

## “SCRAPS FROM THE BOURGEOIS KITCHEN”

On the Romanian Frontline of Outsourced Creativity

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### Introduction

In March 2021, the ‘Rubik’ platform was launched in the city of Cluj-Napoca (Cluj, from now on). Rubik was raising the alarm about a fast-moving gentrification and an aggressive real estate market that was increasingly ‘suffocating’ cultural and artistic spaces and practices. Rubik is a platform of the now dematerialized Paintbrush Factory, a locally and internationally famous collective of visual and performing artists operating since 2009 on the premises of a former paintbrush factory, located in the industrial area along the river, a few kilometers east from the medieval center of this Transylvanian city (Braniște 2019; Mironica 2019). The Paintbrush Factory was pushed out in 2019 by offices and classrooms for an ‘informal’ information technology (IT) school. It was also abandoned by City Hall. Cluj politics has been dominated for more than a decade by mayor Boc and his liberal alliance, set up for turning Cluj into the penultimate Romanian instantiation of a ‘creative city.’ Boc was the mayor of the educated ‘creative class’ à la Richard Florida, cognitive workers who would not only drive up productivity after the postsocialist collapse, but also anchor a liberal cosmopolitan city while participating in the making of a brave new global world of automation and Artificial Intelligence (AI).

After the 2008 financial crisis, the former industrial landmarks of the city have been increasingly reclaimed for business centers, IT



**Figure 7.1.** Cluj IT offshore offices. © Oana Mateescu and Don Kalb

offices, technology parks and co-working spaces. Socialist furniture and textile factories were repurposed for the postindustrial service economy, which in this semi-peripheral area of the capitalist world economy could not but emerge as an offshoot of a global wave of Western outsourcing in ‘business process’ and information technology services. This is a city that had been teetering on the brink of economic collapse for more than a postsocialist decade under nationalist mayor Funar, who steadily decried the evils of foreign capital and kept fueling interethnic tension between Romanians and Hungarians (Petrovici 2011). From the time of the financial crisis, and accelerating after 2014, the city’s attractiveness as an IT outsourcing hotspot in Eastern Europe let loose an entire panoply of bottled-up neoliberal aspirations, while offering, for the first time, a viable local alternative to the prospect of mass outmigration. Cluj became the most successful Romanian example of a process that in the 2010s was transforming cities, economies, labor, and ideology all over Central and Eastern Europe, in an uneven repeat of what had been happening earlier in India, Mexico, and the Philippines, but now on postsocialist territory.

The ‘nowhere office,’ brought into fashion by the 2020 global pandemic, had already been colonizing urban space in and around Cluj. As an invocation of the mobility of contemporary “footloose

labor" (Huws 2014), this notion gestures to the multitude of spaces that labor can take over or even create. Echoing the jargon of Cluj creatives, one can speak of laboratories—pockets of urban space dedicated to experiment, collaborative discovery, and creativity, but in the (etymological) end also places defined by their capacity to produce and shelter particular types of labor. Much of our fieldwork consisted in doing the rounds of IT offices, coffee shops, co-works, maker spaces, incubators, accelerators, IT schools and coding academies; as well as time-bound events (real or virtual) curated via websites and apps: meet-ups, workshops, start-up pitches, IT conferences, innovation labs, tech fests, job fairs, and a cornucopia of corporate and civic 'hackathons' and even 'blockathons' (harnessing blockchain for public sector challenges) that were on offer.<sup>1</sup> With the professionalization of the hipster into the 'upster' (involved in 'start-ups'), labor here has come to appear as a form of social and urban belonging framed in the terms of a liberal techno-moral governance that can seemingly refashion the entire city into a laboratory, and whole working lives into a space of perpetual adventure. Labor and politics can both be 'hacked' via digital fixes: apps for mobility, citizen complaints, cultural consumption, and even an online platform for urban participatory budgeting—the original Porto Alegre idea associated with the democratic desires of the alterglobalist movement of the early 2000s, turned into an app and a click. This urban laboratory embodies the kind of "entrepreneurial citizenship" that Irani (2019: 22) saw emerging in India as a way "to subsume hope and dissatisfaction, redirecting potential political contestation into economic productivity and experiment."

However, underneath the experimental buzz and the futurist rhetoric of mayor Boc, one is inevitably confronted with the deep, unsteady beat of a huge outsourcing complex, a 'service plantation' in the apt characterization of some critical insiders, which now occupies anywhere between 20 and 30 percent of the local labor market (upwards of 20,000 workers in a city of some 400,000, including 80,000 students). This complex is driven by the pressure on Western capital to reduce the costs of its office workers in the West. Labor is offered for some 30 percent of the Western price, and is only slightly more expensive than the Indians and Filipinos with whom they knowingly compete (discounting the top players, who command incomes near the Western average for IT specialists). But if one digs deeper one begins to see how the local ensemble is equally shaped by the needs, 'aspirations,' and capacities of local 'living' labor. Transnational Romanian tech-talent from the diaspora in places like

France, Toronto, and Silicon Valley also play a marked role, as do the specific balances and ideological biases of Romanian politics. Below the surface, one finds an accumulation machine that steadily draws in and spews out extensive renewable pools of young, exploitable, cognitive workers who are drawn towards the shining liberal city in the valley by the promises of its educational institutions, all seeking to escape the steep decline of the villages and small towns in the postsocialist provinces. From the moment of their arrival, the young adults lack the means to sustain themselves in the rapidly gentrifying city, and soon enough begin selling their spare labor time (often in the night) to the corporations while trying to finish their studies, which many, understandably, fail to do in the end. One knowledgeable insider told us frankly: “This is the IT business model: we take fresh people and turn them into saleable commodities.”

Theories of ‘creative classes’ and their associated trickle-down urbanism à la Richard Florida (2002), but also Marxist evocations of ‘cognitive labor,’ ‘immaterial labor,’ and the supposedly democratic and egalitarian ‘urban multitudes’ and urban commons that are associated with it (Lazzarato 1996; Negri and Hardt 2004), are dominated by the teleological timelines of postmodern reiterations of modernization theory, as well as by the ongoing transformation of Western metropolises. But they are conspicuously silent on the uneven and contradictory realities of capitalist social space. This has serious repercussions for their reliability and relevance within Western cities, but in the context of the capitalist production of non-Western and non-core spaces it all but destroys their credentials. Cluj, as we found it, was produced by a determinate and knowable ‘spatial fix’ (Harvey 1981): a dynamic point in an identifiable value chain; a receptor of particular flows of capital, overwhelmingly seeking cheap ‘no collar’ service labor in ‘plantation-like’ regimes of production; a point where specific global and local histories—capitalist, socialist, and postsocialist—were dialectically coming together; a fix that feeds on and nurtures peculiar valences of labor and life.

There was even, as several of our interlocutors suggested, a special ‘cultural fix.’ He meant the buzzing ‘work ethos’ of the city. The culture-word often appeared when local actors were trying to explain to us the nature of the city, both with positive and with negative connotations. Cluj was more ‘Western’ in culture than the rest of Romania, because it had been ruled historically by the Habsburgs, not by the Ottoman Turks, which obviously explained its creative success and its work ethic. Cluj was also ‘multicultural’ and therefore ‘open’ as compared to a supposedly monocultural Romania or Eastern Europe,

inhabited as it is by both Hungarian speakers and Romanian speakers. One of our more senior interlocutors bluntly but perceptively claimed that "outsourcing is what you get if your leadership destroys both agriculture and industry." But even he sought recourse to culture in order to explain why Cluj should then have become a region-wide champion in the race for IT outsourcing: the Habsburg mental heritage did it. But culture was also called upon to explain blockages: there was "an outsourcing mind-set that did not allow the emergence of a 'product mind-set,'" a mental transition that various top players deemed necessary in order for Cluj to climb up in the chain of value.

Working through the frontlines of value dialectically embedded in this peculiar 'spatial fix,' this chapter explores some of the ways in which outsourcing produces, shelters, divides, and exploits, but also simultaneously animates and inspires digital labor in the postsocialist space. In his classic account of 'de-classed' white-collar workers in Weimar Germany, Siegfried Kracauer (1998) described the grand cafes, cinema palaces and dance halls of Berlin in the early thirties as "shelters for the homeless," where the new salaried masses could forget the fraught contradiction between their middle-class desires and their increasingly proletarian reality. Kracauer would have wished them to run for the shelter of Marxism rather than accept "scraps from the bourgeois kitchen that now end up down below at a reduced price" (ibid.: 103). This chapter picks up such threads of contradiction as they unfold across global and local chains of value, embedded in entangled local and global histories, and moving the spotlight from boomtown to revanchist city, to dropouts and 'bubbles of pampering,' and finally to conflicted intimate zones where even the leftovers, Kracauer's "scraps," cannot but smack of the political.

## **Creatively Outsourcing Social Contradictions**

I don't know what I would have done after graduation, if not for the IT corporations. Probably picking strawberries in Spain. . . . IT is the only area in Romania where you can make a living.

—IT service worker, female, BA Applied Modern Languages,  
MA Translation Studies

Many outsourcing companies treat developers like cattle. You get in line, you get a number assigned to you and then you just churn out code.

—Manager, IT company

Traditional outsourcing is dead. Long live disruptive outsourcing.

—Deloitte 2018

The Covid-19 lockdowns put a spotlight on the essential, yet vulnerable, workers who could not afford the privilege of working from home, exposing deep divisions among and within labor that had previously been obscured in the global routines of capitalism *comme il faut*. In Cluj, at the height of the lockdown (April 2020), when movement within the country and across the European Union was reduced to a mere trickle, the city's tiny international airport was literally flooded by around two thousand people in one day. These were seasonal agricultural workers streaming in from villages all over northwestern Romania to embark on charter flights to Germany, where entire fields of vegetables were beginning to rot in the absence of cheap and exploitable migrant labor from Eastern Europe. There was panicky talk in Brussels about the potential failure of the European harvest 2020. "The asparagus imperative" (Rogozanu and Gabor 2020) instantly trumped the tightly maintained pandemic strictures on movement and social intercourse, graphically exposing the astounding unevenness and inequalities that lie at the core of the EU economy. The photographs of migrant workers packed into the airport also made visible once more to the citizens of Cluj the presence of 'the other Romania,' of provincial abandonment and poverty. While many in Cluj imagined this as a reminder of the ongoing coexistence of two separate cultural worlds in the same country, some understood that the Cluj bubble itself was predicated on precisely this spatial unevenness: fed and maintained by renewable inflows of human energy extracted from the imploding postsocialist provinces—namely, their aspirational youth, seeking escape and a future to believe in.

The images of the crowded Cluj airport, and the dark jokes about white asparagus (Pop 2020), could hardly vie with the omnipresent hashtags of pandemic order and responsibility: #stayathome (#staiacasă). Working from home turned out to be nothing less than a boon for the local IT sector: the transition to remote work was "smooth," leading initially to increased productivity and efficiency, and greater flexibility, as well as cost and risk cuts—new hires were postponed and companies resorted to subcontracting to freelancers, now even into the countryside (Bunduchi and Crișan 2021). Moreover, the pandemic push toward the digitalization of various processes led to growing demand for IT services, so much so that a report on IT outsourcing in Eastern and Central Europe could state blankly that Covid-19 was "a real opportunity" (Emerging Europe 2021: 16).

Ten years after joining the EU in 2007, Romania was found to have experienced among the highest emigration rates in the EU, with 20.6

percent of its working population having moved abroad (largely to other EU countries).<sup>2</sup> The workers crowding Cluj airport on their way to the EU agricultural fields, slaughterhouses, and nursing homes were only the latest surge in an exodus that had profoundly changed the national labor landscape as well as its domestic politics. As one of our interlocutors from Cluj put it, Romania has been busy "exporting its social contradictions."<sup>3</sup>

This is a region-wide experience. Romania, Bulgaria, Poland, and the Baltics have joined the upper league of global labor outmigration together, next to countries like India, Mexico, and the Philippines. Significantly, all these giga-expulsion locations have become leading IT and 'business process' outsourcing destinations for Western capital. The Romanian experience, thus, stands for a recurrent global phenomenon. In open, liberalized emergent economies there is a close social and territorial relation between, on the one hand, large-scale foreign emigration from the provinces, and on the other, booming cities driven by outsourced Western capital exploiting educated, 'smart,' and lucky local youth. In all such places we should expect the presence of a popular sense of bifurcation of the country into two apparently sealed and opposed cultural worlds, a bifurcation that is likely to get aggregated and expressed in a sharply polarized national politics of an often identity-driven kind. In Romania this polarization articulates as productive versus unproductive populations, and as anti-corrupt versus corrupt politics, the two images perfectly overlapping. As one result of such politics, IT labor in Romania has acquired a waiver from income tax, allowing 'productivity to thrive' and produce its assumed 'trickle down' and 'spin-offs.'<sup>4</sup> There is also a low flat tax as an incentive for foreign capital in general. And finally, to fuel 'start-up' development and satisfy the myths of disruption and innovation, corporations are allowed to hire IT labor as 'independent entrepreneurs.' The Cluj IT sector is in many ways an 'enclave economy,' the boundaries of which are maintained by a combined politics of class and identity: disruptive, productive, anti-corrupt, self-propelled by the purity of talent and effort.

After fifteen years of IT boom, Cluj, thus, stands as a stark urban exception in a landscape of abandonment: an oasis of employment, a "middle-class bubble,"<sup>5</sup> a "magnet city" for internal migration, the quintessential university town, a hotspot for the creative and knowledge economy, the only East European city to be shortlisted by the EU for "the capital of innovation award" in 2020. As a city council brochure proclaims (and *The Economist* confirms), "Cluj is the most attractive city in Romania." This attractiveness is about

economic growth, employment, cultural vitality, civic engagement, public dynamism, and all-around friendliness. The city government is rhetorically committed to generating an urban environment that is appropriate to the “high value” creative classes it seeks to accommodate. Still under the spell of Richard Florida (2002), and oblivious to his legion of critics (such as Lovink and Rossiter 2007; Mould 2018; and Peck 2020) or his own recent turnaround (Florida 2017), Cluj, in the words of its mayor, strives to encourage “technology, tolerance, and talent” with a view to fostering growth and innovation. His chosen urban interlocutors are Silicon Valley and Boston.<sup>6</sup> The emphasis on innovation, technical as well as social, perseveres despite the overwhelming factual dependence of the local economy on outsourcing from the West, a dependence that inevitably poses limits: with very few exceptions, actual product development in IT is mere aspiration.<sup>7</sup>

Cluj, as its more sober observers easily acknowledge, continues to specialize on arbitration on labor costs. Western outsourcing firms bill the labor of local IT developers for 5,000 USD to their Western clients (clients who often do not know that the actual work is being done in Romania). The local developer is paid around 2,000 USD, which leaves a lot for the necessary support labor that can be paid decidedly less, all the way down to 500 USD for service night work. This is how various local insiders summarized the Cluj equation for us in 2018 (while 2023 numbers are adjusted upwards for inflation, the logic is similar). Cluj sells cheap labor hours, a mere “numbers game,” as the critics repeat, “monkey business.” If local capital could claim property rights to a well-selling product, they would be able to sell the same quantity of expended labor over and over again, like Silicon Valley and Boston. As long as the opposite is the case, Cluj has no choice but to labor over and over again for any next unit of output sold.

Major efforts are now being made in Cluj toward designing, marketing, and selling that desired product. Some do so for the under-resourced but growing Romanian market, including the emerging market of Romanian ‘smart cities’ in which Cluj plays a leading role. They thus escape the harshest pressures of outsourcing and labor arbitrage that rule over the majority of firms. One famous enterprise, UiPath, the second Romanian ‘unicorn,’ now registered in New York, sells crucial business software to half the Fortune 500 list of multinationals. Significantly, the firm grew from within the multiple connections between the IT world of Cluj and its American Romanian diaspora. It maintains a relatively small development unit of some



eighty engineers in Cluj (as of 2019), and is seeking to double that if local Romanian skills allow, which the director thinks is still open to question.<sup>8</sup> But elsewhere in the business, "a lack of product mindset," as the critics say, make it hard to actually develop that product that can be sold over and over. Others argue that a lack of deep research is to blame. But these obvious absences are all the predictable results of its specific spatial fix: Cluj is where the cheap labor is, not where the rich final market is, or where globally protected property titles are held. Access to and knowledge of that final market and its fast-moving demands is the usual prerogative of their Western headquarters, intermediaries, and clients. No outsourcing location has found an easy path out of the global unevenness and hierarchies of value from which it arose.

This IT fueled fantasy of 'creative-driven' and future-oriented urban development persists, despite two further major contradictions. First, the fast-rising housing and living costs that put Cluj ahead of Bucharest and make it one of the most expensive cities for living in Southeastern Europe, fomenting not only deep urban inequalities but also serving to transfer a substantial chunk of any broad-based local wage growth for its workers inevitably toward its landlords. Indeed, there is a noted tendency for local entrepreneurs in IT who are not part of global conglomerates to switch their capital after their first or second round of accumulation from labor arbitrage and the cumbersome management of productivity within highly competitive global value chains to the more comfortable rent taking from local real estate. The research undertaken by housing activists (such as *Social Houses Now*) draws attention to the exorbitant costs of housing in the city: in 2020 at 1,800 euros per square meter (rising to 2,228 euros in 2023), it forces many students and employees to live in overcrowded and overvalued conditions, to work multiple jobs in order to cover basic rent and living costs, or to submit to hellish commutes from the metropolitan area—two hours in the rush hour for 30 kilometers up and down is not rare (Troc 2019; Vincze et al. 2020). Meanwhile, investment in public and social housing—a sector drastically reduced since the mass housing privatizations of the early postsocialist era—has been entirely cut since 2015. The 'creative city,' the mayor argues, does not need it. Activists suspect him of being in cahoots with real estate capital, and forced evictions have now become the norm. Cluj is the Romanian city with the largest concentrated Roma population, quartered in the infamous ghetto of Pata-Rât on a waste-site near the airport, just outside the city (Vincze et al. 2018).

Secondly, there is the very real uncertainty of an outsourcing bubble that could implode any time, with transnational capital flying off without notice. This happened with Nokia around 2010. The Finnish transnational had started a major investment for a smart phone factory in Cluj just before the financial crisis struck. A few thousand ‘high value’ jobs were announced, and they were already hiring. But Nokia was forced to write off the whole investment in order to save its Helsinki capital base (Zinca 2011; Mihaly 2015). Moreover, major Western outsourcers in Cluj, like UK-based Endava, are steadily opening up cheaper and more competitive locations in countries further East, such as Ukraine, Macedonia, and Albania, but also Morocco, Mexico, and Venezuela. And then there is India lurking in the background with more than 3 million workers in its IT sector in Bangalore and Hyderabad, where labor is still 20 percent cheaper than in Cluj. ‘Near shoring’ circles say that technically the Indian outsourcers are less good than the Romanians, and ‘culturally’ they are less proximate to the West, which is said to put strain on the continuous long-distance communication that is going on with clients. But what is the ultimate exchange value of those differences? We constantly heard that wage rises in Cluj are on an unsustainable upward curve. If claims toward greater prosperity continue, it is publicly said, the goose with the golden eggs will be killed. Insiders are warning that that moment is fast approaching, even though measured in a human lifetime it has only just started.

Enabled by information and communication technologies, the outsourcing waves of the 2010s thus found the nearshore of Cluj an irresistible location: a cheap young aspirational workforce, many with good basic technical training grounded in a local history of socialist computing, excellent English skills, and in a geopolitical and cultural comfort zone within the EU. The basics of IT outsourcing in Cluj continue to reflect this focus on labor arbitrage and low-value activities: the industry is still often described as a “service factory” with little autonomy or control over the tasks received on “the new assembly line.” Just as in India, the paradox of IT outsourcing is that it stimulates a popular imaginary of technical and social innovation while training and employing a workforce trapped between the calculation of billable hours and fast delivery times (Aneesh 2006; Upadhyaya 2016). A local outsourcing survey (Andras 2017) sought to separate Eastern Europe from South Asia, and emphasizes cheap labor there versus creative labor here, while pointing to the higher added value and forward-looking practices now being developed in Cluj IT and

business process outsourcing (BPO). In the best local enterprises, something of this promise seems to be actually happening. But perhaps as a consequence, we also learnt about growing numbers of cases of well-groomed local specialist employees being transferred into the Western parts of corporations. Fix investment in the local economy from German multinationals such as Bosch and Siemens is also growing, as is product development. There is some hope beyond the outsourcing bubble. But no one has the illusion that it could be working for all: there are always dropouts and leftovers.

## Dropout Syndrome

People in my team have BAs. They usually started working during their studies and thus missed many courses. Even if they have degrees, they had interrupted ones: they can be assimilated to dropouts in that sense. . . . I consider my colleagues here as functional dropouts because they cannot read and compute.

—Female team coordinator, PhD Sociology

There are only so many people who have an IT university degree; we see them in internships, and we take those who fit our company. Many more do not have university degrees. If we really want to grow, fast and big, then we need to look at people with no software studies.

—Female HR specialist, PhD Philosophy

Since 2010, the number of IT employees in Cluj has almost quadrupled, reaching over twenty thousand in 2020 (Petrovici and Mare 2020).<sup>9</sup> Computing science departments in the various local universities are eager to adapt to corporate needs, while their students are keen to plunge into the IT labor market long before graduation, even in their first year. Students in the social sciences and humanities are not left behind, as they too flock to any opportunities to get involved in the lower tiers of the IT labor market, which hardly require specialist skills, and in fact predominate. Such entry-level jobs outside the core of IT developers do transmit the promise of a potential career in the proliferating HR, service, analyst, and project management jobs within the sector. Workers are being offered training and in-house courses, as well as impressive day-to-day support from their personal coaches, managers, and direct colleagues. Anything they do not yet know, they quickly learn to find it on the web. IT companies compete in offering attractive benefit packages to their turnover-prone employees: high salaries relative to the Romanian

average, private health insurance, gym, pool or sauna subscriptions and countless opportunities for further learning (in hard and soft skills but also in “life skills” such as yoga, meditation, etiquette, wine tasting, etc.). Even low-tier jobs in service, support, and nontechnical areas are attractive: slaving away on the night shift at a service desk on a full-time salary of 500 euros is equal to the Romanian average wage (as of 2018) or a teacher’s pension, but comes with the added promise of a potential professional career in the ultimate sector of the future.<sup>10</sup> This is clearly preferable to picking strawberries in Spain, harvesting asparagus in Germany, or caring for the Italian elderly, activities that are imagined as mere temporary escapes for the ‘other Romania.’ Among Cluj IT workers there is the omnipresent praise for ‘constant learning’ and challenge. This here is the ‘real education,’ ‘it is never boring’: lived mantras that reflect the very material market compulsion for constant adaptation, reinvention, and reorganization to which the sector, not sitting on much capital of its own, is even more consistently exposed than similar disruptive sectors in the West. Those workers who internalize these pressures best and know how to weaponize them are the ones selected for longer-term careers, and they sometimes rise up remarkably fast in the flat and similarly dynamic organizational hierarchies.

The IT world in Cluj is often described as a pyramid with a very broad base, a narrow and low middle, and a thin but extended peak. The top earns globally average wages all the way up to 10,000 euros a month or more. A few thousand developers get somewhere between 2,000 and 4,000; but below them salaries decline fast and close in on median levels that may be around 1,000 or lower, depending on the type of firm one is looking at (2018 figures, but the pyramid structure has not significantly altered in 2023). Some 80 percent of personnel may be in the lowest tier. Experienced product managers, business analysts, and HR personnel, who all play active roles in the organization and production of IT, rarely reach above 1,700 euros according to our discussions (2018), and most remain below. This is also true for positions that have global functions within a transnational corporation. Some well-trained and experienced people in their early thirties are running all-Romanian programs for large international consultancies such as Accenture, but their income rarely seems to reach above Western poverty lines, underlining the bargaining power of international capital in Romania.

Many people further note that while women occupy almost 40 percent of jobs in Romanian IT, which is higher than anywhere else in Europe, they do get paid less. These inequalities are liable to

get only deeper with over half the local economy considered vulnerable to automation (Petrovici and Faje 2019). Truly middle-class lives, with an apartment in the city, are led by couples who both work in qualified roles in IT. "Marriage is the only solution," one interlocutor admitted to us with dismay. But many couples break up. Corporate demands on time and energy are high, working hours are long, and there is a lot of new learning to do in one's 'spare time.' The pressures of childcare create extra stress, sometimes only relieved by the help of a grandmother on a pension. Is it coincidental that Cluj seems to encourage explorations into 'pluri-amorous' relationships among its thirty-something-year-olds?

Mayer Boc's rhetoric evokes a powerful illusion of Cluj as a 'creative city,' and his electorate clearly revel in that story. Even while enjoying the liveliness and dynamism of the local scene, and partly buying into the narratives of its city marketing, many of our interlocutors reject that attractive epithet. For an increasing number of citizens their daily reality is at least as well described by Neill Smith's notion of the 'revanchist city' (Smith 1996).<sup>11</sup> Classical ground rent drives its economy possibly more so than the productivity and prosperity of its IT workers. High reproduction costs push people relentlessly into markets and into self-exploitation in order to reach something like an adequate income at some point in the future. Their efforts and their wages then further fuel the ground rent. While in Cluj some IT entrepreneurs have reportedly been switching their investments into real estate, in a city like Iași it is the real estate capitalists who seek to develop the IT industry so as to secure sufficient demand for their office developments. The two, the productivity and the ground rent, then, are mutually reinforcing and together describe two of the three essential elements of the 'Cluj machine.'

Education and class, mutually entangled, form the third element. An economist and director of one of the largest outsourcing establishments in Cluj, one of our interlocutors, has argued that the fast rise of Cluj in IT production in the 2010s as compared to other cities in Romania must be explained by having the highest density of students (Surdea-Blaga 2018). It is the ultimate student city, with around 80,000 in a population of almost 400,000. He knows what he is talking about intimately, because he has years of experience in managing the recurrent inflow of new young workers into his own 'plantation.' As an economist, however, he falls back on quantitative data and comparative arguments about correlations, while failing to put the finger on the exact social relations and dynamics involved. As anthropologists we feel confident to say more.

The average age in IT production sites in Cluj seems to vary from a low median of 22 years in the big multinational outsourcers to around 28 years in the more complex ones. Many of the workers that we interviewed started in low-paid entry jobs in the night shift, or with flexible hours while studying. They found it impossible to sustain themselves in the city with limited parental and state/university support. The best students in Romania get a state stipendium, but the great majority of students find it hard to access sufficient funds for full-time study. The underinvestment of the state into its higher education sector produces a large, fresh, young, and flexible working class for the least paid jobs in the outsourcing sectors, receiving initial wages of 700–900 euros (in 2023; the national average net salary in 2023 is 900 euros). Often, they begin as volunteers in order to learn the basic skills, tipped by their friends or kin who are already in there. The IT and BPO sectors yearly suck in thousands of students who come to Cluj with hopes of professional development in the social sciences and humanities, but who cannot support themselves in those careers. Not surprisingly, quite a few of our interviewees ultimately dropped out of their classes from sheer fatigue and depression. Our interviews, predictably, also indicate that students from middle-class urban backgrounds—or, even better, those born and raised in Cluj itself, with the best schools in the region—not only seem to have greater chances to claim state stipends, they also receive more financial support from their parents and are more likely to actually finish their degrees. Educational neoliberalism in Romania, combined with an unaffordable ‘revanchist city,’ thus serves to funnel, year after year, thousands of aspiring working-class students from the provinces into the urban ‘service plantations’ of the outsourcing industry. The Cluj machine feeds from the dreams of the young adolescents escaping ‘the other Romania.’

Directors and HR personnel made it very clear to us that the IT sector in Cluj not just thrives on all these non-engineers, it actually needs them. It needs them for three essential reasons. First, in order to contain salary levels, ‘converted’ university dropouts or social science and humanities BAs and MAs are considerably cheaper than credentialed computer and IT scientists, and they can be trained to do the less tech-heavy work on human resource management, project management, infrastructure maintenance, website maintenance, testing, communication with clients, marketing, and even ‘front-end development.’ Secondly, they are actually better on the communication-heavy ‘relational tasks’ because they appear to be “less nerdy.” Thirdly, the effort to move into richer service packages for clients—

'the disruptive outsourcing' proclaimed by the big consultancies—depends to a great extent precisely on the nontechnically educated. But here is the bottom line: for systematic cost-containment, the young university dropouts, no matter what they were once trying to study or become, are essential. As many of our higher-up interlocutors emphasized, degrees are positively irrelevant; what is required are "functional illiterates" with a willingness to submit to training and reconversion, work long hours, and keep up with it. The heroic dropout of Silicon Valley fame, who quits studying in order to strike big in the app world, is replaced here by the involuntary school dropout whose value lies in endless malleability, flexibility, and a capacity to labor.

It is tempting to keep thinking with the figure of the dropout a bit longer, dropout now in a somewhat larger sense. It is broadly known that labor turnover within the IT and BPO economy of Cluj is of epic proportions as compared to the West. It is around 25 percent per year, meaning that, on average, half of all workers leave their firm within two years (2018 figures); the best reputed firms have a percentage in the low twenties, the worst around thirty. Part of this is explained by the sheer dynamism of a boom-type of development that is just ten years old and transforming local society deeply. After two years, the 22-year-old dropout from sociology or theater studies, who is now trained in basic skills for the lower tiers of the production process in IT outsourcing, applies to a fast-growing new firm for a higher wage. Thousands of such switches happen every year. Or a 25-year-old computer science BSc now a trained developer, has acquired fame in the networks and is headhunted by one of the firms that seek higher value in product development. Dozens of such transfers are going on every season. But a significant though hardly ever discussed part of labor turnover is young working-class university dropouts, who had little choice but to sustain themselves via IT work, leaving their jobs, perhaps because in the end they remembered they had actually wanted something else for their lives than hard work and long hours for a corporation; or who simply collapse from exhaustion and need time to rethink and reboot; or who abruptly decide to emigrate to Western Europe where some of their friends are, for example to try once more for an MA in a field that one really likes, but this time in Denmark or Norway, with support from the local state that Romania denies its students. It is our claim, then, that another form of dropping out may well explain a good part of the labor turnover phenomenon so characteristic of the Cluj boom. How much might it explain? One third, one half, more? It is hard to say,

because in Cluj, not surprisingly, one also tends to hear class-biased readings of the local labor turnover syndrome, emphasizing the stories of the aspiring people who are doing well out of it, and who remain in view.

In this transformational, high-pressure, outsourcing context, it appears almost imperative that the generation of value, to a considerable extent embodied in the transitive figure of the dropout, be mystified by the form of creativity. It is no wonder then that IT workers are often described as “pampered” and “entitled,” their lives unfolding in a tightly insulated, cozy bubble. Creativity, and the so-called pampering that goes with it, may be merely illusive but for many it is no less compelling. Creative outsourcing is the Cluj version of “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011).

## Bubble Consciousness

What’s the point in going home when you love it at the office?

—Business analyst, female, BA Sociology

I come into the office at 9 a.m., I leave at 6 p.m., and my whole day is spent in English and in a very particular kind of office environment: it’s like a parallel world. All day long, I interact with Western clients, Western business procedures; it’s like living in a different country.

—Shared service center manager, BA Economics

Going out of their bubble is a challenge for creatives. Outside the creative bubble, on the periphery, life is not just play and fun but also power relations and authorities

—Lala Panait<sup>12</sup>

“The promise of the Romanian Silicon Valley story drives many new developments, and brings new work models and corporate cultures, from horizontal co-working environments to managerial hierarchies, work-from-home shifts, or office-space architecture. With them, work dynamics are also changing.”<sup>13</sup> So announces the exhibition PPM#5, opened in October 2020 by the curatorial collective *Aici Acolo*, whose trademark is the organization of pop-up exhibitions in the unused or abandoned spaces of Cluj. One of the exhibits, *Noul Mono Bloc* (The New Mono Block), is a satirical promotional material for a new real-estate development, an entire building dedicated to “work and only work,” which compresses living, office, leisure, and consumption spaces, thereby saving the time and energy of the resident workers



who have no need to ever get out. The artist (also a member of the anarchist publishing house *Pagine Libere*) designed it as a holding pen for "the pool of precarious labor meant for boring and unimaginative work." As a structure of containment, the mono block collapses work, home, and life into a single space defined by its sealed interiority, which, by denying the urban outside with all its problems, can sustain the fiction that "everything is, in fact, fine." This might very well be the inverse of "the social factory" of Italian autonomist Marxism (Gill and Pratt 2008; Campbell 2018), with the whole of the urban and social reproduction subsumed by capital (also, Kalb 1997), walled in and evacuated of the initial political optimism of that tradition: post-Fordist immaterial labor has neither escaped the laws of capitalist value nor has it unleashed the presumably revolutionary potentials of the multitude. Instead, the political subject has taken shelter in a bubble that promises mere comfort.

With their clean lines, airy and light interiors, transparent and glossy surfaces, IT offices are a far cry from the socialist factories on whose ruins they are built. But the difference goes beyond design: it is a matter of workplace environment and corporate culture, imported from global hi-tech hotspots like Silicon Valley, oftentimes as a joyfully accepted form of discursive dumping that mimics the inequalities of the outsourcing value chain that sustains it (see also Nadeem 2011). In contrast to the public sector or Romanian-owned companies, the offices of multinational corporations are attractive because they emphasize transparency and respect for employees, while downplaying hierarchy and rigid management. "At the multinationals, everything is shiny. . . . The workplace is humane. Nobody shouts at you; nobody acts in an authoritarian or bossy manner. Everyone is considerate. We're all people, we all work, we act like civilized, nice people" (service delivery, female, BA European Studies). The sparse design livened by occasional splashes of vivid color—beanbags, posters, and, of course, logos—is reflected back into organizational forms that are "lean," "agile," and "dynamic." The sense of belonging experienced by IT workers, the feeling of "being at home from the start," is enhanced by the constant teamwork and the responsibility they feel toward people with whom they work closely, sharing space, meetings, and ceremonies, particularly so in the framework of Agile software development with its collective rituals of 'sprint' and 'scrum.' Often, this relationship is expressed in hyperbolic terms of attachment—"I love my office"; "I'm in love with my company"; "This is heaven on earth"—that do not simply index the effectiveness of employee branding operations in the media, with

their emphasis on enthusiasm and passion at work, but also mark the distances (spatial and conceptual) traveled by these young workers while parsing the horizon of their realistic alternatives in Europe and Romania.

Ping-pong championships, table football, guitar playing, swimming, Buddhist stress management, yoga, therapy, massage, wine tasting, ceramic painting, karaoke, cooking lessons, book clubs, theater—this is just a sample of activities taking place in the offices of large IT companies in Cluj. One might be justified in assuming the office has become a vast playground for the “no-collar” workforce (Ross 2004). Indeed, it is this apparent leisure richness, coupled with the high salaries exempted from tax and the multitude of perks, that prompts the (self) characterization of IT workers as “pampered” (*răsfățați*). The comparisons drawn by the interviewees with the working lives of their parents and siblings point out the deeply felt discrepancies between their pampering and the bareness and hardships of socialist factory life, and postsocialist underemployment amid deindustrialization and migrant labor. In doing so, they distinguish not just among the gradations in a range of amenities—from having a fridge or an ergonomic chair at work to the luxury of being able to choose between twenty different kinds of tea, or between gym and pool subscriptions. But implicitly, they rank kinds of labor that they can, in a sense, also outsource—from having a full-time cleaning lady at the office, who saves them the trouble of washing coffee cups; to having the attention of mentors, career coaches, and personal development specialists who assist them in the endless labor of “bringing in value” by setting them on the path to “becoming,” “improving,” “learning,” and “growing as a person” (see also Gog and Simionca 2020).

Similarly, corporate social responsibility (one of the most successful non-monetary benefits, alongside flexible hours and working from home, in countering employee turnover) externalizes to the corporation the job of curating by committee the forms of acceptable social and cultural activism. While Christmas packages for children and tree planting are universally approved, the stakes become controversial when employees contemplate interventions in the field of identity politics (Is it ok to support LGBTQ rights?),<sup>14</sup> or programs that smack of ‘social assistance’ rather than cultural or educational uplifting (mostly in the form of coding instruction for children and teenagers, who will, after all, become the future labor pool).

There is, in fact, a suspicion of the social, fueled by the omnipresent narrative of an inefficient and corrupt state that steals via taxa-

tion the hard-won earnings of IT workers and passes them on to the non-deserving folks inhabiting 'the other Romania.' Even for many people who identify themselves on the Left, the moral equation is stark: the corporation is good, the state is bad. "It's the corporation that pays for the roof over my head and for my medical treatment, not the state" (service desk analyst, female, MA Translation). Notwithstanding the factual tax exemption for IT workers, a common complaint is that they are being conned into paying "the salaries of all these state employees" and for "the upkeep of all these illiterates who don't work," even while lamenting the sad state of public education and health. The Romanian version of moralized neoliberalism (Muehlebach 2012) is built on a stark sense of meritocracy that cherishes the productivity of the IT worker and rejects redistribution toward "the lazy" in favor of "a moralist bubble on the cultural plane" (State 2019: 80). The social Darwinism (Kalb 2019) implicit in this moralist bubble is disavowed by the triple commitment to anti-corruption, meritocracy, and good governance. In the process, class and inequality get displaced by culture and identity politics.

In a March 2021 debate on a Facebook group for people looking to rent an apartment in Cluj, almost five hundred people posted comments in a string dedicated to the disparity between rents and salaries in the city. Is Cluj affordable only for IT workers? Should that be so? A sharp divide emerged between those with net salaries below 800 euros and those above; those who failed short of the mark were advised to upskill, work hard, and stop being lazy, or to simply take themselves off to a cheaper city. It is not surprising that most of those doing the advising worked in IT. They then came under a barrage of accusations framed not in terms of classes, but of bubbles: "Sorry to burst your bubble;" "Get out of your own bubble;" and "You're too happy in your little bubble." Notwithstanding the self-ironic usage of the term—when turned inward to familiar social and cultural routines within the limits of a shared urban enclave—bubbles burst with aggression when directed outward. Bubble consciousness grows with the alignment of productive, progressive, and anti-corrupt IT workers who feel secure in their disdain for unproductive, reactionary, and corrupt others. Bubbles are where class fragments along lines of culture, value, and hierarchy.

From the very beginning of fieldwork, we were struck by this insistent talk of bubbles: creative, IT, and activist. The overwhelming concern with bubbles is not merely a recognition of the speculative regime of outsourcing labor—in other words, the existence of

Cluj as just another fragile bubble on a global chain of value (but see below). Migrating from the social media coinage of “filter bubbles,” it has evolved into a social and cultural recognition of the propagation of enclaves that are comfortable in their isolation. In this context at least, within the bubble is complacent coziness while without is anxious torment. Labor consists in defending the thin bubble membranes and maintaining the illusion of pampering.<sup>15</sup> In a wider sense, bubble consciousness defines the whole postsocialist history of the city, launched in 1992 with Caritas, a massive pyramid scheme that inducted Cluj citizens into the possibilities of endless financial accumulation and unstoppable growth (Verdery 1995). As a local artist and activist, Szakats (2021) notes perceptively, Caritas was the first postsocialist exercise in the normalization of the Great Public Fiction of Cluj. Unsurprisingly, in 2021, City Hall denied permission for an artistic exhibit about Caritas in the city center, as this would have only served as a reminder about losses, extraction, entrenched inequalities, and burst bubbles.

## The Politics of Leftovers

### *The Cheesecake Meme*

In response to a question about participation in political protests (this interview happened in the wake of anti-corruption demonstrations), Mihai, a support engineer and self-described “IT janitor, poet, and ironist,” veers instead to the possibilities of office food leftovers. As “political opinions take time,” he would rather invest his energy in scrounging cooking oil and leftover milk from work, “much like they used to steal onions from the collective farm.” Leftovers enable him to save on food expenses when he is strapped for money, but also to make a virtue out of necessity by playing with the combinatorial aesthetics of repurposing residues, in a parody of corporate resilience. The pinnacle of his efforts was “a proof-of-concept cheesecake” made entirely from leftover ingredients:

Pretzels ground into biscuit and brown sugar from work with a bit of milk, turned into cottage cheese and whisked until it was creamy. On top of everything, apple jam. This was at a time when everyone was disenchanted with the lack of salary raises. Such a gesture of beautiful defiance instilled courage into my co-workers, and I became a small local hero. But then came HR and took me to task: Why are you bragging about this? And I was like: I did it for the memes, you know?

### *Pizza and Profit*

Looking back at his attempt to organize a strike at his former cake shop, Vlad—artist and IT support worker—uses the ritual of handing out pizza leftovers to question the redistribution of profit in his current IT company:

In the two years I've been here, the department drew in more clients and more profit. But nothing goes to the workers who made it possible. This is what annoys me, the difference between what we do and what they represent to the clients. When they want to attract a new client, they have meetings with food, drinks. . . then they come to us with the leftovers and say "Guess what? Free pizza, guys!" I see everyone getting up and going into the kitchen for a slice of pizza. I look at them falling for the same tricks the PSD [Social Democratic Party] is using when they hand out free plastic buckets in the electoral campaign. I can't accept this. You want to buy me with a slice of pizza? I piss on your pizza! I don't need it. They buy us, like we are pigs at the trough. But maybe my experiences and opinions are too extreme. When I tell my colleagues this, they laugh but they still take the free pizza. It's incredible. The problem is that nobody thinks like me.

In the two vignettes above, Mihai and Vlad are both converts to IT, in their late twenties, working in support jobs for large outsourcing companies, subsidiaries of multinationals. Their biographies overlap to a great extent: they come from working-class families (parents were factory workers) in small Romanian towns, and they are the first generation to get a university education (Mihai dropped out after two years of Philology, while Vlad got a degree in Political Science). They were drawn to Cluj by the promise of steady employment after trying factory work, seasonal service jobs (including abroad), and short-term gigs. The IT jobs are seen as a route to survival, while their passions lie respectively in writing poetry and drawing. Both would probably agree they inhabit the emerging global class of the cybertariat (Huws 2014) or cyber-proletariat (Dyer-Witheford 2015).

Mihai and Vlad are part of a growing population of young university dropouts and graduates going through professional reconversion to IT. They learned on their own or on the job, unlike most people who pay for reconversion courses and/or accept unpaid internships. They are the leftovers of a labor market that has very little room for poets or visual artists or, for that matter, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, theologians or philosophers. Drawn to IT by the expectation of high salaries, the futuristic horizon of technology, and the cosmopolitan promise of 'siliconization,' they rarely manage to ascend to the coveted status of 'developer' (at most in front-end

development), staffing instead the lower-tier and lower-paid support and service sectors of IT, software, and game testing, as well as the nontechnical positions in human resources, marketing, and business analysis (with the possibility of advancing to service or project managers). As Vlad put it, “We’re the field laborers, the barons are in coding. We’re the plebs, sweating it off.” He echoes here the perspective of many other support workers who see themselves as “modern slaves” toiling on “the new assembly line” and getting “half the pay they deserve” for performing work that is “both challenging and grinding” and with none of the creativity accolades bestowed on code developers (who refuse to see the ingenuity that goes into the repair and maintenance of support infrastructures). Many quit after two or three years, overcome by the punishing rhythm of night shifts, the pressure of being constantly on-call, the grueling volume of work, and the unfulfilled promises of salary raises and advancement. When they do quit, it is often after severe episodes of insomnia, eating disorders, depression, or sheer “psychic exhaustion” (as Vlad says).

Those who manage to convert all the way to coding work have to put in extra effort, time, and energy in assimilating and keeping up with technology changes. For them, the IT imperative of lifelong learning starts as an uphill struggle to reimagine themselves as analytical, algorithmic thinkers capable of organizing code and life into a logical progression of tasks: “Everything is cast as a task: work task, gym task. I have daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly goals. I’m always planning. I plan my every mood” (tester, BA Public Administration). This is all in the hope that fragmented tasks can eventually be reassembled into projects of value—with themselves as primary value bearing subjects and ruthless curators: “I’ve reduced my circle of friends so that I strictly have only people that I can learn from and who can learn from me. I’m trying to extract value and to give value in every interaction I have” (front-end developer, BA Political Science).

The constant demand for labor in IT, familiar from other outsourcing contexts such as India (Upadhyia 2016), has generated an entire local ecology of reconversion opportunities in Cluj—informal IT schools, coding academies, and company-organized trainings—that overlap with and feed off the abundance of digital resources for online learning, from Google and Reddit to tutorials and online courses, as well as more specialized repositories of coding knowledge such as the indispensable Stack Overflow or Github. Reconversion is more than just another instance of ‘digital catch-up’ or ‘reskilling’ meant to carve out a future for work in the wake of impend-

ing automation. It is, however, deeply connected to this overarching discourse of digitalization as the key to social inclusion, resilience, innovation, and, increasingly so, urban governance.<sup>16</sup>

Shying away from outright placement, some of these IT reconversion sites also act as labor clearinghouses, mediating between their graduates and locally based companies, especially as the mentors are themselves IT workers. The courses answer to market requirements, from the initially popular testing and Java to the currently trendy Python, RPA, and UX design. This adaptation is reflected also in the screening procedures, which select for "proactivity, creativity, flexibility, good communication and English skills" (the same criteria companies advertise for), rejecting 60 percent of the candidates in an attempt to keep only those fit for IT work, but also "to keep things clean" by weeding out problematic psychological profiles ("narcissists and manic-depressives") considered unfit for teamwork and sustained productivity.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, reconversion is formatted to the specifics of IT outsourcing, so much so that the design of some of the courses follows the workflows of developer teams sprinting towards delivery, and emphasizes the modular philosophies of management (Agile) and programming (object-oriented).<sup>18</sup>

In the process, IT converts are taught to abstract: they are initiated into algorithmic thinking, the logical sequences of pseudocode, the prompts of code editors and the "abstractions" of OOP, but they are also shown how to abstract *from*—that is, how to ignore all that is irrelevant to a given project, focusing only on what can be used now, and reused in future projects. IT labor is abstract indeed, not particularly in the sense of "immaterial" (Lazzarato 1996), but rather in its navigation of a series of layers of abstraction, and the forms of compartmentalization and bracketing these rely upon. What is left out—the leftovers—is any sense of the wider structures in which these abstractions travel, or the kinds of politics they might be answerable to.<sup>19</sup> Becoming socialized in abstraction goes hand in hand with the abiding suspicion of the social.

What we call the politics of leftovers recapitulates and condenses the perspective of these recent IT converts—poised between precarity and pampering—as "global value subjects" (Dyer-Witthoford 2001) equipped to address not just the imperative of added value but also its distribution across the global chains. They understand that outsourcing exists within a framework of inequality that captures locally produced value, turning Cluj into a cost center of low-complexity and low-value activities—the leftovers—while the core, high-value competences are kept further up the chain (Hardy and Hollinshead

2016; Guga and Spataru 2021). This “experience of differential valuing of labor” (Vora 2015: 69) turns workers like Mihai and Vlad into contemporary gleaners who cannot afford to ignore the remainders and scraps at the periphery (Bize 2020), even while they ironically repurpose them (as they themselves were repurposed from artists to coders) or reject them in impotent rage and resentment. Of course, it is also possible to grab them gracefully, with the kind of pragmatic determination that recycles resilience into elegance, as Maria (IT marketing, BA Sociology) does when she “splurges” to buy clothing from Zara outlets rather than buying secondhand. After all, the downtown of Cluj is ringed with countless outlet stores and second-hand clothing shops brimming with the leftovers of global brands and last year’s fashions.

## Conclusion

Contemporary accounts of creative economies emphasize the increasing tendency of labor to spill over: it can no longer be contained within the workplace and work time, or even within organizational structures. Bolstered by digital technologies, the discourse of flexibility threatens not just to blur but to erase the distinctions between “the private and the public, free time and work time, exploitation and emancipation, alienation and fulfilment, and work and play” (Bilic, Primorac, Valtysson 2018: 13; see also Gregg 2011). The new workplace is a sprawling complex of physical and digital spaces that aggregate into hubs, clusters, and networks (Gill, Pratt, and Virani 2019; Zukin 2020) along urban lines and across the uneven intersections of global chains of production and value. Increasingly so, labor is displaced to the non-place of automation, floating away in ghostly fashion into the seemingly virtual infrastructures of cloud computing under the surveillance of robotic processes (Moore 2018; Gray and Suri 2019).

As you enter the UiPath organized RPA League Kick-off (RPA: Robotic Process Automation), you are faced with a large poster of an astronaut perched on a chunk of slowly disintegrating matter, gazing complacently into the cosmos: “Getting a sci-fi job title is no longer science fiction.” Another one depicts a suited-up figure overlooking an urban palimpsest where the recognizable landscape of Cluj is consumed by futuristic visions of glowing light, a sanitized Blade Runner metropolis: “Join the RPA League to become an Automaton Overlord.” The conference hall of the Cluj Hub co-working space





**Figure 7.2.** Cluj with new offices in background. © Oana Mateescu and Don Kalb

is filled with students and IT workers eager to sign up for the RPA League—the free teaching platform provided by UiPath—and to share into the success story of the first Romanian unicorn.<sup>20</sup> The presentations by the staff of the newly opened UiPath office in Cluj emphasize the potential of robotic process automation “to reboot work” by eliminating all the repetitive and lower-value tasks, and thus freeing humans to be creative. “Work is history.” Of course, this bright future requires immediate initiation into the mysteries of RPA which, we are told, is accessible even to people without coding knowledge, and will soon become an indispensable digital skill, much as Microsoft Office was once considered. In an interview with the head of the UiPath office in Cluj, he elaborates on the impact that RPA can have on “the paradox of creativity”—the split between IT engineers and other people in Cluj—by allowing people outside the field of IT to do automation intuitively, and reach for “the Holy Grail of tech work.” IT reconversion programs might provide you with coding skills, but these will soon be outdated (via the automation of front-end programming); by contrast, “with RPA you can do anything” and, at the same time, be shielded from the fear that your job will be automated. In this spirit, UiPath offers courses for

the universities in the city; indeed, their RPA platform has recently become the core of an entrepreneurship and innovation scholarship at the largest university in Cluj, luring students with the promise of “high-income skills” and “unfireable jobs.”<sup>21</sup>

Mihai and Vlad are more attuned to the politics of leftovers. Also, perhaps, their support jobs are first in line for automation, in their case via cloud computing. Mihai, with four years more experience on the job, is keenly aware of the successive waves of abstraction transforming and potentially deskilling or eliminating work: “The IT bubble in Cluj will partially burst, everything that is IT support entry level. Because it’s moved to the cloud, it’s someone else’s business now. You need less-qualified people, since the infrastructure that was previously hosted on physical machines has now become a virtual machine, delivered as a service.” The effect of labor arbitrage in outsourcing is usually a redivision of labor; in fact, Peck (2017: 204–9) sees the basic charge of the global outsourcing complex as “the decomposition, migration, and recombination of tasks” followed by standardization and deskilling, which in their turn pave the way for automation. When workers like Mihai and Vlad (and their employers) imagine their futures, it is as “new age janitors,” tending to software robots or training algorithms, fighting over the scraps of labor left after the latest enclosures of cloud platforms.

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## Notes

1. There is already a growing literature that explores the regimes of such urban laboratories: for example, Biagioli and Lepinay 2019; Gill, Pratt and Virani 2019; and Zukin 2020. On Cluj, see McElroy 2020.
2. Retrieved 30 March 2021 from <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/210481530907970911/pdf/128064-SCD-PUBLIC-P160439-RomaniaSCDBackgroundNoteMigration.pdf>.
3. Personal communication with Dana Domșodi, December 2018.
4. The exemption from the 10 percent income tax applies to IT workers directly involved in the production and editing of software; support and service workers in IT are excluded. All IT workers still have to pay the obligatory social contributions (health and pension), which reach 37 percent. See Guga and Spătari 2021 for a critique of the IT tax exemption.
5. Personal communication Alex Cistelean, December 2018.
6. While Silicon Valley is the ultimate model of tech-driven urbanism for much of the region, the urban innovation programs proposed by the Cluj Cultural Center evolved out of conversations with New Urban Mechanics in Boston.
7. The same can be said of Romanian IT on the whole (Guga and Spătari 2021), with the exception of Romanian-owned Bitdefender and unicorns such as robotic process automation UiPath (which, however, moved its headquarters to New York) and, more recently, blockchain and fintech start-up Elrond, which emerged out of Sibiu but is actually incorporated in Malta.
8. Interview Andrei Roth, UiPath Cluj, September 2019.
9. If we include 'business process outsourcing' the number is closer to 35,000. The separation between the sectors is not sharp. The upper layers of BPO in terms of skill and pay merge with the middle layers of IT, and quite a bit of the less-skilled labor processes in IT resemble BPO, in particular website maintenance. For 2023, the number of IT employees (excluding BPO) in Cluj is estimated at 25,000.
10. Romanian average net salary for 2023 has risen to around 900 euro; lowest salaries in IT (entry level customer support) are still below (around 700–800 euro).
11. In a study of cafe culture in Cluj, Petrovici and Faje (2019) operate with the same premise of the revanchist city, arguing, though, that this has not produced a

- revanchist discourse among the emerging middle classes of Cluj, who are open to discourses of tolerance, diversity, and even social justice. This claim relies on the protests and progressive movements of the early 2010s; however, these have lost steam, and the promise of Cluj as a left-progressive center (Clapp 2017) has not been vindicated.
12. In February 2018, anthropologist Lala Panait was the guest speaker at *Creative Mornings* (the franchise of a global event, with English as the default language) on the premises of Cluj Hub, the largest co-working space in Cluj, occupying the top floors of a former socialist commercial complex, where she discussed community work in the city, focusing on the project of urban gardening undertaken by the association Colectiv A at *La Terenuri* in the former working-class neighborhood of Mănăştur (Panait and Medeşan 2016).
  13. Retrieved 30 March 2021 from <https://www.aiciacolo.ro/tagged/ppm5>.
  14. A question of office politics exacerbated by the 2018 family referendum (Mateescu 2018).
  15. Interestingly enough, Sloterdijk's (2013: 211–22) philosophical anthropology of global capitalism anticipates the Cluj preoccupation with both “bubbles” and “pampering.”
  16. See the Future of Work program, currently underway at the Urban Innovation Unit, a partnership between the municipality and Cluj Cultural Center. Retrieved 30 March 2021 from <https://diviziadeinovare.ro/future-of-work/>.
  17. Interview with CEO of Informal IT School. The discussion here is based on participant observation at an “Introduction to IT” course, and interviews with mentors and graduates of reconversion courses.
  18. Wark (2017) also remarks upon the remarkable suitability of object-oriented programming (OOP) to outsourcing.
  19. Malazita and Resetar (2019) go as far as claiming that practices of abstraction instilled in early-stage computing education produce “anti-political subjects”; for more nuanced views, see Amrute 2016, and Irani 2019. For the politics of IT labor on the global peripheries, see Takhteyev 2012, Chan 2013, and Beltran 2020.
  20. In venture capital parlance, a unicorn is a privately held start-up with a valuation of over 1 billion USD. Robotic process automation start-up UiPath was the first Romanian example, even though it has now moved its headquarters to New York.
  21. Retrieved 30 March 2021 from <https://aubb.granturi.ubbcluj.ro/activitati-studenti-v9/>.

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