explanatory power of the theory that results from ethnographically grounded research: "the theories developed in abductive analysis denote an attempt to generalize causal links and descriptions of the world out of particular empirical instances." (Timmermans and Tavory 2012, 174).

In an effort to bypass the inductive vs. deductive dichotomies in the construction of fieldwork-grounded analyses, the two authors advocate an approach "aimed at generating creative and novel theoretical insights through a dialectic of cultivated theoretical sensitivity and methodological heuristics." (Timmermans and Tavory 2012, 180). Stressing the importance of deductively checking new explanations against empirical data to test theoretical robustness (Timmermans and Tavory 2012, 175) the authors focus on "unanticipated and surprising observations" which allow the researcher to overcome the limits of inductive approaches such as grounded theory (Charmaz 2017; Glaser and Strauss 1967) or analytic induction (Katz 2001).

In short the novel manner of approaching ethnographies can be summarized as follows:

"abductive analysis involves a recursive process of double-fitting data and theories. An abductive inference involves making a preliminary guess based on the interplay between existing theories and data when anomalies or unexpected findings occur. If the existing theories fully account for the empirical phenomena, the researcher has simply verified an existing theory. (...) pushing the data against existing theories will likely identify changed circumstances,

additional dimensions, or misguided preconceptions. Anomalies, which are inevitably both empirical and theoretical, then require the development of tentative new theories." (Timmermans and Tavory 2012, 179)

Therefore, the promise of a generalizable case-study is predicated upon the quality of its theoretical acumen. And constructing an insightful theory is, in the opinion of the two authors, also the outcome of methodological rigor, which can be achieved through the processes of revisiting, defamiliarization, and alternative casing.

It was my intention to offer a short review of the ethnographers' concern with the geographically and temporally bounded character of classical participant-observation fieldwork. I began by presenting the manner in which fieldwork was archetypically construed. I then presented two opposing stances defending the generalizability of ethnographical data, stances that, in my view, exemplify the wide range of attitudes that practitioners in the field hold on the issue. I embrace a Geertz-ean perspective that reconceptualizes the concept of 'generalizability' as an effort of theory production focused on weaving a system of analysis that makes understandable the conceptual structures informing our subjects' behavior. This form of theoretical generalizability can be better put into practice if we heed three seminal perspectives on ethnographic work: Gupta and Fergusson's deconstruction of the unacknowledged premises of 'fieldwork,' Marcus' argument against generalizing from a single 'site' and Timmerman and Tavory's invitation to move beyond the reductionist inductive vs. deductive relationships between theory and data. I conclude this essay with the survey of these three critiques of the ethnographic theoretical and methodological corpus, critiques that reformulate and translate the debate into seminal new coordinates.

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