

Overlapping Nostalgias

Negotiating *Space* and *Labor* in the (Post)Communist City of Bucharest

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Abstract

This article explores infrastructural transformations within communist and postcommunist Bucharest, arguing that they constituted the foundation for divergent discourses of nostalgia. The themes of production and domesticity provide a spatial focus and a framework for the investigation of this phenomenon in relation to workers as an urban social group. In reference to (post)communist Bucharest, I go beyond the spatial and temporal ambiguity that seems to trigger nostalgia, and I suggest its concrete embodiment in the structure and praxes of the city. I propose that under the communist regime the experience of nostalgia was a way of coming to terms with the abrupt break from pre-communist material and symbolic conditions, while the theme of labor became a vehicle for the normalization of those changes. The understanding and praxes of labor in the new condition of the city became a vehicle for nostalgia, and constituted the main reference point in the appropriation of the new urban and symbolic structure.

Keywords: nostalgia, (post)communism, ideology, housing, labour, infrastructure, Bucharest

The communist condition of the city of Bucharest is significant within the context of the former Eastern Bloc, not simply because the imposed ideology became reified in architectural and urban form, but also and especially because its artifacts came to play a symbolic role in the shaping of social relations (Humphrey, 2005, p. 39) and individual praxes. As in other socialist countries, architecture in Romania was the key instrument for imposing the new ideology, which not only sought to erase the previous order but was also imagined as producing a new human type: the Socialist Man and Woman (Humphrey, 2005, p. 39). By addressing discourses of nostalgia, this article examines the relationship between spatial change—specifically regarding spaces for production and domesticity—and the emergence of the socialist working class. The notion of labor assumed a central role in making social and urban transformations meaningful under communism, and also became the main catalyst for the articulation of nostalgia in the postcommunist period. Under communism, the dominant understanding of labor was that it was homogeneous. This understanding was integral to Party ideology, and it was an explicit vehicle for power, social cohesion, and coercion. After the fall of the regime, the spatial ruination of industry entailed a ruination of labor itself, bringing about a fragmentation of the city within the capitalist market. Taking Bucharest as its example, this article argues that the spatial and social reconfigurations that emerged during communism laid the groundwork for a new society, one which appropriated an artificial condition that became the foundation for discourses of nostalgia within the contemporary city. Within the postcommunist condition, nostalgia emerged in relation to the former category of workers, and it became embedded in the infrastructures of production and domesticity that the state provided and that were normalized over time. I propose that the experience of nostalgia, both under communism and in its aftermath, was not only an “enchantment with distance” (McHugh & Kitson, 2015, p. 488), but also became a way of coming to terms with the abrupt break from previous material and symbolic conditions. Focusing on workers as a social group, this article examines the theme of nostalgia by investigating the dynamics between spatial praxes and discourses of labor. It investigates how the material world of architecture and urban themes worked together to provide the basis for a peculiar social metabolization of ideology and post-ideology. In examining these issues, the article argues that we can articulate two divergent, overlapping nostalgias: one pre-communist, and the other postcommunist.

The politics of nostalgia

Nostalgia was initially understood as a malady caused by distance from one’s homeland (Bonnet, 2015), and was therefore associated with notions of space and geography more generally.¹ The modern understanding of nostalgia as a cultural category (rather than a medical condition) de-emphasized the importance of space in favor of its temporal dimension (Bonnet, 2015, p. 2). Categorized as a “modern symptom” (Appadurai, 1996; Boyer, 2010; Boym, 2001), nostalgia is an ontological condition strongly

related to temporal longing and estrangement. Even if its specific reference is related to the longing for a place that no longer exists (or has never existed), its real claim is temporal—an imaginary historical past, an already mythological time of stability and normality (Boym, 2001, p. 66). The association with the alleged past is ambiguous, and the nostalgic attitude is constituted as “defining and claiming autonomy in the present” (Boyer, 2001, p. 25) while projecting utopian thoughts into the future. Nostalgia is a cultural practice (Stewart, 1988, p. 227) within the disorganization of the present, attempting to mediate notions of unreality and loss. It is necessarily accompanied by a forgetting, erasing parts of experience while at the same time projecting continuity (Davis, 1979, p. 35). Invoking the past, and related to the incapacity of the nostalgic subject to fully appropriate the present, it advances the discourse of a loss of identity—or rather, of an inability to articulate identity—and of a deficit of agency and community (Tannock, 2006, p. 454). Within a communist discourse of both material and symbolic erasures, nostalgia overcomes its passive attitude and becomes a defensive mechanism against the repressive shock of loss.

Spatially, only ruins seem to be triggers of nostalgia (Edensor, 2005): they project a discourse that aestheticizes imagined pasts, transforming the remaining fragments into souvenirs of a utopian time. Crumbling wrecks enable nostalgia by their ambiguous temporality: in the ruin, the past is both present and inaccessible (Huysen, 2006, p. 6), holding a promise “for an alternative future” (Huysen, 2006, p. 8). Because the ruin shows only the aftermath of what happened, not the event itself, its presence allows unfettered access to a person’s memories, or even to their imagined version of those memories. Urban and industrial ruins are triggers of an aestheticized past (Edensor, 2016), but at the same time they are critical sites where conflictual processes of past and present become visible. The discourse of spatial ruination extends to architectural theory (Boyer, 1996, p. 305), where it is associated with notions of estrangement or unhomeliness (Vidler, 1992). Spatial ruination in this case is mostly related to intentional erasure and associated with a nostalgia that emerged within modernist discourse about architecture (Vidler, 1992), which wanted to eradicate tradition in order to live with structural and spiritual cleanness, free of any memory.

In reference to (post)communist Bucharest, I go beyond the spatial and temporal ambiguity that seems to trigger nostalgia, and I suggest its concrete embodiment in the structure and praxes of the city. In relation to this I ask: what role did physical infrastructure play in the emergence of the new practice of everyday life under communism, and how did nostalgia become an instrument for coming to terms with the radical changes that communist political power imposed? What processes normalized communist urban and social conditions following the emergence of postcommunist nostalgia after the fall of the regime? I assert that nostalgia is less about a “diffuse longing for an imagined past” (McHugh & Kitson, 2015, p. 488) and more about a specific lived condition that pertains to a relatively recent collective experience; less about “sensual environs” (McHugh & Kitson, 2015, p. 488) and more about the concrete

spaces of the factory and the home. My inquiry into the city of Bucharest rethinks nostalgia in terms of material culture and socialist-built infrastructures.

Urban nostalgia and the architecture of the new in Bucharest

Taking advantage of social discrepancies and the low level of democratic culture (Lăzărescu, 1977, p. 113), the instauration of the communist regime in Romania produced a shift that replaced the symbolic dimensions of daily life with new forms and principles. In late 1947, the Romanian monarchy was abolished, and the Communist Party supported by the Soviet regime achieved complete control. The weaknesses of the social body and economic circumstances were the premises for the implementation of extensive reforms in collectivization and industrialization that radically changed the character of the country and distorted the characteristics and self-understandings of social groups. This simultaneously created a new mass, one that was anonymous and isolated from tradition and therefore easy to control (Boia, 2001, p. 116).

Spaces of production

On June 11, 1948 a law came into effect that nationalized Romania's main industrial and financial assets. The state became the sole owner of enterprises, which started to function according to the centralizing principles of the Stalinist economy (Zahariade, 2011, p. 28). This was the primary vehicle of control over material and productive resources, and it marked the preparatory stage of industrialization (Tulbure, 2016, p. 72). Industry—which at that time was under the USSR's influence and was viewed as a propaganda element—was developed through the modernization of nationalized factories and the emergence of new industrial areas. The era presented a huge opportunity to outline a new spatial structure for industrial activities, due to the drastic reshaping of the socioeconomic system. Bucharest's area size and population were growing very fast thanks to the socialist industrialization process. Now the target of large investments in industry, Bucharest saw the construction of large housing districts due to the increasing number of jobs in the capital and people's migration from the countryside to the city. The theme of production reconfigured the city: the fragmented traditional structure where a church was the landmark in every district was replaced with a homogeneous urbanism that knew no social or cultural variation. Within this new urban topography, industry and the factory represented semantic elements in the realm where ideology fully unfolded and propaganda was disclosed. Factories were seen by the Party as a source of progress, and consequently took on moral connotations (Chelcea, 2008, p. 98).

On November 13, 1952, a reform was passed that initiated the transformation of Bucharest: the "Decision Regarding the Construction and Reconstruction of Cities and the Organization of Activity in the Domain of Architecture." The socialist reconstruction of the city was intended on the one hand to

encompass its functional organization, and on the other to endorse an aesthetic of homogeneity and conformity across the entire city (Tulbure, 2016, p. 155). The leitmotif of this ideological planning was the erasure of the difference between center and periphery, and a new configuration of the city's spaces of production and domesticity.

Spaces of domesticity

The district of housing blocks built in proximity to the factory became the symbol of communist modernization and was used as a propaganda instrument. This shift implied “the erasure of the traces left by the capitalist society founded on exploitation and its replacement with a new built environment that would rest under the sign of satisfying the material and spiritual needs of the working class” (Zahariade, 2011, p. 43). The emergence of a new urbanism and a new configuration of the house, as well as the reimagining of both public and domestic practices, laid the foundations for a pre-communist nostalgia that functioned as a defense mechanism against the modernizing shock of socialist transformation. Two main ideas were to frame the phenomenon of socialist mass housing: the Soviet experience as a primary point of information, and extensive standardization as a unique mode of fulfilling the annual and five-year plans in a fast and economical way (Silvan, 1954). The sense of the fragmented previous condition of the city was reversed, and large prefabricated housing district types such as the *cvartal* and the *microrayon* reconfigured the interaction between inhabitants and the city, imposing new patterns of appropriation of space. *Cvartal* was the name of an urban unit used during the 1950s to organize the newly built housing districts in Bucharest, where prefabricated elements were deployed in construction for economical and repeatable assembly. A basic orthogonal structure aligned identical four- to five-story buildings on a grid (Maxim, 2009, p. 10), incorporating a nursery and kindergarten, and usually extending over an area of six to 10 hectares. Built on a former slum (*mahala*), the district of Floreasca comprised 2,265 one- or two-bedroom apartments, schools, a nursery, a clinic, a restaurant, a shopping center and a library (Rădulescu, 1957, p. 29). It was seen as a manifestation of socialist modernism, and it often served as a propaganda model to emphasize the success of this urban configuration. A more organic, but at the same time more “self-sufficient,” housing structure was the *microrayon*, a departure from the rationalization and rigid structure of the early Soviet-inspired *cvartal*. This was constituted as a relatively independent structure which could function entirely within its own borders, with no need to interact too much with the rest of the city. It incorporated various ancillary functions, such as a nursery, kindergarten, primary school, shopping center, laundry facilities, garages and canteen. Emphasizing the need for greater density within the city, more than 30% of the ensemble comprised taller buildings—10–11 stories—to ensure maximum efficiency. Generally the occupied area varied between 15 and 45 hectares and accommodated between 3,000 and 12,000 inhabitants. The use of a new urban morphology and prefabricated construction systems

also symbolizes a desire to discard the familiar forms of construction, reducing it to automated processes that dispense with the familiar appearances of objects (Alonso & Palmarola, 2014). The transformation of the city became programmatic: it aimed to erase the memory of previous political systems (Stroe, 2015, p. 104) and the hierarchies of the traditional urban form.

The stage of mediation: Cățelu district and the acknowledgment of nostalgia

The Communist Party's modernizing policy of removal was addressed in the first stage by architects who sought to translate the new principles of Soviet prefabrication by referencing familiar elements in new domestic constructions. The singular experiment that acknowledged the damage that the socialist city's radical transformation would cause at the level of consciousness was Bucharest's Cățelu district. Built in 1956–1957, the district was a national interpretation of Khrushchev's 1954 speech in which he criticized excess in the construction of new cities, emphasizing the need to readapt standardization and prefabrication methods according to new economic constraints. In spite of these directives, Cățelu's planners were inspired by vernacular architecture and endeavored to adapt the traditional communities' most important principles in the new district (Biciusca, 2006). In this case, the vernacular became a potential resource for the rationalization (Biciusca, 2006, p. 10) demanded by ideology, and a potential foundation for a leftist architecture that might naturally inspire the new Soviet modernity encouraged by Khrushchevist discourse. A 1957 article in *Arhitectura RPR* magazine recognized the potential of vernacular architecture for the new urban and architectural discourse:

Vernacular architecture, pertaining to the architecture of the villages, constitutes a product of the peasant's culture; the peasant has a specific mentality that reflects in all his achievements and which is characterized by economy and practicality. These features make him address construction problems without the romanticism of city dwellers, whose wishes linked to their homes refer especially to a false stylistic decor. (Crăiniceanu, 1957)

Cățelu district was constituted of two- and three-story buildings, inspired by vernacular architecture but constructed with prefabricated components. The diversity of elements that constituted the whole ensemble comprised loggias, galleries, porticos, and exterior staircases, as socialist-realist reinterpretations of traditional Romanian architecture (Ionescu, 1969, p. 65). One of the most important elements in this assembly was a local version of the porch (*prispa*) (Biciusca, 2006, p. 18), which functioned as a social space for inhabitants' interactions. The morphology of the assembly itself integrated a smooth passage from the public realm of the street to the private space of the home through a series of thresholds (Biciusca, 2006, p. 20) and semipublic spaces. On the first floor, the apartments were articulated by a

series of porticos that led to a central courtyard, which would be appropriated by the residents in various ways: as small vegetable and flower gardens, spaces for rest furnished with benches and covered by grapevine pergolas, etc. On the second floor, the entrances to the apartments were strung along a wide porch—with arches looking onto the courtyard—that served not only as functional space, but also as a space for socialization, and as a zone of mediation between exterior and interior. In this space children would do homework, women would gather or perform domestic tasks, men would read newspapers or play backgammon (Biciusca, 2006, p. 15). Architecture became a way to support the articulation of a community through spatial configuration. The presence of the church within the district, in spite of the atheist character of the political system, emphasized a care for the passage to urban industrial life from previous conditions (Biciusca, 2006, p. 21) embedded in tradition. As in the countryside, the priest was an important figure in the community; sometimes he would come into the apartments for secret celebrations (baptisms or weddings) for young officers whom the Party forbade to go to church (Biciusca, 2006, p. 17). The Cățelu “experiment” was a successful attempt to reintegrate into urban life some of the principles that had been present in pre-socialist architecture and that could sustain a sense of community. It was also a vehicle to address the *tabula rasa* proposed by the new government. Architecture was a concrete way to rescue elements that had informed pre-communist everyday life—the clear delimitation between private and public, the importance of the courtyard as a semipublic space where most activities took place, the porch as a space for socialization, and the street as a space for gathering and sustaining community interaction—in an attempt to make the transition easier to appropriate. This was unique: none of the subsequent projects maintained this direction. Following this experiment, the principles and elements employed in Cățelu were eliminated, and later constructions imposed a completely new spatial order. The state was the only client, and the design work was coordinated nationally through the State Committee for Architecture and Construction. The Institute of Design (Institutul de Proiectare București) was in charge of all of new projects in the city of Bucharest. Individual houses were replaced with mass housing, and architectural design was transformed into urban planning (Maxim, 2009, p. 8). The courtyard as a fundamental element of daily life was replaced with a pseudo-exterior extension of the apartment; the street as a space for socialization was replaced with the “block” staircase as a space for surveillance. Communal access to buildings took on an ambiguous relationship with the street in socialist Bucharest: it was neither totally private, because in most cases access was from the main street, nor totally public, because it was a narrow gap, usually surrounded by a very low fence. The idea of the threshold between public and private was removed from architectural intent; but this gap was appropriated almost unanimously by the inhabitants as a space for socialization. This in-between space became a semiprivate space furnished with improvised seating and usually covered by a grapevine

pergola. The latter was most often the only element brought in—in public space—from the countryside, where it had served not only as a productive plant but more importantly as a space of encounter.

Domestic interiors and the cure of nostalgia

The transition was radical, and it materialized as the bare replacement of the old structure with a new infrastructure and regulatory system. The experience of nostalgia that emerged during this loss of affective spatiality (McHugh & Kitson, 2015, p. 490) was fueled by the physical transformations produced by the new political regime. Under such circumstances, I argue that nostalgia overcomes the “enchantment with distance” (Bennett, 2015; McHugh & Kitson, 2015) with which it is usually associated. Instead, it becomes a defense mechanism against the policy of removal and an antidote against the shock of communist modernity. Nostalgia was considered subversive of power, and it manifested in material form only at the level of interior domestic spaces. A 1954 article in *Arhitectura RPR* magazine explains the paternalist state’s goal to produce a limited number of standardized domestic spaces (*secțiuni-tip*), based on a Soviet model of industrialized construction that would be able to serve the needs of the new socialist lifestyle:

A very important problem that has to be solved and given all due attention is the assurance of the maximum comfort and durability of the apartment, this being the expression of the care manifested by our popular democracy toward the working people. (Silvan, 1954, p. 15)

The imaginative manner in which the standardized space of the housing districts was appropriated helped to give meaning to the domicile, becoming a way of coming to terms with the present and the newly imposed communist modernity. For example, spaces adjacent to the apartment, such as the balcony, acquired multifunctional purposes, and were transformed into spaces for various domestic repairs, small gatherings, gardening, or storage for the traditional pickles:

The balconies of the communist blocks were conceived in the spirit of the international style that does not consider the specifics of the area or at least of the bare geographical conditions. And therefore, the initial role of the balcony as a space for recreation inside the rationalist apartment was entirely lost; it was transformed simultaneously into pantry, greenhouse or workshop (for what was needed in the house but not only there). (*Bucureștenii*, 2003, p. 51)

The balcony became the replacement for the traditional courtyard as an extension of the domicile, and it started to be included in the interior space of the apartment by having its perimeter enclosed with glass.

Later, in the 1980s, enclosing one's balcony in this way was considered a dissident act regulated by the state: "it was justified on the grounds that that the enclosing of the balcony [...] weakens the building and affects the general aesthetic" (*Bucureștenii*, 2003, p. 52).

The generally poor conditions of the apartments—especially during the last decade of the regime—were paralleled by goods shortages and restrictions on utilities, which were available for scheduled limited periods only. Katherine Verdery (1996, p. 40) talks of an "etatization of time," referring to state policies that "expropriated Romanians of much of their control over time," especially in the state-regulated schedules for using water, gas, or electricity. The liquidation of the interior sought by the socialist ideal of a rationalized, abstracted and equal living space for every family instead evoked a need to make one's own mark: apartment interiors became phantasmagorias where personal traces found refuge and people could express their own aesthetic preferences (Statica, 2016, p. 60). In communist Romania, inhabitants tried to embellish and add personal traces to the standardized concrete panels and massive furniture. The lack of symbols and of meaningful personal space manifested as a need to collect and exhibit little objects associated with prior experiences of everyday life. Malevich himself had warned about the lack of character or figuration in socialist praxes by placing his "black square" in the place traditionally reserved for religious icons (Alonso & Palmarola, 2014, p. 13), thereby suggesting the political need for the disorientation of the New Socialist Man:

Only with the disappearance of a habit of mind which sees in pictures little corners of nature, Madonnas and shameless Venuses, *shall we witness a work of pure, living art...* To reproduce beloved objects and little corners of nature is just like a thief being enraptured by his legs in irons. (Malevich cited in Alonso & Palmarola, 2014, p. 13)

The austere interior was meant to encourage people's non-attachment to objects (Buchli, 2016, p. 136); the specific materiality of the apartment and its configuration generated a detachment from the material world, producing instead an attachment to the broader socialist collective (Buchli, 2016, p. 137). Popular responses to this aesthetic austerity were diverse. For example, the glass cabinet,² a piece of furniture present in nearly every Romanian apartment, served to exhibit the most extraordinary objects, from books of Ceausescu's writings or speeches to little bottles filled with holy water or oil, Orthodox icons, crocheted doilies, or porcelain objects; the cabinets became miniature museums. In response to rigid communist discipline, a very large number of domestic spaces "displayed a popular form of eclecticism, plaster statues, innumerable vases in different shapes, embroidered table cloths, goblins, plastic fruit" (Vișan, 2011, p. 59) that had usually been inherited from previous generations or had been handmade. Nostalgic memories materialized in small objects that transformed socialist apartments into manifestos

against the cult of newness that the communist regime promoted (Vişan, 2011, p. 59). The experience of loss—manifested as a dramatic shift in physical, lived, and symbolic aspects—brought about nostalgia for a former condition. Especially within the interior of the apartment, nostalgia became a way to materialize the “aesthetic of pastness” (McHugh & Kitson, 2015, p. 488) in order to mediate the experience of the new life. Nostalgia for spaces associated with pre-communist domesticity translated into apartment interiors as a subversive way of facing the new political and social reality, which aimed to avoid superfluous attachments to material culture (Buchli, 2016, p. 132). Preserving and displaying rescued or manufactured objects of the recent past was not only a subversive practice against radical political action, but also a manner of symbolically appropriating the new communist conditions and infrastructure.

The narratives of labor and the normalization of communist life

Nevertheless, removal and distortion performed under such ideological domination dictated the forgetting of praxes pertaining to previous conditions, and what had first emerged as spatial estrangement started—through repetition—to be appropriated and become familiar. Among the mechanisms meant to produce this forgetting, the theme of labor was central, playing the role of “official” symbol of space and new urban praxes. Labor as “the biological process of the human body” (Arendt, 1958, p. 7) has an impermanent, repetitive character oriented toward the sustenance of life. Work, on the other hand, “provides an ‘artificial’ world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings” (Arendt, 1958, p. 7); the concept is related to the production of things that have a clear end in mind. Work has a character of permanence, and involves the conscious transformation of the natural conditions of the world into the realm of human appearances. It is with the rise of modernized society that, as Arendt argues, the boundary between work and labor begins to dissolve. Labor becomes a generic process where individuals execute simple repetitive movements that are meant only to increase productivity. The rise of the social, as a consequence of the production society, determines the ruination of both public and private realms, and is translated into an instrumentalization of social relations. Contradicting this distinction—and in line with the use of this notion by the communist state—Marx attributes emancipation to labor itself. He sees labor not as an instrumentalized process whose only capacity is for the simple “reproduction of one’s life” (Aureli, 2011, p. 5), but as “the very anthropological portrait of human nature” (Aureli, 2011, p. 5), whose subjective character is related to both the physical and intellectual potential of the human being. While industry was central to the constitution of the communist city, the theme of labor became an omnipresent mechanism to give meaning to the ideal of production, placing the worker at the center of society. The factory spatialized these state intentions in concrete form, and was able (along with domestic spaces) to tame people’s bodies and practices. The particular power of factories to discipline subjects in a meaningful relationship to state power (Todorov, 1994), and to create a workers’ imaginary that was able

to sustain the dream of the production society, was extensive: “factories are not built to produce commodities [but] symbolic meanings. They result in a deficit of goods but an overproduction of symbolic meanings” (Todorov, 1994, p. 10). Mechanization, standardization and the repetition of daily rituals accelerated the process of forgetting, and transformed abstract prefabricated infrastructures into a normalized condition embedded in everyday life. Prefabricated blocks became homes, and factories became landmarks in the city.³

Within the communist context, the discourse of labor is peculiarly complex: from labor as coercion,⁴ to heroic labor, to patriotic labor. Charity Scribner (2003) observes that the “laborization of the body” not only caused alienation but was also the main force used to regulate attachment to the collective identity, leading to solidarity and the production of a meaningful imaginary of the factory. The themes of labor and the laborer became the most visible aspect of communist social and political life. Patriotic labor—a mandatory type of unpaid labor for the benefit of the state—was prompted not only by an economic incentive, but more importantly by an ideological one, and was justified in terms of human beings’ natural need to work (Antonovici, 2015, p. 18). The state emphasized the instructional role of physical labor—education through and for labor— aspiring to social militarization—in the sense of both order and following orders—and the creation of the New Socialist Man and Woman (Antonovici, 2015). This pervasive “cult of labor” (*cultul muncii*) constituted the foundation for the appropriation of socialist values, rules, experiences, and spaces, and transformed workers into the class that made the main contribution to the country’s achievements (Hoffman, Raşeev, & Ţenovici, 1984; Kiedeckel, 1993; Kiedeckel, 2002, p. 118). A publication from 1971 describes young workers’ working environments and lives as follows:

Work has become for us a matter of honor, enjoying the respect and appreciation of our society. The socialist Party, state-awarded prizes, medals, the title of Hero of Socialist Labor for the best of us [...]. To labor are dedicated poems and novels, musical and artistic works. (Bărbulescu, 1971, p. 313)

A re-ritualization of space was invented, not only as a spatial construct, but also as a symbolic dimension through the “celebration of worker images in socialist ritual and state policies” (Bărbulescu, 1971, p. 118) or festivals.⁵ “Production rituals” (Verdery, 1996, p. 23) such as work-unit competitions, production campaigns, or voluntary workdays were meant to affirm the stability and fortitude of this social group. The political discourse of the empowered worker—the icon of the New Socialist Man and Woman—and of labor as the source of all value (Hoffman et al., 1984; Kiedeckel, 1993, p. 189) developed in parallel with a discourse of social cohesion within the spaces of work. Labor was at the center of shaping

collective consciousness, and it contributed to an appropriation of the politicized physical context that confirmed the privileged status of the worker. Socialist infrastructures—of both production and domesticity—became spaces through which workers legitimized their position in the city, and which they appropriated as symbolic of their social status. Starting in the late 1970s—and in parallel with social practices that both empowered the worker and constructed the rhetoric of the socialist state—a new series of subversive praxes emerged in response to the politics of shortage established by the state. These praxes included the emergence of a black market or barter economy, while the factory became a space for the undermining of work schedules and practices: “we wouldn’t work then. They were pretending to pay us, we were pretending to work... that was the way” (Bucureștenii, 2003, p. 227). Michel de Certeau’s (1984) notion of *la perruque*—in which the worker tricks the employer, using work space and time to do his or her own work—is very relevant for understanding this appropriation of labor as a form of enjoyment in spaces of production. Under a social discourse that praised labor as a cultural construct, and in conjunction with the shortages of the last decade of the communist regime, *la perruque* was a practice of resistance that allowed workers to invent tactics in response to the controlled consumption that political directives imposed. Once again, the worker acquired an important social status within the barter relations that paralleled “official” consumption, insofar as he/she had access to a wide range of goods (food, clothes, household items, etc.) and services. A former factory worker admitted: “during that time I was working in a textile factory. I have to say that a significant part of the goods went to contacts [people who would give another type of good in exchange]” (Bucureștenii, 2003, p. 175). Another source said:

Anyone working in a bread factory had bread for himself and for his relatives... He would leave with a full bag in the evening. In the 1980s, when the shortages were significant, it was a real battle to get into a factory that produces goods because, I repeat, not only your family, but also your friends needed to be helped... You had to have in mind the meat provider, your counterpart. You had bread, he would give you meat. It was barter. (Bucureștenii, 2003, p. 176)

In spite of changes produced at the level of labor discourse during the communist regime in Romania—and especially the gap between the political rhetoric of labor and its practice toward the end of the regime—the worker’s status remained constant. Workers enjoyed not only a privileged position within the social imaginary, but also an advantaged position within a new system of exchange that paralleled the praxes of consumption imposed by the state.

Postcommunist topographies and the discourse of nostalgia

The proliferation of industrial spaces within the urban domain of Bucharest secured their strong connection with living spaces, while the theme of labor embodied ideological discourse in everyday praxes. The powerful relationship established among industrial spaces, labor, and workers laid the groundwork for its translation into contemporary nostalgia. Sonia Hirt (2012) observes that the transition to capitalism brought about the disintegration of the main attributes of socialist urbanism: a dissolution of the compact social form; a shift in scale from public to more private spaces; the replacement of industrial spaces with commercial ones; the appearance of social contrasts, informality, and marginality; and the end of unity in the city's general aspect (Hirt, 2012, p. 47). In postcommunist Bucharest we may speak again of spatial estrangement—determined by the market economy's reconfiguration of the city, as well as by the ruination of industrial sites—and social estrangement, caused by the general disempowerment of labor (Kiedeckel, 2002, p. 118) and the worker:

Everybody had a job during that time. There was even a plan for factory workers to receive a cooked meal in the canteen. Young people had job security. If they didn't want to work, they [state authorities] would come over to the apartment and take them to the factory. (*Bucureștenii*, 2003, p. 227)

Post-socialist deindustrialization had a massive impact (Verdery, 1999) on Bucharest, manifested both as urban degradation and social problems: its direct consequences related to the readaptation of the working class, unemployment, or migration (Chelcea, 2008, p. 245). The new political and economic conditions ruined not only spaces but also the previous order that had privileged the worker (Kiedeckel, 2002, p. 116), dissolving the collective identity, social order, and solidarity that had supported both domestic and industrial life during communism (Puscă, 2010, p. 240). It transformed “heroes of labor” into “victims of transition” (Petrovic, 2013, p. 97), and manufactured new social structures with which workers engaged in difficult and antagonistic ways (Kiedeckel, 2002, p. 116). A former worker in a factory in Bucharest remembers: “it wasn't better then, but at least there was job security. Today there's no such thing anymore” (*Bucureștenii*, 2003, p. 238). Poverty and social disparities increased (Hann, 2002, p. 4), while spatial ruination entailed a ruination of labor itself, giving rise to a more heterogeneous city.

The decay was abrupt, and within two or three years after the fall of communism the industrial spaces had become unrecognizable (Puscă, 2010, p. 241). Postcommunist deindustrialization opened up various paths for these spaces: some continued to function at a lower capacity, or changed their function (some were rented as warehouses); others were demolished and the terrain exploited for real-estate or commercial investments; many were abandoned and left in ruins. This last category is very present in popular culture and supports the nostalgia surrounding the “demise of socialities based around heavy

industries” (Edensor, 2005, p. 51). Since factories no longer represent a lively articulation of urban topography, the experience of the city as continuous and homogeneous has changed in favor of a restless search and appropriation of new landmarks. Postcommunism has ceased to use production and domestic infrastructures as an instrument of state ideology, and their physical and symbolic degradation has been accompanied by the dissolution of the social imaginary that privileged the worker and his/her social status. The new form of the city situates itself within commodification, in opposition to the production-oriented communist system. Labor tends to be invisible in the metropolis, where traces of former spatial praxes are covered over and references to the worker have vanished; the ideal of labor has disappeared from public spaces, signboards, and banknotes (Petrovic, 2013, p. 97), and its presence has migrated from the center to the periphery. Post-socialist capitalism is manifested in an explicit forgetting of labor, and in its general programmatic and thematic unrecognizability. In this urban capitalist topography—which forgets labor—the ruined industrial space is a relic that recalls a former order. The demolition of Dambovita Mill in Bucharest in 2005–2006 aroused one of the very few public protests against the removal of the city’s industrial heritage. The mill’s presence is recalled in Mircea Cărtărescu’s (2004) writing:

They demolished my mill! [...] The building with the most impressive industrial architecture in the world. How can I even suggest to you the meaning it had for me? I grew up in its magnetic field, curving the space of my world. I lived in the continuous sound of its sieves. [...] And it’s not just the mill to be demolished. The Pionierul bakery will disappear, on whose fantastic pipes we used to climb and on whose windows we would knock until the workers came out to give us hot bread. Also to be destroyed is the Quadrat rubber factory, as tall and enigmatic as the mill: huge wall without any windows, almost an Egyptian artifact. Very soon there will lie on a huge block a slag desert, twisted iron from the concrete reinforcements, dust and debris. [...] That building for me was alive, an archetype in my interior world [...]. They took it off in a stupid, vandalistic, cruel, and useless way. Only desolation remains. (Cărtărescu, 2004)

The closure or demolition of industrial spaces soon after the fall of communism pushed workers out of these spaces (Puscă, 2010), severing both physical and emotional contact. What is remarkable about the new postcommunist nostalgia is also that, although it emerges as the “personal dramas” of a significant part of Bucharest’s population, it is further translated into a larger scale and is often present in public discourse. The physical presence of these relics urges the production of nostalgia not only through direct experimentation, but also through their haunting recollection. Their imaginative potential, projected onto the inhabitants and the city itself, invests them with power, and situates their symbolism in the gap

between two divergent conditions. The market economy also takes advantage of a generalized (post)nostalgia that the socialist industrial theme has engendered among the younger generation. For instance, the Carol factory (Halele Carol) was reclaimed and converted into a space that draws on its industrial heritage to bridge the entrepreneurial and cultural sectors through various events (concerts, exhibitions, industrial tours, workshops); the Automatica factory was converted into a club and concert space by Fratelli Studios; the spinning workshop in the Cotton Industry factory (Industria Bumbacului) was converted into a multifunctional venue housing concerts, contemporary art exhibitions, and a rooftop bar. These spaces become more than a pleasing aesthetic from the past (Edensor, 2005); they gain a life of their own and “help normalize an otherwise radical process of change” (Puscă, 2016, p. 250). The aestheticization of these industrial ruins generates a postcommunist nostalgia that mediates the changes in status (primarily of the worker) and in the conditions articulated during communism through the state-controlled relationship between production and domesticity. They are now the critical expression of a failed political and economic system, but at the same time they are catalysts for nostalgic projection. Their proximity to living spaces in Bucharest makes them active participants in urban life, and discourses for negotiating old and new urban praxes are mediated by their presence. Their temporal reference is to past triumphs and greatness (Huysen, 2006, p. 12); their spatial reference is to decay and ephemerality; and as a whole they embody a present past which is imagined as form of nostalgia. They are vehicles of collective nostalgia, physical reminders in a very dense and now fragmented urban tissue. The ruins in the contemporary city constitute a critical space that is associated both with notions of labor—for those who experienced them first-hand—and with tendencies to aestheticize material culture—for the new generation.

Conclusion

Nostalgia in Bucharest transcends its status as a dream and becomes a critical vehicle to map the physical and symbolic changes the city has endured. It situates itself at the boundary between political will and the social praxes of urban infrastructures, enabling material and affective experiences that mediate successive appropriations of the city’s various positions. The discourse of nostalgia among workers as a social group in Bucharest can therefore be interpreted in light of metamorphoses produced at the level of urban space and labor. The premise for this lies in the production of a pre-communist nostalgia that was brought about by the erasure of extensive parts of the city and the configuration of a new domestic and social life through a new socialist infrastructure. The radical break with the past that the communist regime brought about in Bucharest produced an antagonistic reaction to change that provoked nostalgia as a defense mechanism against the shock of loss. Space became an instrument that had to mediate the conflict of political constraint and personal memory. Housing and production were the

two main themes used to transform daily life, the becoming of the self, and the form of the city. The communist project to reconfigure the city and erase previous symbols translated in an initial stage into the subversive manifestation of pre-communist nostalgia, especially in apartment interiors. Ideological constraint, daily practice, and repetition imposed a new habitus, and the new structure was eventually appropriated and normalized. The working class, however, had a peculiarly privileged position during the communist era, benefiting from political support, social status, and its relationship to the politicized discourse of labor. The postcommunist conditions of the market economy, which determined the deindustrialization and concealment of labor in Bucharest, complemented the declining status of the working mass, who had to reorient themselves. The proximity between industrial and domestic spaces, paralleled by their constant ruination under capitalism, emphasized the rupture from a stable past and a formerly privileged position. We may also talk about a general reorganization and fragmentation of the urban structure that determined the reconsideration of the spatial and social praxes that workers had previously used. It is in this context that we may talk about a discourse of workers' nostalgia during postcommunism. I suggest that this constitutes a peculiar historical continuity: appropriations and reappropriations, symbolizations and resymbolizations of changing topographies cyclically bring to light common themes and discourses of normalization that are rooted in contradictory stances. Nostalgia thus returns to its initial sense, one that is connected to a spatiality of loss—manifested under communism in the new infrastructure, and engendered under postcommunism by physical and symbolic ruin.

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¹ Etymologically, “nostalgia” comes from the Greek *nostos*—“return home”—and *algos*—“pain.”

² For a discussion on the buffet cabinet in the Soviet apartment see also Victor Buchli’s *An Archaeology of Socialism* (2000, p. 4-5).

³ On the cover of a 1962 tourist guide to Bucharest, the factory is portrayed as one of the main urban elements contributing to the identity of the city (Berindei, 1962).

⁴ The legal framework for coerced labor was set up in 1950 and introduced as a measure for the “reeducation of hostile elements.” Prisoners were forced to work on massive projects proposed by the communist government, such as the Danube-Black Sea Canal (also known as the Canal of Death) and the Great Brăila Island. It is estimated that more than one million people were imprisoned and forced to work on the canal project.

⁵ Celebrations such as Labor Day, a national holiday celebrated every May 1 with impressive parades and mobilizations of the working class.