

**Critical Engagements with and within Capitalism:  
Romania's Middle Managers after Socialism**

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*Statement*

*I hereby state that the thesis contains no materials accepted for any other degrees in any other institutions. The thesis contains no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.*

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a study of the way individuals live within and engage capitalism in the particular historical context in which capitalism is being forcefully presented as the *right* systemic alternative to the morally, socially and economically *wrong* socialism of the past. Capitalism is not only built *with* the ruins of socialism, but also by keeping its ghost alive. On a theoretical level, I argue that ordinary actors are endowed with critical capacities and their actions are informed by their sense of justice; critical theories of capitalism cannot afford overlooking this aspect. Through unpacking the two facets of ideology – as integration and as distortion – I place the tension of maintaining a sense of legitimate personhood at the center of my analysis. I rely primarily on working life histories of middle managers in Cluj, Romania and a solid contextualization of these narratives in the economic trajectory of the city, its ethnicity cum class history, together with an account of the series of reforms in the national system of higher education. I try to substantiate the claim that because it is their very possibility to maintain a sense of legitimate personhood that is primarily at stake for the individuals, the hegemonic anti-communist discourse and the reality it enables to hold together short-circuits the possibilities for the critical work of individuals to turn into a strong alternative to this reality. The ways in which socialism figures into the justificatory mechanisms of capitalism makes its reality hold together to an even greater extent than in other contexts. As academic production of knowledge can only either contribute to confirming this reality or to putting it into a state of uncertainty, I argue that it is crucial to think of the quality of research primarily in relation to its having met the challenge of the political implications it inherently has. I used the ambiguous status of methodology (with a special

focus on Sequence Analysis) within the sociological production of knowledge to restate both the fragile position it has in relation to the other institutions that confirm reality and the necessity to work towards living up to the responsibility of feeding into critique.

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## INTRODUCTION

Around year 1990, Capitalism's greatest Other crumbled and fell throughout Eastern Europe. Consequently, an extra layer of legitimacy was added to capitalism, and the claim of it being the only tenable form of societal organization gained even wider plausibility. The ambiguity and complexity of the moment was easily dealt away with on a certain level, as the events started figuring in various narratives proclaiming the naturally achieved empirical proof of the unsoundness of the socialist project. The unexpected end of the Cold War was not the first time the region had played an active role of feeding into the overall grand narrative of capitalism. On the contrary, as Bockman and Eyal convincingly argue, Eastern Europe played the role of a "laboratory for economic knowledge" feeding the arguments of US economists with "data" obtained in the Other conditions throughout the 50s and the 60s (Bockman and Eyal 2002, Bockman, 2007). They oppose the thesis of the diffusion of institutional forms, according to which the neoliberal vision and its policies were merely imported from their Western source and implemented in Eastern Europe after 1990. Their alternative reading makes salient the complex politics of knowledge in which various actors from the two regions have been historically active and how the othering process has been sustained by practices at various levels. The fall of the socialist regimes therefore constituted the last test from this laboratory, which was read as indicating that the alternatives to capitalism are invalid; capitalism is postulated as the overarching framework of societal organization, whose particular nuances can still constitute the object of debate but which cannot be contested in itself.



The central axis of justification for the ample reforms that followed after 1990 was constructed around the goal of minimizing the distance to “democracy” and “market economy” and increasing the distance from the socialist past. While these reforms are often indiscriminately described as being informed by neoliberalism, serious doubt has been raised lately against this view (Ganev 2005, Drahokoupil, 2009, Gille, 2010). Indeed the countries from this region varied greatly in both the degree of closeness to the neoliberal orthodoxy and the speed with which the reforms were implemented. However much needed the more precise documentation of the nuances of the reforms, their omnipresence and the centrality market economy and democracy had in giving their overall orientation is hard to argue against. In 1990 Eastern Europe lost its status as the Other of capitalism; instead, it emerged as a territory on which capitalism and democracy do not exist yet, but are to be attained as a project. How are democratic political structures to be built from scratch? How is an educational system to be reformed so that it would serve a different economic logic? These were questions preoccupying all types of actors: from policy makers, politicians and analysts both locally and world wide to academics and ordinary people. Apart from institutions, the political system and economy itself (which pertained to the realm of action of experts that still had to be trained and formed) a crucial matter of concern emerged: the ordinary person. What were the proper person’s attitudes, behaviors and understanding of their own role, entitlements and responsibilities in society became one of the most widely problematized aspects (Eyal 2000).

In Romania, references to *people’s mentality* were omnipresent in media and political discourses, as an umbrella concept synthesizing various aspects concerning the individual

that were deemed important (Heintz 2006). The concept aims to capture the relationship people have to work, the commitment to the quality of its results, to investment of time and energy and to expectations from the employer, family or the state. At a more abstract level, *mentalities* comprise people's understanding of what they can and should expect from the outside structures and how they understand as their own role within the system. Within this discursive space, the reason for which individuals' mentalities matter is because they guide and determine actions and therefore contribute directly to the success or failure of the top-down projects, depending on whether they are right or wrong. Confronted with various proofs of unsuccessful reform and deterioration of life conditions, mentalities become an important part in explanatory mechanisms: it is the wrong mentalities of individuals that prevent the successful implementation of reforms and that sabotage the entire process of societal refashioning. The mechanism through which mentalities factor into the overall functioning of society is not merely described. There is another causal link that is being drawn: the source of the wrongness is clearly identified in the legacy of the socialist system. Therefore, not only was communism flawed and caused suffering to people before 1989, but it continues to exert its negative influence through the institutions it left behind and through the individual mentalities it created. The paternalistic state left individuals with little room for maneuver, but also with little responsibilities. Therefore, socialism created passive individuals, who expect everything from the system and do not adequately grasp their own responsibility in the process. The worker, the miner or bureaucrats in the state system are recurrently represented as exemplary figures of un-adapted individuals, repositories of faulty mentalities and living reminders of a wrong regime. More recently, the trope of the

socialist legacy is being complemented by that of nostalgia over communism, to which everyone is susceptible (Poenaru 2010).

This dissertation is a study of the way individuals live within and engage capitalism in a particular historical context. A distinctive feature of this particular context is the relationship between its relatively recent past, its present and its imaginable futures. The past – socialism – is being unequivocally deemed negative and capitalism becomes the *right* systemic alternative to this morally, socially and economically *wrong* regime – yet to be fully achieved in the future. The intensely sustained politics of memory feeding the hegemony of the anti-communist discourse has been documented in an increasingly coherent manner. This reality of the wrong and right is difficult to put in a state of uncertainty because a series of institutions are invested into its holding together. The robustness of reality (Boltanski 2011) and the sanctions associated to the attempts of its critique are highly visible in the intellectual field. The main underlying argument that I try to substantiate throughout this dissertation concerns the existence and relevance of the link between anti-communism as the dominant discourse of truth and ordinary individuals' possibilities to maintain a sense of legitimate personhood while making claims that do not fit the main lines of this discourse. It is not only intellectuals who get sanctions when their positions fail to be containable in those provided as legitimate by the anti-communist discourse. On the contrary, ordinary individuals' capacities of critique and claim making based on their sense of justice are constantly short-circuited in a similar manner. Therefore, I will argue that it is vital to operate with a theoretical understanding of the working of capitalism that takes individuals' critical capacities and their sense of justice seriously.

This study looks at non-extraordinary capitalist actors and the way they engage the system in which they live. The people who shared their experiences and views with me and who allowed me an insight into their enthusiasms, struggles, disgusts and indifferences are neither the typical elites whose exit on the winning side from the 1989 change of regime (with the privatization processes and the routes to political power that were opened) was amply documented, nor those marginalized categories whose life chances are most seriously threatened by the current neoliberal policies. They are people with higher education, working for relatively good salaries, in a middle scale city. They are also relatively young, as all of them graduated university after 1992 and had no significant working experience during socialism. Their enthusiasm and involvement in the capitalist enterprise is one of the crucial factors of its success. They constitute the middle class invoked by the politicians and analysts, individuals whose proper mentalities are hoped for and whose proper involvement is believed to lead to the accumulation of wealth that would then trickle down to the others as well. They are not left out of the current imagery of society; on the contrary, they are called to be its heroes. At the same time, their position is a vulnerable one, as most of them live off their salaries and are therefore affected by the flexibilisation inherent in the labor code changes and the cuts in social security.

Trying to draw academic attention to the way in which local history influences the outcomes of “postsocialist transformations”, David Stark famously said that capitalism is built not *on*, but *with* the ruins of socialism (Stark 1996). While true, this affirmation does not give the full picture, as capitalism is also built by keeping the ghost of socialism alive. The reality of a capitalist mode of societal organization, the reality of the necessity

to build the institutions and the individuals making up this new reality finds a powerful resource in maintaining the ghost of its opposite alive.

Consequently, post-socialism figures in this study on two distinct levels. The first one is the level indicated by “building with the ruins of socialism”, namely the institutional context which plays a role in shaping the current conditions. On this level, I do not think of socialism as a monolithic and clearly known reality. Rather, in line with much of the anthropological wisdom, I start with an open question of whether it is socialism that affected this and that feature of the educational system for example, or the economic production. In line with much of the anthropological literature focusing on the postsocialist transformations, I hold that the common features of socialist countries that set them sharply apart from the other regions of the world should not be overemphasized in such way that their commonalities become unthinkable (Hann 2002). On many levels relevant to my analysis, there are elements of specificity that stem from the particular way in which the socialist economic system was thought. In other cases, however, those features could more accurately be conceptualized as part and parcel of larger phases of the history of modernity. Various aspects of bureaucratization, fordist production systems or qualificational spaces of transition from school to work need to be considered separately, in their belonging to both their socialist and larger modernity history.

The second level is the politics of knowledge, where there is the “socialist effect”, which is being worked towards by various contemporary institutions, academic knowledge production being part of them. At this level, socialism becomes a monolithic entity, which infuses all the levels of understanding, of all actors, albeit in different ways. There

is a serious convergence in efforts of various institutions in producing the effect of a monolithic reality of socialism.

This dissertation is organized in four sections, situated at different levels of argumentation, each of them composed by two chapters.

In the *first section*, I set out the coordinates of the research, first as a theoretical anchorage and then as choices and strategies for empirical investigation.

*Chapter One* argues for the necessity of discussing the possibilities of critical work of ordinary actors and that of the social scientists within the same theoretical framework. I strongly rely on Luc Boltanski's insights on how the inherent tension between the take of pragmatic sociology of critique and that of critical sociology on the distribution of critical capacities among ordinary actors and social scientists can and should be put to use. Centering my argument on the way various strands of critical or standard sociology conceptualize the contemporary subject, I set out the analytical framework that I will employ in my attempt to make visible the link between the possibilities of critique and transformative action of individuals and the discourses of truth that infuse their social environment. Ordinary actors are endowed with critical capacities and their actions are informed by their sense of justice. Through unpacking the two facets of ideology – as integration and as distortion – I place the tension of maintaining a sense of legitimate personhood at the center of my analysis.

*Chapter Two* serves as the methodological background of the research, in which I offer a justification of the choices of people I interviewed and the additional ethnographic

material I rely on. Further, I present the logic of the interviews and the analytical status I give to the narratives I was offered. I dwell on explaining the potential of Sequence Analysis, as a formal method to complement the qualitative data analysis.

Following the clarifications in the first two chapters, I restate the research questions that the following three sections provide answers for and the way they are in dialogue with each other.

*Section Two* takes my analysis at the level of the “case”, which I here conceptualize as the career field of Cluj.

In *Chapter Three*, I rely on and critically engage with the most promising framework developed by Organizational Studies scholars in their attempt to capture the complex interdependencies between individual careers and the environment in which they unfold. Therefore, through the insights offered by the conceptual language of the *career field* and its varying degrees of autonomy with the economic system and the educational one, I problematize the boundaries of my case, by looking at their porosity and tension. Through a narrative focusing on the relationship between (1) the economic trajectory of Cluj as a rescaling locality, (2) the changes in the main parameters of the Romanian national higher education system and (3) the individual level symbolization of Cluj as a locality, I provide the contextual elements needed as a background for the rest of the analysis.

*Chapter Four* approximates an analysis in the spirit of the pragmatic sociology of critique. Relying on the contextual elements set out in the previous chapters, I make salient two analytic dimensions relevant for the heterogeneous career field of Cluj:

organizational environments (firms) and new positions in the labor market. I then substantiate the ways in which these analytic entities elicit the enthusiasm of people. Informed by Boltanski and Chiapello's definition of the spirit of capitalism as the ideology that provides the reasons for engagement in capitalism, I look at enthusiasm in order to flesh out what out of the space of individual demands is being satisfied by their present situation. The dimensions of individual fulfillment, sense of security and of contribution to a greater good are looked at as being in a constant tension between various realities that do better or worse in satisfying them. Adherence to a certain reality is obtained through opposition with another reality which fails to satisfy the same requirements for fulfillment, security and justice.

*Section Three* takes the analysis to the level of individual careers in order to explore the patterns of similarity among the sequences, as well as the dimensions on which their flexibility can be described

*Chapter Five* operates a move of zooming in and out of individual career stories. I first present in detail three contrasting careers, presenting in detail three individual working life stories in order to show how contingency and structural elements intertwine. In the second part of the chapter, I rely on Sequence Analysis to offer an account from a distance of all the career stories I have collected. I explore the possibility of grouping them into clusters of similarity on several dimensions on which change could be theoretically observed and on which it is empirically realized: switching firms, levels of hierarchy, domains of activity, location. I also take into account a recurrent event in the stories of the people interviewed, namely the fact that they occupy positions that are held



for the very first time in the firm they work in itself. As part of the process of gradual institutionalization of positions in the labor market that I described previously,

*Chapter Six* also looks at individual careers, but instead of taking as the unit of analysis the entire sequence of states, it operates a cut into a single turning point that is common to all the careers, namely transition from school to work. The argument developed here is one of change in the last two decades of the way the relationship between the world of work and that of studying are being imagined and acted upon. In order to secure a more solid ground for such comparisons, I rely on additional interviews with people who were undergoing that very turning point at the time of my research.

The *Fourth Section* adopts a metacritical position and problematizes the links between the critical capacities of ordinary actors and the institutions of reality-making in the particular context of Romania.

*Chapter Seven* is in a direct dialogue with the first chapter. I employ the conceptual language of reality-that-holds together and focus on the semantic function of integration that the institutions have. I try to substantiate the claim that because it is the legitimate personhood that is primarily at stake for the individuals in the way they are targeted by the anti-communist reality, the hegemonic discourse that makes this reality hold-together short circuits the possibilities for the critical actions of individuals to turn into a strong alternative to this reality. While putting the reality of the capitalist mode of organization in a state of uncertainty is in itself a major challenge both for ordinary individuals and for those taking a metacritical position, the ways in which socialism figures into the justificatory mechanisms makes it hold together to an even greater extent.

*Chapter Eight* starts from the observation that people's understandings of their work occupy an important position far beyond the realm of sociological or anthropological research interests. For this reason, I find it crucial to evaluate the quality of research primarily in relation to its having met the challenge of the political implications. The rich domain of methodological concerns emerged in close connection with the idea of maximizing the extra value added by the scientific accounts in comparison to mere opinions or speculations; in this sense, methodology should be strictly instrumental to a goal that is higher than itself. However, the methodological realm has gained a considerable degree of autonomy in relation to both epistemological preoccupations and those related to more encompassing definitions of the quality of research. It is in this semi-autonomy of the methodological realm that I find both one of the biggest threats and a great resource for social scientists. Anchoring my discussion in the substantive topic of the realm of work, I describe a mechanism by which both survey methodology and in-depth anthropological research may end up displacing political implications from the concerns over quality. I continue by arguing in favour of a reflexive and responsible use of methods and devote some space for describing both the potentials and the perils of utilising Sequence Analysis.

## SECTION 1

In the *first section*, I set out the coordinates of the research, first as a theoretical anchorage and then as choices and strategies for empirical investigation. Following the clarifications in the first two chapters, I restate the research questions that the following three sections provide answers for and the way they are in dialogue with each other.

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material I rely on. Further, I present the logic of the interviews and the analytical status I give to the narratives I was offered. I dwell on explaining the potential of Sequence Analysis, as a formal method to complement the qualitative data analysis.

# **CHAPTER 1: ORDINARY CRITIQUE AND METACRITICAL POSITIONS WITHIN AND AGAINST REALITY-THAT-HOLDS- TOGETHER**

## **1.1 The contemporary subject under focus: accounting for large processes of social change**

In the early 90s, Anthony Giddens was saying that “in conditions of late modernity we ‘live in the world’ in a different sense from previous eras of history” (Giddens 2002). This sense of witnessing a new era was shared by many others. The globalization apologists announced the triumph of communication, the erasure of boundaries and local limitations. Among social scientists, several concepts were coined to stress both the novelty and the particularities of a new époque in world history. The “late”, “liquid”, “post”, “second” or “reflexive” modernity (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994; Lash 1999, 1990; Beck 1992; Bauman 2007, 2000; Urry 2003) gave rise to many questions and answers, among which is what Adams has called “the extended reflexivity thesis”(Adams 2003). Authors diverse as Giddens, Beck, Lash, Scott or Sennett are united in their attempt to theorize the parameters of the conditions of the individual and her ways of engaging with the environment in the current époque (Adams 2003). They converge in signaling a qualitative transformation of reflexivity and its effect in individuals’ lives nowadays. Although they do not claim that reflexivity *per se* is specific to this era, the late modern reflexivity is framed as a particular and qualitatively different type of active engagement of individuals with the variety of aspects of their lives. It is being argued that in the particular conditions brought about by the late modernity, the past, the present and

the future are constantly questioned and reexamined, re-given meaning in the light of new information. All realms of life and the self as an entity *per se* cease to be safe from interrogation and revision; they exit the area of the implicit, of the strongly embedded in taken for granted forms of being and “come to be governed by decisions” (Giddens, 1994: 76).

Ulrich Beck, for example, portrays modernity in its late (or reflexive) stage as being marked by the leap from a logic of distribution of wealth to a logic of distribution of risk, from wealth production to risk production. Consequently, people become

set free from the apparently naturally ordered ways of life and certainties of the industrial society... traditional forms of coping with anxiety and insecurity in socio-moral milieus, families, marriages and male-female roles are failing. To the same degree, coping with anxiety and insecurity is demanded of the individuals themselves (Beck, 1992:153)

Therefore, instead of “naturally” deriving from the particular embeddedness in a social position, individual life trajectories become do-it-yourself biographies. Individuals craft their own lives from the bits and pieces of experience and they put them together and aim at constructing a coherent and unitary sense of the self. Or, as Giddens puts it, “the reflexive project of the self consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives” (Giddens, 1991:5)

Beyond converging in the idea that there is a qualitatively different experience of being in the world of late modernity that individuals engage with, a dilemma referring to the effects the uncertainty and the high degree of loss of relevance of traditional pertinent

solutions and guidance can be identified: whether the dynamism of late modernity has irremediably eroded the sense of self and of personal meaning inherent in the modern embeddedness and have people trapped in an inability to meaningfully relate to the world (“the corroded self” of Richard Sennett’s account); or whether this has given them access to an area of meaningful empowerment to act upon their own lives (Adams, 2003).

Sennett’s contribution is centered on the challenge of reconstructing the unity out of the fragmented pieces of experience and the lack of any overarching instance that would provide guidance to do so. He emphasizes the moral ambiguities and lack of certainty that need to be dealt with and gives little positive connotations to the alleged newly acquired freedom (Sennett 2007).

Giddens maintains a comfortable ambiguity in relation to the “powerlessness versus empowerment” continuum. He does this by bringing into focus the realm of possibilities that the disembeddedness brings along with it. He shifts the focus from the loss of meaning by emphasizing that the same drive that sweeps people off their feet and threatens their rootedness brings about opportunities for crafting an existence that is not conditioned by previous ways of doing things. This is what makes Matthew Adams classify the giddensian account as an “optimistic” one, as opposed to Richard Sennett’s view. For Giddens, “powerlessness and reappropriation intertwine variously in different contexts and at varying times: given the dynamism of modernity, there is little stability in the relationship between them” (Giddens, 1991).

The choices people have to make are not made abstractly in Giddens’ view, and he does not plead for a view of an unconstrained agentic power of the individual. He, however,

explicitly departs from the unilateral view proposed by Sennett which only takes into account the “anomic” potentialities inscribed in the contemporary conditions. The space open for personal innovation and for the possibility of transcending undesired constraints of the past should also be taken into account, Giddens argues. Other resources become available for contemporary individuals. Risks, the imminence of choice and responsibility, come along with the resources needed in order to manage the situation, and Giddens stresses the empowering dimension brought about by the new social and economical conditions as he “regards the dynamism of market-based society as on balance creating expanding opportunities for more people to exercise a degree of meaningful autonomy over their lives” (Webb 2004:772). The meaning of life is not eroded in this view, but remade and remakeable.

Two main lines of contestation in relation to this type of accounts are relevant for the argument I will develop in this chapter: (1) the lack (or inconsistency) of a critical stance and (2) the inadequate context sensitivity, coupled with bringing mere anecdotic evidence to support the generalizing claims made. After dwelling at more length on both these dimensions of critique, I will come back towards the end of the section and argue in favor of maintaining the level of “individuals’ engagement with their environment” at the centre of analyses.

The point of divergence among the proponents of the extended reflexivity has been therefore interpreted as them being either pessimists or optimists. An alternative reading, however, qualifies them as providing either critical or non-critical accounts of the pervasive neoliberal orthodoxy. In this alternative reading, authors such as Giddens speak



from a normative position that they do not admit or engage with, and contribute to the dissemination of elements clearly belonging to a neoliberal ideology. For example, the redefinition of security through a direct link with *employability* that the neoliberal orthodoxy proposes echoes substantively the argument about the positive potentialities inscribed in the new logic. Albeit employability takes the broader issue of security to the more restricted realm of the working life, it is a useful entry point for reframing “the dilemma of optimism” as “the dilemma of the social scientist’s critical stance”, as critical management scholars have convincingly showed.

Critical management studies have emerged as a field of scholarly enquiry in direct dialogue with the management literature, fully aware of and in reaction to the latter’s normative character. Their topics are broad and so are the theoretical positions that they anchor their critique in. Within this field, a range of scholars situating themselves in the line of analysis opened by Foucault’s discussion of governmentality have produced convincing accounts about what they call the neoliberal subjectivity, understood as

the ways in which subjects are governed as market agents, encouraged to cultivate themselves as autonomous, self-interested individuals, and to view their resources and aptitudes as human capital for investment and return. Neoliberal governmentality presumes a more or less continuous series that runs from those macro-technologies by which states govern populations, to the micro-technologies by which individuals govern themselves, allowing power to govern

individuals “at a distance,” as individuals translate and incorporate the rationalities of political rule into their own methods for conducting themselves<sup>1</sup>

(Binkley 2009:62)

The observation that employees do not enjoy (and cannot claim) security in the traditional sense, in which it is guaranteed by the nexus of the (national) welfare state and the employer also has the quality of polarizing responses. The reading stemming from a normative position proposes that it allows people to explore a variety of settings through the various projects (and therefore fulfill their talents and capabilities). Security is redefined so that it does not depend on (imperfect) organizations (like the welfare state), but one that is embodied by the person and their unique qualities which will make them wanted by others.

The initial formulation of governmentality differentiated between the pressure towards the formation of a certain subject and the processes of self-production on the actor's side. Also, governmentality “is always a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts between techniques which assure coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by himself” (Foucault, 1993:203-4). However, this implicit indeterminacy that this conception of the workings of governmentality holds tends to be diminished in recent studies (Binkley, 2009)<sup>2</sup>. Instead, the focus lies on describing the

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<sup>1</sup> The intersection between a broader problematique of the link between micro-technologies of self-making and macro-technologies of government and the particular era in which they are traced by researchers leads to several contestations. One of them comes from the tendency of this literature to equate the processes of subject-making with the neoliberal era. Kipnis (2008) develops a substantive critique of the easiness with which any form of governmentality is attributed by anthropologists to the specific neoliberal logic.

<sup>2</sup> There are, however, exception with Binkley himself being one of them. He focuses on outlining the possibility for conceptualizing resistance “understood as temporal counter-conducts within neoliberalism” (Binkley, 2009).

scripts for subjectivity that individuals are exposed to through “the institutional logics, the assemblages, technologies and *dispositifs*” (Binkley, 2009:62) and on documenting the link between elements of individuals’ understandings of themselves and the macro-technologies of government they are targeted by. In Binkley’s view, the failures of subjectification processes as well as the resistance of individuals are not explored satisfactorily.

What often remains unclear is the level to which the descriptions of a new subject pertain. The level of describing empirically observable ways in which actual people embedded in concrete contexts understand their actions and themselves; the level of the constructions that various institutions propose and mobilize their semantic power to inscribe a certain reality. How people think they should understand themselves? How do they act? What are the aggregate observable effects of their ways of acting? The next section will dwell on the way the tension between being targeted by scripts and the responses individuals have is looked at.

Going back to the second level of contestation of the “extended reflexivity” scholars. One formulation of such critique refers to the insufficient attention paid to the structural constraints, the inequalities and the mediating instances that make the otherwise universal process of individualization impact on different people to different extents and resulting in qualitatively different experiences.

Contra Beck, it is likely that the range, intensity and quality of individualization will be mediated by embedded forms of stratification: whilst the process of

individualization may be universal, experiences of this process will be heterogeneous (Mythen 2005:138)

Indeed, the *globalization* buzzword of the 1990 has not remained without critical reactions from social scientists in the following decade, leading to a substantive body of critical literature that challenges, reinterprets and nuances these claims. Crucially, attention is drawn to the short-term-ism inscribed in many accounts of globalization, which present it as a new phenomenon, as the very element that differentiates the contemporary époque from the previous ones. In fact, globalization needs to be traced back much further, and so do the dimensions on which actual social change is to be documented. The two decades around year 2000 are in this reading characterized by the decline of the hegemonic position of USA, a new logic of capital accumulation, different dynamics of flows and subsequent fixes of capital (Arrighi, 2000, Arrighi, 2009, Harvey, 2003). The diminished capacity of the nation state to act as a container for economic and social processes is being documented (Brenner, 2004, Taylor, 2003, Smith, 2002), together with showing the extraordinariness of the previous phase, in which it was the most relevant scale (Lefebvre, 2003, Smith, 2004, MacKinnon, 2011). Consequently, rescaling processes gain importance, in which both supra-national and subnational scales are deemed relevant for understanding the new processes. The urban occupies a privileged role in these accounts revealing the unevenness of globalization: the narratives of rescaling show how some cities reconfigure themselves into urban hubs (Brenner, 2009, Routledge, 2003, Sassen, 2007). Equally investigated are the transformations taking place within the urban space, with the changing patterns of inequality and

development, the reshuffling of inequalities (Atkinson and Bridge, 2005, Davis, 2006, Mitchell, 2003, Low, 2004).

The context insensitivity is, therefore, a serious problem. The sophisticated insights of the political economy scholarship mentioned earlier are not incorporated. The relationship between situated individuals and these descriptions are not that between an ideal type and the observed instances, between which there would always be a mismatch. There is a systematic bias, which could be best described in terms of assimilating to an apparent level of reality description a normative position, which would be best assigned to the category of scripts for subjectivity.

. The critical theories I referred to have as an underlying ultimately concern revealing the ways the livelihood of people is being affected and transformed within the (changing) structural conditions. Individuals factor in these accounts primarily in their quality of belonging to social classes or categories within the urban spaces, as well as being inhabitants of core-periphery divisions and subdivisions. Or, as migrants, linking places, following flows of capital and creating them, but less in their quality of individuals actively engaging with the environments in which they are embedded.

These theories could broadly be assigned to the category of “critical theories” in Boltanski’s terminology; in his discussion of the relationship between sociology and critique, he distinguishes among two principal ways in which sociological accounts are positioned in relation to their object of study, while both maintaining a position of exteriority in relation to it and operating a form of totalization.

Critical theories of domination necessarily rely on descriptive social science to paint a picture of the reality subject to critique. But compared with sociological descriptions that seek to conform to the vulgate of neutrality, the specificity of critical theories is that they contain critical judgments on the social order which the analyst assumes responsibility for in her own name, thus abandoning any pretension to neutrality<sup>3</sup> (Boltanski 2011)

Boltanski says that their desiderate for emancipation makes critical theories of domination compelled to take their life from actually existing individuals (“the idea of a critical theory that is not backed by the experience of a collective, and which in some sense exists for its own sake- that is for no one – is incoherent” (Boltanski, 2011:5)). “it must grasp the discontents of actors, explicitly consider them in the very labor of theorization, in such a way as to alter their relationship to social reality and, thereby, that social reality itself, in the direction of emancipation. As a consequence, the kind of critique they make possible must enable the disclosure of aspects of reality in an immediate relationship with the preoccupations of actors –that is also with ordinary critiques. Critical theories feed off these ordinary critiques even if they develop them differently, reformulate them and are destined to return to them, since their aim is to render reality unacceptable” (Boltanski 2011:5).

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<sup>3</sup> Both theories of domination and “sociological descriptions” share a position of externality. However, one of them is concerned with “social order” and the other one with “society”.

## 1.2. What do ordinary people have to tell about domination and about the world?

What does this amount to when actual individuals and their discourse, narratives about themselves, about their lives, likes and dislikes are to be interpreted?

To sum up shortly and oversimplifying, albeit with different nuances and *embedded in different foci*, a more or less explicit theorization of a new ideal-type of person which is invoked by the second/late/fluid/post modernity or neoliberal era is found across several bodies of literature. Oversimplifying for the moment, the story goes that the “Taylorist automat”, the ultimate executor, whose task fulfillment was cleansed by any personal input, who relies on the state and the employer for security is now being replaced by the flexible, team-work oriented, creative, self-directing autonomous individual that fits the decentralized, flexible logic of the economy (Ten Bos and Rhodes 2003). The reflexive “do-it-yourself” biographer (Giddens, 1991; Beck 2001), creatively putting together the bits and pieces of experience and overcoming taken for granted ways of being in the world, as well as the pessimistic formulation of “the corroded self” (Sennett, 1998) direct attention towards similar theses<sup>4</sup>. A similar argument comes through the description of the “refashioning the passionate manager” (Hatcher 2003), in which the authors offer an analysis in terms of transformations of gendered features; convergence in the type of subject described, despite the different analytical stake

It is no longer respect for hierarchies and flawless fulfillment of objectives set by those on a higher level of authority, but enthusiastic engagement, initiative, availability and

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desire to become involved and invest one's creative energies and potential. The exemplary workers are easily adaptable and their autonomy makes them not need detailed instructions for their task fulfillment. They inspire and mobilize the others around them<sup>5</sup>.

In the current stage of capitalism, the iconic form of organization is not the large and multi-layered firm with a rather constant structure through time. On the contrary, it is a world of projects, of temporary arrangements between individuals, having only a clear duration and aim. Every individual's future is uncertain at the end of each of these projects. Therefore, what is at stake in projects is not only its successful completion, but the personal performance, which, in case is satisfactory, will trigger further engagements. The purposefulness that was inscribed in the fordist imagery of the individual life course project is taken away, as the new requirements are those of constant adaptability and lack of attachment. The only red thread for the life project inscribed in the new logic is that of the employability<sup>6</sup>.

In "The New Spirit of Capitalism", Boltanski and Chiapello also delineate phases in the history of capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello 2006a, 2006b). Their descriptions of both the previous and the current époque echo substantively the accounts mentioned above (Boltanski and Chiapello 2006a, 2006b). Their descriptions of each of the three great stages they identify in the history of capitalism gives significant space to the ideal subject who embodies and enacts what is considered the proper economic logic of the time. The *Great Person* central to the previous two forms of spirit of capitalism have been the bourgeois entrepreneur and the *cadre* (the manager in large companies). Against the image

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of the cadre, the Great Person within the 3<sup>rd</sup> spirit of capitalism is the connectionist individual. The following sections will dwell on the way the spirit of capitalism as “the ideology that justifies people’s engagement in the system” is conceptualized and the ways in which it factors into their model of social change. What is important at this point of the discussion is that Boltanski and Chiapello’s descriptions are situated clearly and explicitly at the level of expectations that the system has for the individuals. Their description of the dominant ideology of each of the *époques* is based on, as well as the features of the Great Person is based on management literature, which has an explicit normative position.

The normative management literature, together with other genres it is related to (like training materials, career advice centers) is an important site for getting at the normative visions. This type of literature makes explicit recommendations for behaviors and attitudes that one should adhere to in order to live a successful, liberating and moral life. Links between individual behavior and greater desirable purposes are selectively emphasized, together with an attempt to give the particular prescriptions the status of the only or at least the most appropriate means to reach those goals. The reasons for committing to the system are because it fulfils the requirements of Fairness: Excitement: Security.

They are attempts to make a *reality* hold together. They show how in the reality that they propose, if one adheres to the does fulfill the requirements for excitement, security and justice. There exists, therefore, this layer of description, in which a certain reality is proposed, and the proponents of it are also identifiable.

The scholars inspired by Foucault's concept of governmentality mentioned above offer a convincing line of critique to the euphoria of liberation allegedly brought by the phase of flexible accumulation of capital comes. They show how the newly emerged model of the autonomous self-directed individual actually factors into a complex model of governmentality, of creating subjects that can be ruled from a distance (Rose, 1999). In this strand of literature, the emphasis is laid on deconstructing the mechanisms which sustain and enforce this model as well as on delineating the endangerment of the human being it entails. The critical stance of much of this literature is directed against expressions what are actually normative subject-making narratives as truths about the (natural) functioning of the world. Some of these sociologies do not hold that they want to be critical, but they want to be neutral. There is no such thing as neutral, because the categories belong to one of the realities.

A seeming division of labor emerges between the "management literature" and the "critical social scientists". The role of the management literature is to pinpoint the sources of enthusiasm while the role of the sociologist (or critical management scholar) is to delineate the subjectification mechanisms and the translation of the system's needs into requirement for subjects.

Let us take the example of a recruitment interview, in which a woman in her late 30s applies for an interview. Based on her CV, she gets additional questions. She tells the story of the succession of her job as a programmer, then a sales agent, then the manager of a new branch of the firm, then the marketing "department", then the head of this department. She can talk, for example, about the moment when she was offered the

opportunity to choose between remaining a programmer and going into Sales as a moment when she had to take the time to think about herself, what she is like, what she would like to do, what fits her. And to present it as a moment of self-discovery, a challenge and a great opportunity, despite the difficulties or readjusting. About her other turning point, when she set up the marketing department, she can say that she finally discovered which domain really fits her well, and best matches her needs for doing innovative things, and also things that are important, that have an impact in the overall trajectory of the firm.

There is the position of the human resources manager, which, when evaluating for an interview a person establishes her worth, the degree to which her trajectory so far, her skills and attitudes match the ideal typical construction.

She takes the ideology as the source for confirmation of worth, for establishing order in the reality, for the causal links between individual actions and higher and highest levels of abstraction. It solidifies the test, it makes the expectations from the subject clear and translated. Recruitment agencies, evaluations, selection procedures are all instances in which reality is reaffirmed, its reality is being reasserted (the reality of reality, that is). At the same time, its normative functions, of qualification are at work, as “it fixes the relationship between a symbolic form capable of being associated, on the one hand, with a state of affairs and roles in a type situation and, on the other hand, with a state of affairs and performances in a token situation ... It associates with the situation or object in question not only various predicates, but also relations to other objects, making it possible to invest them with a value ... Finally, it points towards consequences in reality,

particularly at the level of usage, in such a way as to posit an alternative between correct usage and incorrect usage, and thereby open up the possibility of a sanction. The process of qualification is therefore indissolubly descriptive and normative” (Boltanski 2011:40)<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, people’s accounts of the limits and forms of their engagement with the capitalist system, the enthusiasms and indignations that they have about their engagement tend to be treated differently from the two positions. On the one hand, the management literature fails to see its own normative position and does not question the link between what people say (and think) about themselves and their actions and what they are pressed towards thinking and saying. On the other hand, the critical stance is highly suspicious towards any expression of excitement or contentment and sometimes takes the expressions indignations seriously. The management “camp” would present her as the perfect example that once the true principles of functioning of the (current) economy are understood and acted upon accordingly, the person will have a happy life. The other camp will be suspicious with her saying that overall she is content she had the opportunity to try out many different jobs in her life so far, because it allowed her to discover what she is really good at and to try out her limits. In this reading, we have the successfully subjected human, who uncritically talks the neoliberal script that was subtly imposed on her. A subjection she is not aware of, she is not in any way engaging with the normativity of “flexibility” or the “availability to constantly reinvent oneself”.

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<sup>7</sup> This work of qualification generally relies on formats or types, invariably combined with descriptions and/ or definitions, which are themselves stored in various forms (such as regulations, codes, customs, rituals, narratives, emblematic examples, etc. ). These formats incorporate classifications (and, in particular, classifications making it possible to distribute people between groups or categories) and combine them with rules that exercise a constraint on access to goods and their use. They thereby play a major role in the formation and stabilization of asymmetries (Boltanski 2011:9)

I hold that none of the two positions is close to doing justice to the actual experience of individuals, which is in most cases a mixture of indignation and genuine enthusiasm and content. This is problematic not because of theoretical disrespect to the individual, but because of the limitations it places on the critical account from metacritical positions and their possible contribution to the emancipatory agenda they are committed to. The propensity to take the extreme position of solely unmasking evil mechanisms as a counterbalance for the immense visibility the managerial discourse has (due to the multiple channels through which it is diffused and the resources these channels have) is understandable. However, failing to acknowledge (and incorporate theoretically) the reality of the blend sets up a crucial blind spot. The lens through which the evil mechanisms are unmasked needs to be prepared to see the failure of the evil mechanisms just as well, otherwise the ways in which they actually function remains concealed. This particular direction that the Foucauldian concept took ends up operating with a problematic definition of a social actor.

The propensity to take the extreme position of unmasking evil mechanisms and emphasizing their quality of being intrinsic to the neoliberal logic as a counterbalance for the immense visibility the managerial discourse has (due to the multiple channels through which it is diffused and the resources these channels have) is understandable. In the desire not to allow any element to escape without the critical scrutiny that would tie it to a need of the system, too much significant variation is being, however, silenced and ripped off its political potentials. This sets a crucial blind spots for analysis that this tendency brings, because of the tendency to focus only on the pressures, not on the multilayered experience of living within these pressures (part of which is the genuine

enthusiasm and seduction). It fails to address the insights of the antropological literature has shown how hegemony comes with counterhegemony etc. And basically does not allow for the process by which these things work to be shown.

This leaves us with restating the tension of what critical accounts are. Whom they can be expressed by and the venues through which they might matter. There are two problems, which will be addressed in the following two sections. They can be framed as the distribution of critical capacities across the “ordinary people” and the “social scientist”. One of them relates to the understanding of the actor and the conceptualisation of the possibilities of engagement. Beyond the agency structure debate. The other one refers to the nature of the critical accoutns that social scientists do, can or could provide.

In the following section, I propose that the actor endowed with critical capacities<sup>8</sup> is crucial in a theoretical understanding of the workings of capitalism. I will follow the pragmatic sociology of critique’s insights, the “spirit of capitalism” as a conceptual entry point. The tendency to appropriate the critical capacity entirely to the social scientist is engaged with in the fourth section. This problem goes beyond the foucauldian-inspired accounts of subjectivities. I will use Boltanski’s distinction between the sociological theories of domination and the pragmatic sociology of critique, together with the tension that they inhabit in relation to their underlying emancipatory agenda.

### 1.3. Critique and *Reality* 1: Ordinary actors endowed with critical capacity

Both these problems are central to the preoccupations of Boltanski and Chiapello. This section will dwell on. On a first level, their account of the changes between the macro stages of capital accumulation resonate with the ones described so far. They are also preoccupied by the demands made on the individuals and the individuals responses to those demands. The centrality they give to the “spirit of capitalism” in the account of social change that they give, and the way they exploit the tension between the spirit of capitalism and critique offers a way to address the tensions mentioned above.

*Capitalism* is characterized by a minimal format stressing the need for unlimited accumulation by pacific means<sup>9</sup>. Capital is cut off from material forms of wealth and can be increased only through continuous reinvestment and circulation. This endows it with a clearly abstract quality that contributes to the perpetuation of the accumulation process. (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005:240; 1999).

The analytical space for a “spirit of capitalism” stems from the tension between the absurdity of the system (the wage earners lost the ownership on their labor and products of this labor; the capitalists’ the striving for maintaining the cycles of capital (re)-investment becomes divorced from the actual wealth and its potential usage) and its dependency on the commitment of many people. While in itself an amoral system, capitalism needs moral elements in order to capture people’s enthusiasm and

commitment to it<sup>10</sup>. “The spirit of capitalism is the ideology that brings together the reasons for commitment to the system” (Boltanski and Chiapello), and it has historical variations.

There are three dimensions that they identify in what the spirit of capitalism should provide answers for (formulate representations/an ideology). The *first one* articulates the ways in which the system can help people live a more fulfilling life (the “liberations” it offers). The *second one* delineates the ways in which (proper) involvement in the system would yield security for the actors. The *third one* is built in reference to the idea that the system serves common good, that there is coherence with a sense of fairness (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999, 2005; Chiapello, 2003).

While the spirit of capitalism is directed towards capturing the enthusiasm and commitment of these people towards the smooth functioning of the system, it has the concomitant effect of constraining the system. In order to motivate people to invest in this principle of organization, capitalism exposes itself to the possibility of critique on terms it has agreed to hold important. Not *all* action is legitimate and not *everything* goes.

The pragmatist desiderate, which states that

The main problem with critical sociology is its inability to understand the critical operations undertaken by the actors. A sociology which wants to study the critical operations performed by actors – a sociology of criticism taken as a

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<sup>10</sup> They refute the idea that it is based on force (therefore, the argument that people are entangled in the capitalist system solely for survival is rejected. This argument would actually contribute to naturalizing capitalism as the only form of social organization. This is also visible in the justification efforts that are made by the state and other institution to convey reason for which disadvantageous contracts and austerity measures are legitimate, are fair. This is already the distortion element of the ideology.



specific object – must therefore give up (if only temporarily) the critical stance in order to recognize the normative principles which underlie the critical activity of ordinary persons. If we want to take seriously the claims of actors when they denounce social injustice, criticize power relationships or unveil their foes' hidden motives, we must conceive of them as endowed with an ability to differentiate legitimate and illegitimate ways of rendering criticism and justification. It is, more precisely, this competence which characterizes the ordinary sense of justice which people implement in their disputes ( Boltanski and Thevenot, 1999: 364).

A crucial part of the definition of the spirit of capitalism lies in the understanding given to “ideology”. Eve Chiapello’s discussion on the need to reconcile two sets of meanings most frequently attributed to the concept of ideology (Chiapello 2003). In an article that clarifies the understanding of the “spirit of capitalism” (developed in Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999), she creates the opposition between a culturalist and a Marxian understanding of ideology. The “spirit of capitalism” comes as the theoretical solution. presents the necessity and theoretical possibility of bridging the apparently irreconcilable poles of understanding the concept of ideology: the Marxist one and the culturalist one, as she labels them<sup>11</sup>. Centered on the role ideology has in masking the exploitative nature of capitalism and producing a false consciousness, the Marxist vein defines ideology as a distortion against which critical thinking/action needs to be directed. The other sets of definitions focus on the ideology’s aspect of social representation, vehicles of thought,

perception and knowledge, which are omnipresent and play the crucial role in the integration and reproduction of societies and smaller groups<sup>12</sup>.

This integration involves seeing ideology-as-distortion as one of the effects (or pathologies) of a wider culturalist conception of ideology as a factor of integration. Of course, as Geertz forcefully stated, symbolic action is that which precedes the distortion effect. Nevertheless, we still have to understand how the semiotic dimension of action can produce distortion in the Marxist sense of the term, meaning a distortion of thought due to the interests involved (Chiapello 2003:160).

The strive for integrating the two poles takes a first step through Ricoeur's addition of the function of legitimation: "it is because ideology in its group integration function tends to legitimize a social order in its current state (trying to ensure the preservation and reproduction thereof) that it is a theatre of distortion" (Chiapello, 2003:160).

While both stemming from the verb "to legitimize", the terms legitimation and legitimacy allow for the difference between the emphases that the two conceptions pose on the same phenomenon: on the one hand the concealing aspect and on the other hand, the representations that ensure the shared description of the world, orient action and reinforce and maintain the legitimacy and stability of social order.

Legitimacy is that which those who are being dominated voluntarily grant to those who are dominating them. However, in actual fact this latter group has a

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<sup>12</sup> She refers here to Geertz and Louis Dumont. Thevenot offers a more detailed discussion of the link with the Durkheim and Mauss's emphasis on the categories of thought, Bourdieu and Mary Douglas's take on the role of cognitive categories in the social (Thevenot, 2007).

surplus to play with. They have been able to obtain more, they have developed power above and beyond that which those who are being dominated would be willing to grant to them if they alone had the choice in this matter. Still, those who are in a dominant position do need to legitimize the sum total of their domination, including any excess their. . Ideology as a producer of integration produces legitimacy but also legitimation as a way of accounting for the surplus power tht those who are in a dominant position dispose of. It is specifically in the legitimacy production function, in other words, in this legitimation of surplus power, that ideology meets up with the distortion function (Chiapello 2003:161).

A better and more dynamic formulation of what is exactly the tension that the spirit of capitalism captures comes in Boltanski's later discussion of the semantic role of institutions. He draws the distinction between the world and reality. The original position is that of radical uncertainty, which characterizes the *world*, which is a reunion of all the things that happen, in which each individual has a position and a point of view, and which cannot be described fully. *Reality* is the socially constructed interpretation of the *world*. Institutions have a semantic function, of keeping "reality together". It is constantly threatened by elements from the world. It is a A more dynamic reformulation of this argument is offered by the theoretical language of the *tests*. And the distinction between reality and the world. Boltanski distinguishes between tests of truth, of reality and existential tests. Individuals are therefore seen as operating with multiple orders of worth, making demands of worth and as being "realistic".

## 1.4. Critique and *Reality 2*: Metacritical positions and their dynamic interaction with the spirit of capitalism

Crises and change are intrinsic to capitalism, who constantly transforms itself. Contrary to the so-called pessimistic views which do not give much role to the critics of capitalism in influencing the direction in which the system develops, critique plays a crucial explanatory role in the model of social change outlined by Boltanski and Chiapello (1999; 2005). The macro switch from the second to the third phase of the spirit of capitalism (or the rise of the second/late/liquid/post modernity, neoliberal era) is centered upon the changes happening at the level of the formulation of the reasons and ways in which people are invited to be involved in the capitalist system and gives the critique of the 60s a fundamental explanatory role.

They argue that the main pillars of critique in the 60s were the *artistic* (emphasis on the dehumanization entailed in the industrial models of organization of work, ripping of people of their possibilities of expression, creativity and innovation) and the *social* (denouncing bad working conditions and contracts, exploitation) one. Looking at the new spirit of capitalism that emerged after this crisis, the connection between its core elements and the concepts the artistic critique was directing against the previous one is striking. Through this indigenization of critique, a displacement occurs, leading to a new historical variety of the capitalist principles, one in relation to which new critical points need to be articulated.

The spirit of capitalism fed itself from the moral dilemmas identified by its opponents, and selectively articulated them into a new representation, that will now be seductive, as

it addresses real problems that people had faced. This solves capitalism's amorality, and the absurdity of the system.

A new reality is proposed by capitalism (here problematic the distinction between organizations and institutions and administration) The artistic critique is disarmed, as its key concepts for claim making in relation to the previous spirit of capitalism are now at the core of the justifications capitalism offers people for their entangling in the system: "creativity", "autonomy" or "innovation".

Talk of work and working subjects is always normative, and the spirit of capitalism itself has oppositions as its building block. Any current or new vision on subjects is made in relation to another vision, which is deemed inadequate. The management literature on which Boltanski and Chiapello rely when building their description of the third spirit of capitalism is structure around opposing the new ways to the old ways, with clear value judgments on the two.

In *The New Spirit of Capitalism* we attempted to construct a framework to unify (1) approaches referring to supra-individual entities with the capacity to affect a large number of people over a long period, that is, approaches following the critical sociology tradition and using the concept of capitalism and (2) approaches originating in *pragmatic sociology*, putting the emphasis on action, on the normative demands in the name of which deliberate actions are undertaken, and in particular on critical operations, that is, approaches belonging to the 'sociology of criticism' current. But rather than describing critical operations in restricted situations examined on a one-off basis, our objective was

to bring out the role played by criticism in the dynamics of capitalism, and to construct a model of normative change (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005).

Unveiling and reaching to the essence of supra-individual processes of subjectification seems to be the privileged possibility of the social scientist or other critical actor. It is from the need to endow the non-extraordinary social actors (i.e. non social-scientists) with critical capacities that the proponents of the sociology of convention start from. Taking this requirement seriously means more than acknowledging that sometimes processes of subjectification fail, but to substantively engage with the problem identified in section 2.3.

## **CHAPTER 2. THE CASE, THE QUESTIONS AND THE METHOD**

### **2.1. The empirical material: samples and interviews**

#### *The main sample – middle managers*

This research draws primarily on the 44 semi-structured interviews I conducted between September 2007 and June 2008 and during a short follow up in June-July 2009 with professionals/skilled workers living in Cluj, Romania. More than half of them have a middle managerial position in a privately owned firm. The other 18 interviewees have a coordinating position in a private firm, an NGO or the state sector. Their educational background is various: Technical University, Economics, Computer Science, Sociology, European Studies, Psychology, Letters, Social work, Philosophy, Environmental Sciences, Physics, Theology, and History. All the interviewees had obtained their higher education degree after 1992 and had their significant working experience after this date. All of them had graduated at least 5 years before the interviews and have worked for at least 5 years. The sample was balanced gender-wise, and variety was sought in respect to the sector of the firm in which they were currently working (state, private, NGO, self-employed), the type of ownership of the firm (foreign investors, local capital, mixed ownership) their age, the length of their careers and their social background.

In addition, I have taken notes of the various discussions I had with people fitting the criteria for selection, but whom I did not thoroughly interview. The analysis is based on more information than the ones in the interviews, but it is only 44 complete working life stories that I have collected. I had detailed access to background information about two of

the firms where my interviewees worked because of my flat mates. Particularly useful was the rich insight they facilitated through various discussions surrounding two cases of promotion as well as the crisis that one of the firms went through after an audit process was not successful.

The first decision of narrowing down the category of young “people with higher education” was not focusing on any of the strongly institutionalized and structured career fields (like law or medical school), or clear niches like IT workers. Instead, I wanted to examine that part of the labor market that is most sensitive to the broader changes in the overall logic of capital accumulation as well as the educational system. From this point on, an alternative logic of sampling would have been to narrowing my interest to a niche like marketing, or human resources, or one of the more cutting edge innovative branches (like branding or organizational consulting). However, I decided to allow for a variety of domains/occupations/positions to enter my sample because all these positions in the labor market are relatively new in the Romanian context, and therefore with a low degree of institutionalization of both the rules of entering the field and of switching across fields. The decision to have as the constant element for all the interviewees the fact that they are either middle managers, run a department or have narrower coordinating functions in their firms was made after some exploratory interviews.

My decision of leaving the positions open to certain extent is also supported by the literature which conceptualizes the way in which the labor market/career field and the educational system interact with each other, and the type of “spaces of transition from school to work” they constitute. There is a solid body of literature focusing on work entry



patterns regarded as outcomes of the institutional arrangements specific to a certain country. Scholars argue for the existence of a causal link between the particular features of the educational system and the characteristics of the transition from school to work in particular countries. These analyses are most of the time realized on large samples, employ statistical testing of hypotheses and give an overall image of the situation in the respective country or countries (Shavitt and Muller, 1998; Rosembaum, 1990; Kerckhoff, 1995; Shavitt and Muller, 1998; Kohlrausch, 2000; Iannelli, 2001; Róbert, 2002

The most relevant insight brought by this literature for my study refers to the point at which specialization of individuals happens in these spaces (if at all). In a highly stratified, standardized and with a strong component of vocational training educational system, the specialization happens in school. School leavers have clear professional identities and a limited number of tracks that their diploma allows them to follow. On the contrary, the “occupational” space is the ideal type of the neo-liberal orthodoxy, (whose features are now strengthened by the commitment of the Romanian educational system to “align to the Bologna standards”): school leavers have general (as opposed to specific, narrow) skills, which can be further employed in a variety of jobs, positions. The emphasis rests on the transferability of the skills, which make possible a constant upgrading of the person, so that the needs of the flexible capital accumulation are met<sup>13</sup>.

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13 The consequences on the individual trajectories of these institutional determinants touch upon more aspects: broadly speaking, individuals moving in an occupational space are more likely to find jobs soon after their graduation and to have them tightly linked to their background than their organizational space counterparts. However, they are more exposed to the risk of permanent unemployment after unsuccessful first tries, unlike the situation in Britain, where a long period of waiting after the graduation is more the norm than the exception and youth are very likely to experience long periods of “early turbulence” (Kohlrausch, 2000, Scherer, 1999). The “turbulence” extends over to the entire career, as the transferable and general skills that make possible and invite flexible careers.

Following this distinction, the reforms of the Romanian space of transition from school to work could be described as trying to undergo a shift between an occupational and an organizational one. The socialist educational system was strongly stratified, centralized, with strong vocational component. Transition to the labor market was highly institutionalized and specialization took place before entering it. While often incoherent, the reforms of the educational system, converge towards loosening this link. The current logic in which the educational system frames its role favors a loose link between qualification and job held. This has two implications: on the one hand, regardless of the qualification held there are multiple tracks that can be followed by an individual. On the other hand, it means that a particular position in the career field (on the labor market) can be occupied by individuals with various educational backgrounds.

While the overall configuration of the space of transition from school to work in Romania may be an organizational one, there are important differences within it. Areas such as Law and Medical School as fields of career have highly restricted entering rules. Also, Psychology has been in the past 3 years becoming more institutionalized. With engineering or technical studies in general, there is also a strong link between the qualification and the job held. The entire labor market/career field/space of transition from school to work is undergoing a process of restructuring. This process is, however, an uneven one: not all areas (in terms of positions, jobs, niches, professions...) have the same rhythm of change; also, while the nation state still operates as an important homogenizing filter, there are both supra-national and sub-national sources of uneven transformations toward greater institutionalization. From the perspective of the intra-national differences, Cluj is a case of looser institutionalization than the capital city

Bucharest. There is more room for “unlikely” changes in careers and a greater part of the jobs available have looser descriptions than it would happen in Bucharest.

The interview guide inquired about the entire trajectory of the informant, starting with their choice for the university and their experience during the studies and ending with their current employment situation. I have probed on details about the turning points in the careers, the overall context in which these changes took place, their reactions and motivations. I also tried to get an image of the strategies they had when switching jobs (for example the type of networks they were mobilizing), their motivations for doing so and the alternatives they felt they had at various points, even if they did not get materialized. The last part of the interview focused on their plans for the future and the background information that had not been mentioned so far (their parents’ occupation and level of education, the way they assess their parents’ opinion about their professional life course so far).

Informed by previous studies which have shown the relevance of the migratory path of the educational and work trajectory, variation was also sought on this dimension. A recent study following the careers of the ethnic Hungarian university graduates in Transylvania points at the sequence of locality scale in their migratory path as one of the main factors behind the typology of careers they outline (Csata and Mandel 2007). They delineate important differences in the “career habitus” of people belonging to these different types of underlying migratory trajectories (before the university, the university years and after the university as being in either rural, small scale city, Cluj, capital city (Budapest or Bucharest) and the possible combinations resulting from here).

Graduates of universities in Cluj have several migratory paths behind them: one possibility is that they have spent most of their life in the same city, being born, raised and educated in Cluj. An equally noteworthy possibility is that they came from other parts of Romania for their university studies and then stayed there afterwards: in most of these cases, it is either from a smaller town, or a village that they originate, but cases of people coming to study from Bucharest or cities of comparable scale to Cluj, like Timisoara or Brasov are not negligible. The majority of the interviewees (37) have a BA degree from one of the universities in Cluj. However, 21 of them are not originally from Cluj, but went there to study from smaller scale towns and rural areas in Romania. 13 of them had one or more episodes of working either abroad, in Bucharest or in smaller scale localities in Romania for some time.

*The additional sample – future graduates*

Apart from Chapter 6, the entire thesis is based on the material described above. In this chapter, however, I rely additionally on a set of 28 interviews collected in 2006 and 2008 with students in their MA studies and final year of BA. Supplementing the stories of working lives of the middle managers that have been central so far in this dissertation is necessary because of the way this main sample was constructed: all the middle managers have worked for at least 5 years and have been awarded (at least their first) BA degree no later than 5 years prior to the interview. Therefore, they have not been students in these last 5 years, when the educational system has gone through many changes that are likely to impact greatly on the conditions in which they make their moves towards the labor market. I will provide a more detailed analysis of the changes in the educational system both in Chapter 3 and in Chapter 6. While the middle managers have felt the effects of these changes, they have done so only in a mediated way, as actors within the career field

that is affected by the educational systems' transformations (Mayrhofer et al). While the main focus in these studies is on the early careers, the changes in the relationship between the educational system and the economic one also influences the careers of those who have started them earlier, through the parameters it sets for the career field. The type of specializations for which degrees are issued, the number of graduates as well as the teaching principles are the means through which the educational system in its interaction with the economic one influence the basic parameters of the career field.

I intended to maximize the difference between the domains chosen, to have faculties with different profile of their graduates in terms of their early employment patterns. In order to get an image of these employment patterns, I used a report issued by the University based on questionnaires filled by the graduates at the moment when they pick up their diploma. Using the SPSS package, I clustered the faculties according to their graduates' profile using the following variables: percentage of graduates working in the state sector, percentage of graduates working with a permanent contract and percentage of graduates that are employed in the domain that they have graduated from. The underlying assumption was that the differences obtained on these variables mirror a deeper difference in the way in which the subfield of their domain of activity is structured. Three clusters resulted from the analysis, and I chose one faculty from each of them: Physics, European Studies and Psychology. According to this report, Physics (and the cluster to which it belongs) is characterized by a high percentage of students working in the state sector, with a permanent contract and in their domain. Psychology graduates (as the graduates in the other Faculties from the same cluster) work less in the state sector, but have permanent forms of employment and do work in their domain. European Studies

graduates work significantly more in the private sector, in a variety of domains of activity and with a larger variety of employment contracts.

These additional interviews were collected following a comparable logic and therefore the material is comparable on this dimension with that obtained through the working life stories of the middle managers in the main sample. Future graduates were asked narratives of their lives in the past years, starting with the beginning of the university years and ending with the present. They were asked about their *past experience* and about the *projections for the future* they have. The interviews had several interrelated aims. First, I wanted to map the range of activities that they have been involved in since graduating high school and the logic in which they integrate them in their image of their lives so far. Second, I intended to map the range of sources of information for all these activities (personal-impersonal, type of impersonal and personal) that they were involved with and the differentiated quality of information coming from these sources (informed by the Granovetter's idea of the embeddedness in networks that are sources of differentiated quality information and that operate as important mediators between the objectively available positions and the individual). Finally, I wanted to get an image of their understanding of a "good job" or a "good position" (the underlying idea being that people operating in different domains or subfields have different understandings of what a good job means and that the way in which they relate to the environment and the type of embeddedness that is more convenient to the logic of the subfield differs on this line (Mayrhofer, 2001).

The comparability of the two sets of interviews is, however, limited in another respect. What is common to the interviewees in the main sample is the fact that they were employed on a position with coordination functions in 2007-2007. They, however, have very different educational background and different early careers. In the additional sample, there is some controlled variety on the educational background variable, but none on the future path they would take. Arguably, only some of them would become managers in the future; in this respect, the main sample is a skewed selection, as it does not give any insight into the experiences of the rest of the cohorts of graduates to which the current managers belong that took alternative paths. The argument made in Chapter 6 (the only one using the additional sample) takes this dimension of incomparability into account and further explains its implications.

In line with the overall claim for a context-sensitive analysis of the working lives of individuals, I inquired into the economic and social history of the city, in the available sociological literature, media coverage and personal communications. The interviewees working (or having worked) as Human Resources specialists offered me important additional insights into more general trends in the labor market of Cluj.

There are 2 important characteristics of the people this study focuses on. First, none of the informants has had any significant working or higher education experience during communism. This was a strategic research design choice, by which I aimed to avoid discussing the problem of the legacy of old practices, the degree to which people used to work in a different societal organization have managed to adapt to the new conditions.

The socialist past is a crucial element in understanding most of the relevant aspects of the experiences of my informants. However, it is in a different way than the legacy element.

Also, as one of the analytical lines running through the dissertation is that of the enthusiasm of people, I found it important to look at a population that is somewhat in the middle: most of these people rely on their salaries, even if they have their own firm. Yet, they are not in optionless situations. They can choose whether to stay in a job or not. I will elaborate on this more, but it is important to note that I looked at a category of people for whom the question of “what elicits their enthusiasm” is not irrelevant and is not rhetorical.

## **2.2. A strategy: Sequence Analysis**

Sequence analysis is a method that was adopted by social scientists from biology, where it was used to analyse protein and DNA sequences (See Abbott, 1990; Abbott and Hrycak, 1990) . There is recent renewed interest in the potential of the method to bring systematisation to sensitive temporal data (Aisenbrey and Fasang, 2010; Brzinsky-Fay and Kohler, 2010) Sequence data can come from a variety of fields of inquiry, among the most frequent ones are occupational careers, life course research and criminal careers. It is an exploratory method, which aims to discover patterns in the data, by generating typologies of sequences empirically. The entire career (or meaningful selections of it) becomes the unit of analysis. For each dimension on which the career is considered, there is a finite set of “states” in which a person can be at a given moment in time. The definition of these states is the responsibility of the researcher, and the results of the algorithms that are further applied heavily depend on the way these states were



conceived. Then, a time unit is chosen (a year, half a year), and for each of these points in time, the adequate category is being assigned. The next step is to compare the coded trajectories to each other. One of the logics of comparison is with a theoretically significant trajectory. The other logic is to establish the degree of difference among each pair of trajectories. The way the comparisons are made is by estimating a distance between them: the minimum combination of replacements and insertions/deletions that need to be performed in order to transform one of the sequences into the other. Different replacements can be assigned different “costs” (matrix of costs between each pair of states) if there is a theoretical reasoning behind this differentiation. The matrix of distances that results between all the pairs of trajectories (after the algorithm is applied) is being further analysed by either cluster analysis or multidimensional scaling, and the final outcome is represented by these empirically generated typologies of sequences.

The broader set of theoretical claims to which I want to relate my empirical material refers to the flexibilization of work trajectories in the context of a macro-shift in the logic of accumulation (the post-fordist, flexible phase of capitalist mode of production). Consequently, I look at each life story through the lens of 6 criteria (dimensions), which are my operationalizations of the concept of flexibility. The final outcome of an Optimal Matching analysis of this data would be grouping together careers that are similar to each other, on these multiple dimensions. However, the crucial aspect for having a meaningful and interpretable grouping is the matrix of costs. Deciding which type of difference is to be considered more relevant (more costly) is the most theoretically sensitive part of the analytical endeavor (even more than deciding for the states themselves) and will therefore be made only towards the end stage of the analysis. In order not to impose on the data

already existing categories, but to allow for the specificities of the empirical material to be reflected in the way the coding and estimation of the costs is done, the nature and implications of each of the possible turning points has to be evaluated first.

Instead of the starting point of the analysis, the actual states (categories/codes on each dimension) and the matrix of costs become one of the most important outcomes of it. I have started with a certain understanding of the categories for each of the dimensions and while trying to decide on the way in which each of the life stories fits into these categories, I have encountered difficulties. But further, instead of treating these difficulties as mere technical problems, I intend to make them the core (starting point) of the critique on the conceptualization of careers and individual's "moving" across positions.

### **2.3. Anticipating the answers**

The biographical interviewed offered me insight into personal temporalities. The turning points and stories of the different phases of the lives are told as an intermix of personal decisions, contingencies, descriptions of contexts the way they come out in the firms, the city, the country and even globally. What do these accounts allow to reconstitute and to present further as a sociological narrative?

Asking these questions spells out things more, it allows to analytically distinguish between the different temporalities. Only one section is a description of the careers themselves, but the entire analysis is infused by its spirit: different temporalities that are at work at the same time. And the question of what was the context in which the episodes of the past were happening. The commentaries over the context back then and now

become disentangled, their relationality is more obvious. It is also clear that despite the longitudinal type of information that I have, it is the description of the current career field, while retrospective elements are brought in.

The Second Section of this dissertation builds upon two types of sociological insights in order to allow for the critical engagement of individuals with their environment to be re-packed into a narrative. Other contexts and life stories have made scholars in critical organizational studies to attempt to give a “grand theory of careers” that would allow for careers to be contextualized. I will use the concept of the “career field” to refer to the spatially bounded structure of job opportunities in Cluj and build upon Mayrhofer et al’s insight that the main features of this field are determined at its tensed intersection with the economic system and the educational one in order to bring in the elements of context that are needed in order to make sense in a systemic manner of the individual stories. Systemic elements and analyses are

The Third Section attempts to give an overall account of the careers. It takes the issue of career flexibility and engages. Chapter 5 looks at entire careers and, with the help of Sequence Analysis offers a view from a distance on the patterns of similarities and dissimilarities that can be observed.

## SECTION II

### THE CAREER FIELD OF CLUJ AND ITS ORDINARY CRITIQUE

*Section Two* takes my analysis at the level of the “case”, which I here conceptualize as the career field of Cluj.

In *Chapter Three*, I rely on and critically engage with the most promising framework developed by Organizational Studies scholars in their attempt to capture the complex interdependencies between individual careers and the environment in which they unfold. Therefore, through the insights offered by the conceptual language of the *career field* and its varying degrees of autonomy with the economic system and the educational one, I problematize the boundaries of my case, by looking at their porosity and tension. Through a narrative focusing on the relationship between (1) the economic trajectory of Cluj as a rescaling locality, (2) the changes in the main parameters of the Romanian national higher education system and (3) the individual level symbolization of Cluj as a locality, I provide the contextual elements needed as a background for the rest of the analysis.

*Chapter Four* approximates an analysis in the spirit of the pragmatic sociology of critique. Relying on the contextual elements set out in the previous chapters, I make salient two analytic dimensions relevant for the heterogeneous career field of Cluj: organizational environments (firms) and new positions in the labor market. I then substantiate the ways in which these analytic entities elicit the enthusiasm of people. Informed by Boltanski and Chiapello’s definition of the spirit of capitalism as the

ideology that provides the reasons for engagement in capitalism, I look at enthusiasm in order to flesh out what out of the space of individual demands is being satisfied by their present situation. The dimensions of individual fulfillment, sense of security and of contribution to a greater good are looked at as being in a constant tension between various realities that do better or worse in satisfying them. Adherence to a certain reality is obtained through opposition with another reality which fails to satisfy the same requirements for fulfillment, security and justice.

## **CHAPTER 3 WHAT IS A CAREER AND WHAT ADS UP AS THE CONTEXT OF CAREERS**

### **3.1. Contemporary understandings of careers in Organizational Studies**

A career is defined as an evolving sequence of professional experiences over time (Arthur, 2008). Makela and Suutari (2009) point out that the very nature of careers is undergoing significant transformations given a changing relation between individuals and organizations. This changing relation occurs as organizations are increasingly willing to down-size, restructure, merge and therefore be committed to their own employees (Liefoghe, 2008). In the same way, individuals are responding to such changes by increasingly taking charge of their own career development and building portable skills across multiple organizations (Makela and Suutari, 2009). The way organizations treat employees is frequently associated with the employees' commitment to their organization. For example, Heijden, Engen and Paauwe (2009) studied the way 100 employees of a Dutch multinational perceived career support by their company. Their findings show that perceived career support positively relates to perceived career prospects and performance within an organization. In other words, from the way individuals perceive the organization is treating them, they infer the extent to which their organization values their efforts and therefore can show increased commitment, loyalty, and better performance. Linked to this discussion, the literature conceptualizes two main forms of careers. These are: 1) A 'traditional career', which is based on hierarchical

advancement within one organisation or occupation and is often bound to one geographical setting (Eaton & Bailyn, 2000; Hall, 1996); and 2) a 'new career' that depends on individuals' choices and decisions and spans multiple organisational or geographical settings (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Collin & Young, 2000). The literature on new career has been dominant in research for over a decade (Sturges, Conway and Liefvooghe, 2008). In this section I engage with this literature and show some of its key promises and shortcomings. I show that while this literature values agency of individuals, it gives less emphasis on the importance of structures and history.

The idea behind the concept of new career is that individuals will use their education, skills, relational networks, in order to flexibly move across multiple employers to increase their employability and thus diminish their dependence on a single employer (Marler, Barringer, & Milkovich, 2002; Sullivan, 1999). Accordingly, concepts such as 'boundaryless careers' are largely used in the literature to denote that employees are in charge of their own career development rather than following hierarchical advancement within one company. For instance, managers make sure that they are being trained and developed so that their skills and experiences are transferable across different organizations. Furthermore, the contemporary, or in other words new, career is understood as: First, going beyond organisational and national boundaries; Second, being characterised by higher uncertainty; Third, being managed increasingly by individuals (Arthur, 2008).

The assumption that the 'organization-career' and the 'new career' perspectives have opposing understandings of careers is common in the career scholarship (Currie, Tempest

and Starkey, 2006). On the one hand; by emphasizing the role of structures, 'organization-career' supposes that employees will take on positions of increasing hierarchal responsibilities within the same organization during their working lives. On the other, by focusing on the agency of individuals, 'new career' employees are expected to be less reliant upon one organization and more able to developing their skills across various organizations while at the same time valuing work-life balance. The concept of 'career success' illustrates very well this opposing situation. I refer to career success as satisfaction outcomes resulting from one's work experiences (Ng, Burke, & Fiksenbaum, 2008). Two categories of success are discussed in the career literature: objective and subjective success (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005; Gunz & Heslin, 2005; Bozionelos, 2006). Objective success is linked to traditional career and suggests that individuals invest their time, energy and resources in order to accomplish organisational goals (Hall & Chandler, 2005). Objective career success includes elements such as pay, promotions, and occupational status (Ng et al., 2008). For example, Dries, Pepermans, & Kerpel (2008) indicate that career success is still understood by individuals in terms of job status, salary, and promotion. By contrast, subjective success is connected to new career and values, feelings of job satisfaction, and work-life balance such as through greater involvement with family life (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Heslin, 2005). Several studies in the USA find that people prefer work-life balance much more than power, prestige, money, and lateral advancement in their careers (Inkson, 2008).

More recently, there have been calls to investigate career from a more balanced agency-structure perspective. For example, Currie, Tempest and Starkey (2006) argue that career studies focus on boundaryless careers and their implications for employees with much



less written about the structural challenges on the meso-organisational level. The same authors indicate that careers are still bounded whilst in different ways such as by being situated within an industry, occupation, professional norms, or interorganisational networks. In line with this argument, Pringle and Mallon (2003) suggest that agentic accounts of boundaryless careers could be based on the experiences of limited and privileged group of employees such as men from ethnic majority (Pringle and Mallon, 2003). In the same way, Van Buren (2003) notes that a boundaryless career model could be valid for employees who are young, single, and highly skilled. Therefore, there is a difference between when individuals choose boundarylessness and when they are forced to adopt it (therefore moving across several companies) following restructuration, mergers, or downsizing (Currie, Tempest and Starkey, 2006).

Coupled with the need of balanced agency-structure approaches, the literatures acknowledge that the career research remains largely focused on USA, West of Europe, and more recently Scandinavian countries. For example, Biemann and Wolf (2009) focus on career patterns of top management team members in the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Denmark and Japan. These same authors alert us that career studies of the top managers frequently limit their emphasis to a single dimension such as time spent in an organization rather than considering further important issues which could broaden our understating of careers. They suggest that career patterns can be analyzed along four dimensions. These are time; function; employer; and location. So studying careers as situated in different locations/countries and histories can offer a more holistic understanding of their nature. Such an understanding is helpful in examining the validity of concepts that travel from the USA and UK to other countries. For instance, Sturges,

Conway and Liefvooghe (2008) report the findings of a longitudinal study that investigated the nature careers in Iceland. Data were collected through questionnaire survey in a sample consisting of four Icelandic organizations. Surprisingly, the findings showed no links between career management activities and job performance of employees. Furthermore, individuals were not found to engage in career self-management (or in other words boundaryless) behaviours.

In sum, our review of the literature on career shows that it has one major assumption and another main flaw. First, careers are assumed to be individually driven and increasingly independent of organisational and macro-contextual settings. If the tendency in the past was to view careers as being managed by organisations, the danger in the career studies is to treat careers as properties of individuals (Richardson & Mallon, 2005). Therefore, the need for considering individual, organisational, and macro-contextual dimensions in understanding careers is essential. Arthur (2008) proposes that future career studies should be more interdisciplinary and open to different methodological approaches. More relational approaches linking individuals' activities to their organisations and macro-contextual settings are required (Özbilgin, 2006).

### **3.2. Careers unfolding in career fields: a Bourdieu inspired framework**

This brief review of the state of the art in career studies shows how much of the current efforts are directed towards treating careers less as abstractions and factoring into the analysis elements that are constitutive to them, but which remain at the level of briefly mentioning of contextual information. A substantive and promising direction for the future of career research comes from Mayrhofer et al.'s contribution. The researchers'

way of moving further from the mere observation that there is a need for ordering and simultaneously attending the complexity of careers is by incorporating parts of Pierre Bourdieu's conceptual grid into their research agenda with a more narrowly circumscribed empirical focus than the original Bourdieusian one. The key concepts of "field", "capital" and "habitus", are being carefully assessed for their utility and illuminating potential concerning the issue of contemporary professional careers that Mayrhofer et al have convincingly framed as an empirical puzzle inadequately tackled. The authors aim to avoid more specifically

a choice between objective and subjective career and macro or micro perspectives allows to strengthen or reintroduce themes like multi-level analysis simultaneous action-structure view, combining objective and subjective perspectives, power distribution, social hierarchy and thus social inequalities into career research (Mayrhofer, 2001:2).

In this proposed lens, careers, seen as the succession of work-related positions of the individual throughout his/her life span are to be looked at with a more nuanced and theoretically equipped lens. Careers unfold in the career field, which the authors define as "the field of professional work considered in a dynamic perspective... as the moving field of professional work" (Iellatchich, 2003:2). In this space, individuals equipped with a "specific portfolio of field-relevant capital" try to make their moves and to maintain or improve their position. Similarly to Bourdieu's understanding of the concept of "social field", the career field is a "battlefield", with its own rules of the game enabling and constraining individual actions and strategies, even if these rules at the same time are the product of these patterned practices.

Retaining the idea of the impossibility to reduce patterns of action to either external constraint or to subjective intention, the concept of *career habitus* is thought of as “a habitus which fits to a particular career field.... It is specifically related to a career field and may be defined by the dispositions which tend to be actualized “automatically” within this field” (874). The relationship between the *career habitus* and the *career field* is introduced as being extremely important, as in order to explain individuals’ action, one “needs to combine a consideration of players’ dispositions and competence (habitus) with a grasp upon the state of the game and the players’ individual location in the field” (Iellatchich, 2001:9). Further, *career capital* is seen as the kind of capital that is specific to the career field, “obtained through the investment of the different sorts of capital into professional activity and the recognition of the economic system” Iellatchich, 2001:4). It can be interpreted as symbolic capital within the field of career and as “human performance for the economic system” from outside the field.

In the specific context of career scholarship, the concept of *career habitus* does bring some useful grounding to the way in which individuals’ preferences, attitudes and motivations are normally reported. It is a way of stepping away from viewing these aspects as belonging to free floating individuals or as personality traits, by adding a layer of determinations that individuals carry unconsciously and that they actualize without intention in their present choices, preferences and actions. *Career habitus* is introduced as the conceptual solution for tackling an issue that Mayrhofer and his colleagues find intolerably missing, namely inequalities and power. Indeed, as a signifier for the existence of unequally incorporated social structures and their crucial influence on people’s work-related behaviours, it serves as a useful reminder. Primary socialization





and its implicit strong link with the social position of the individual's parents is one way to bring class issues into the picture, as well as issues of structured gender inequalities. It is indeed a step further from studies that look at "personality traits" as free floating characteristics that individuals end up possessing or not in a somehow random manner or at least in a way that remains irrelevant for the research. However, I find that adapting it to the field of careers is an overstretch of the initial understanding Bourdieu gave to the concept. Further, while I find Mayrhofer et al's observation about the need to tackle power and inequalities seriously, I find the concept of habitus as little useful in this endeavor. The way they think about the field itself and the relationship in which it stands with the other realms of the social is a more promising direction for this aim.

What this framework does is to give a certain analytical autonomy to a space where career related issues are played out by individuals in a patterned and institutionalized way and to invite for the empirical documentation of the particular ways in which the field is structured for the circumscribed population of interest, of the specific meaning these dimensions and concepts have in the particular empirical phenomenon of interest. Therefore, along with this rather sterile toolkit of concepts and the perspective on the nature of careers that they wish to promote comes a strong and repeated statement about the purpose of the framework, which is to illuminate empirical intricate relationships and phenomena.

#### *Subfields and their distinctive "rules of the game"*

Moving closer to the empirical level, Mayrhofer et al. suggest a heuristic mapping of the career field and the "thick description" of the subfields identified (Mayrhofer, 2004) (see

Figure 1 below). Looking at the professional trajectories of different cohorts of Business school graduates, they construct a heuristic map of the way in which their career field is structured. The two dimensions they have found as structuring the field are coupling (which can be tight or loose and refers to the “closeness of relationships and the degree of mutual influence between the focal actor and other actors in the field (Mayrhofer, 2004a: 5)) and configuration (that refers to the degree of stability of the relationships between the focal actor and the other actors). This way, the business career field appears as divided into “Company world”, “Free-floating professionalism”, “Self-employment” and “Chronic Flexibility”. These subfields appear as distinct logics of functioning within the greater field of career. When suggesting this theoretical framework, the authors invite for empirical documentation of the boundaries and the specific elements that make the subfields on the empirical level. Based on interviews conducted with business school graduates, they provide a “thick description” of the career habitus and subfields. The major lines that lead to differentiation within the larger field of career and that give consistency to the subfields as “games” with different “sets of rules” are the *conceptualization of careers*, the *career strategies*, the *career success* and the *career capital*.

		<b>CONFIGURATION</b>	
		<b>Stable</b>	<b>Unstable</b>
	<b>Tight</b>	  COMPANY-WORLD	  FREE  FLOATING  PROFESSIONALISM
	<b>Loose</b>	SELF  EMPLOYMENT   	CHRONIC FLEXIBILITY      

*COUPLING*

Figure 1. The career field (Mayrhofer, 2001, 2004)

Company world, Free Floating Professionalism, Self employment and Chronic Flexibility are the major sub-fields identified, resulted at the intersection of two dichotomic variables: coupling (“loose” and “tight”) and configuration (“stable” and “unstable”). *Company world* refers to the sub-field of the traditional understanding of the careers related to a stable organization, with most of the entries at the bottom of the organizational structure, the aim of the individuals being the gradual advance throughout the company. *Free Floating professionalism* refers to the sub-field of experts that have “tightly coupled relations with one customer for a limited time and is characteristic for an unstable configuration”. Promotion and success are decoupled from the stable hierarchical positions of the company world. *Self Employment* subfield consists of those individual careers that are not tight to an organization and that are less likely to reconstruct their work history using the concept of career. “One’s technical competencies and gifts are regarded as crucial. In contrast to free floating professionalism, social competence, team work and knowledge of human nature are secondary” (11). Finally, the *Chronic Flexibility* sub-field combines the lack of belonging to a certain organization with the lack of focus on a single domain of expertise; individuals shift not only jobs, but also domains of activity.

The same heuristic map of the business career field is used for several types of research question. First, it was used to document the way in which actors playing by the rules of these differently structured games (within the greater career game) construct their subjective careers, the way in which they define success, failure, change, skill, strategies and how this relates to the overall patterns of their employment. Further, it is used as the starting point for testing the hypothesis of the increased complexity of careers in the



contemporary conditions. The authors critically assesses the statements of the dissolution of the “traditional” “non-complex” company world type of careers and the increased importance of the flexible, complex, destandardized careers. Empirically, they use data from panel research of different cohorts of the same Business School graduates and test different operationalizations of these hypotheses, reaching the conclusion that while the Company World might be loosing the supremacy among the different subfields, it is by far an outdated organizational logic.

Talking about the career field as being formed by simultaneously existing subfields with distinct logics of functioning, as social spaces with different densities and rules of the game is a very useful analytical tool. The fact that the particular variables the authors suggest as crucial in the structuring of the field might prove less relevant for different empirical sites and research questions (other career fields), or might need to be supplemented by others does not take away from the potential of the perspective, but merely restates the invitation of empirically documenting the content of the boundaries between different career subfields. It is an encompassing view, that allows for a more diverse reality to be accommodated and that can prove very useful in the attempt to set distance from a linear view on the recent transformations of careers. Instead of talking about the demise of the company world-logic-based type of employment and increase in the level of destandardization (that is broadly speaking the main underlying assumption of many studies in the recent years, as shown in the previous section), it leaves space for

a more nuanced documentation of the particular ways in which the relative importance of the subfields and their specific content is being shaped and reshaped<sup>14</sup>.

The fact that jobs available are in fact positions in a structured field gains from the Bourdieusian relational understanding of these positions. Individuals applying for jobs and moving among them are this way actors that are actually positioning themselves in a field of power, that has structuring lines, particular "rules of the game" and a certain symbolic capital that is given by the specific combination of different forms of capital that are valued in the specific field or subfield. This way the main bias of thinking of jobs as objectively available positions, completely exterior to individuals can be avoided.

The second statement that I agree with in the career field authors is their observation that power and inequalities are issues intolerably missing from the literature on professional careers. Their solution of bringing in the concept of career habitus in order to address the lack of attention given to systematic inequalities and power is unsatisfactory. There is, however, another aspect in this framework that that opens it up for rethinking the embedding of particular career fields into wider systems of forces and fluxes and which actually allows this framework to be informed by the literature that really takes power and inequalities into account in a world systematic manner. It is in the issue of the *degree of autonomy* (and the implicit importance of the tensed intersection) that the field of career has in relation to the other fields that I find the highest potential for looking at the

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<sup>14</sup> "Going beyond the individual. Some potential contributions from a career field and habitus perspective for global career research and practice" and "Career transitions in a post organizational context" look at particular implications of the hypothesis that careers are becoming more complex. They do this by considering the newly emerging subfield of global/international careers or by focusing on the particular moments of transition from one position to the other. They are further attempts to ground sweeping claims by bringing empirical thickness and refinement.

intricate connections between the career field and other realms of the social. The authors argue that the two systems that are in the closest relationship with the career field are the economic (an exchange mechanism seen both from an actor and an organizational point of view) and the legal one (system mainly through the labour legislation and the regulation of certain professions). I will argue below for giving a more central position to the educational system and its interaction with the career field.

### **3.3. About the boundaries of a career field**

#### *The economic system: Career fields beyond and below the national scale*

There is a certain range of issues related to power and inequalities which are not adequately tackled by simply introducing the concept of career habitus. Quite surprisingly considering the topics that tackled by career scholars (international or global careers, managerial careers, post-organization context), issues of the world system and the economic and political inequalities and dynamics (see for example (Harvey 2004; Kalb 2000; Arrighi 1990; Ong 2006) are kept silent about. Statements about the novelty of the situation and the emergence of a post-organizational context that restructures the most fundamental dimensions of the working experience are left without reference to a systematic view on the economic and political dynamics that lead to this.

Globalization is an uneven process (Smith 2008), and its current wave seriously shatters the national scale as the most relevant level of analysis. Several bodies of literature have emphasized the need to move beyond the methodological nationalism (see for example (Schiller and Çağlar 2009) and to acknowledge the importance of sub-national units, like the city, or supra-national ones, like regions. National economic systems are not

heterogeneous, and different localities have their own particular trajectory of insertion in the global fluxes of capital accumulation. It makes us able to offer more nuanced accounts of the ways particular organizational environments are affected by the pressure of certain business models which are brought in either through foreign investment or through isomorphism. As careers are individual trajectories of navigation through these changing environments, these processes need to be brought closer to the heart of career theory. Career fields need to be problematized in terms of their geographical boundedness or lack of it. Through a case of geographically circumscribed career field, it becomes salient that the economic system cannot be adequately accounted for unless it is viewed in its tensed embeddedness in the global and national fluxes of capital.

### *The educational system*

It is not only the relation of the career field with the economic one that can be conceptualized as “a continuous sequence of exchange processes” (Iellatchitch, Mayrhofer, and Meyer 2003; Chudzikowski and Mayrhofer 2011). In fact, a solid corpus of sociological literature examines concomitantly the educational system and the labour market as the two institutional levels that fundamentally influence the conditions and experience of early careers. The ideal typical distinction between “organisational” and “occupational” spaces of transition from school to work describes the two extremes of a continuum on which empirical cases of national education systems can be situated. The degree of stratification and centralisation of the educational system together with the point where the specialisation is thought to happen are the main parameters: in occupational spaces (to which the German model is given as the closest empirical instance) graduates exit the

educational system with clear professional identities, with clearly differentiated degrees (both as level and content of qualification), which make their assignment to positions in the labour market rather straightforward. The rate of unemployment is comparably lower right after graduation, but those who are exposed to this risk, are facing it for the long run. At the other end, in the organisational space (for which the British case is considered exemplary), graduates have general and transposable skills, which qualify them for a larger span of positions; further specialisation is done on the position itself. While the risk of unemployment is comparably higher right after graduation, the risk of long term unemployment is lower (Teichler U. 1999; Teichler and Kehm 1995)..

Studies indicate an increased convergence of both the labour market entry patterns of graduates and the types of spaces of transition from school to work at the European level: the features of an organizational space of transition can be more and more easily recognized (Teichler U. 1999; Teichler and Kehm 1995). The Bologna process explicitly aims at making the national European systems more comparable and is likely to play an important role in this convergence. Indeed, producing “employable” graduates, or increasing their “employability” gradually became one of the key goals of the Bologna Process (Haug 2005, Witte, 2006 in Teichler 2009; Howlett, forthcoming). However, this focus is not an immediate outgrowth of the logic and the spirit of the Bologna Declaration. Instead, it is an expression of the paradigmatic shift in the climate of higher education policy, which pressures on higher education to be geared more towards economic goals. It is symptomatic for the general pervasiveness in all sectors of policy of the neoliberal economic logic.

In order to achieve this employability, HE systems attempt to modify the substance of curricula, and the pillars of teaching principles and also undergo quantitative and structural changes in order to skew the higher number of graduates toward the areas of the economy which are presumed to be of high demand and more important (Teichler U. 1999; Teichler and Kehm 1995).. These several venues through which HE impacts on the labor market are at the same time expressions of the lines of argumentation/claim making through which the economic logic is translated into demands over the educational system. From the other side, the professions in flux, the challenges of late careers and the work tasks and requirement exert pressure from the labor market side, and impact on these dimensions of the educational system.

Therefore, the locality needs to be understood on different dimensions. The economic one cannot be grasped outside the political (its class cum ethnicity history) and the larger history of relations to the broader fluxes of capital and their fixation. The educational system, while it has the imaginary of the labor market as a central element, has its degree of independence. Also, the way people themselves construct the locality in relation to other places, to other career fields. The context can also be described in statistical terms, as the

### **3.4. Sketching out the career field of Cluj: the economic trajectory, the educational system and people's sense making**

#### **1. The educational system**

The Romanian educational system before 1989 echoes some of the features of the one forming an occupational one: high degree of centralisation, stratification and vocational straining (Teichler U. 1999; Teichler and Kehm 1995; Müller and Gangl 2003; Robert 2002). Moreover, the central system of repartitions aimed at securing perfect and smooth individual transitions by assigning people to their positions. While the extent to which this clear-cut assignment was to be found empirically remains an open question, the link between the needs of the economy and the outputs of the educational system was seen as a direct one. The post 1989 general commitment to changing the principles on which the economy functions brought severely into question the legitimacy of the ways of functioning and overall purpose of the higher education system. The last two decades implied constant reforming struggles over excessive centralisation and improving the relationship to the presumed needs of the newly emerging labour market (Marga 2002; Marga 1997).

During socialism the number of places in the university was reduced in comparison to the demand (Sadlak 1994). The massification of the higher education drastically changed the proportion of high school graduates to be admitted to the university and the admission process itself. The quantitative boom of the private higher education sector added to this trend. The offer of specialisations also changed drastically. While and Engineering, Law and Medicine were the privileged options before 1989, “Marketing”, “Finance and Banking” or “Human Resources Management” start having an equivalent in the offer of the educational system. The newly introduced specialisations - especially in the Business Schools – are at the same time extremely attractive because they are seen to be in line

with the needs of the new economy, but they suffer from a lower prestige in comparison to the traditional specializations.

## **2. The economic system: a rescaling city**

Cluj has become a rather famous locality for social scientists due to Brubaker's study (Brubaker 2006; Petrovici 2011)). In 2007 - 2008 when the empirical research was conducted, Cluj had made steady steps into a noticeably new stage. The first signs of change started around 2000, when Romania entered a phase of relative macro stability; the liberal Government elected that year had embarked on a new wave of privatisation reforms, which had a great impact on the national business landscape. It was, however, only with the election of a new local administration in 2004 that Cluj began to undergo a comprehensive and rapid transformation. Intertwined with the massive foreign investment changes quickly started to become visible in the reorganisation of the centre and the peripheries, and the emergence of a differentiated space of leisure and consumption.

Five new neighbourhoods targeting different categories of buyers were under construction and the prices in the housing market were booming for both the old socialist properties and the new ones. In 2007 Nokia, Siemens, Emerson, Bechtel, Trelleborg, Auchan and Carrefour entered the Cluj landscape reconfiguring the labour market and triggering a new wave of incoming population (with both low and high levels of education)<sup>15</sup>. The city centre becomes the scene of an increasingly differentiated space of middle class leisure and consumption activities, visible in the blooming cafés, the

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<sup>15</sup> In the beginning of 2008, before the global credit crunch, the rate of unemployment in Cluj was estimated at less than 1%, having dropped from 3.5% in 2004.



renovation of the old city and the projects of turning streets into pedestrian areas to be occupied by terraces and crafts fairs.

This centrality of cosmopolitanism and middle class life style comes in sharp contrast with the way Cluj looked like in the first two post-socialist decades. The colours of the Romanian national flag (red-yellow-blue) were omnipresent in the city: tiles in the sidewalk, lamp posts, benches, children's swings and toboggans and, ironically, bins (Petrovici 2011; Brubaker 2006). Apart from the symbolic level, the ultra-nationalist local administration had adopted a strict economic protectionism of the city. An indigenous logic was followed, according to which foreign investment was to be kept to a minimum to the advantage of the local business and capital<sup>16</sup>. The significance and nature of the current phase of the city cannot be fully grasped outside of its longer history of struggles over the legitimate definition of the city.

The percentage of ethnic Hungarians according to the last census is 18, but comes in a long history. As Transylvania was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until the early XXth century, Hungarians have been the ethnic majority in Cluj. There was also a clear social stratification following the ethnic line: the centre was inhabited and used leisure-wise by the highly educated Hungarian bourgeoisie, who was holding the prestigious positions in the state bureaucracy (Petrovici 2011). People with lower education, among which most of the Romanians, inhabited the non-central area. The interwar period brought a Romanian administration, which altered to some extent this distribution,

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<sup>16</sup> while cities of similar scale like Iasi or Timisoara had several shopping malls, the first one did not open in Cluj until 2007 (when it was rapidly followed by the a second one and the project of two more)

through the important upward mobility opportunities that appeared for the ethnic Romanians (Petrovici 2011).

The public space of the city which had been clearly dominated in the pre-war period by the Vienna style cafes and casinos had started to become more heterogeneous with the alternative leisure styles of the new upwardly mobile (Petrovici and Vanea 2011). The new class tensions were visible in the difference between the cafes as the place where the “civilizing ethos” of the bourgeoisie could be practiced and the new type of bars, in which alcohol consumption was done quickly and time spent for productive activities<sup>17</sup>.

However, it was only the second wave of massive socialist industrialization in 1970 that seriously altered the configuration of the city, its spatial distribution and symbolic appropriation. By the end of the 80s, two thirds of the population was living in the neighbourhoods with blocks of flats built for the incoming rural immigrants. After 1989, the closure of factories and the economic restructuring had the numerous workers in extremely unfavourable and continually worsening conditions. Mayor Funar’s ethnic entrepreneurship project was tempting and successful because it managed to offer a way for the impoverished workers to re-appropriate the city. However, this appropriation was made in ethnic terms: instead of being “the city of the workers”, it was the “city of Romanians”, as opposed to “the city of the Hungarians”.

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<sup>17</sup> Petrovici (following King and Szelenyi, 2004) interprets the following excerpt from his interview with an urban planner who had been involved in designing the 70s working class neighbourhoods as “an excellent synonymic series of urban space capturing the emancipatory dream of former interwar cultural bourgeoisie integrated in the socialist logic in which the educated were the real bearer of the true intellectual and managerial values”: “[in the early 70s, Cluj was] the city of intellectuals, students, clinics, perfume, theatre, opera, botanical gardens, manners, dancing and restaurants” (Petrovici 2011).

After 2004, due to the massive but gradual retro-migration of the last two decades and the increased economic opportunities, the ethnic dimension began being downplayed in favour of a cosmopolitan ethos of the middle classes. It was now rather continuity with the constructed pre-socialist bourgeois city that was sought, rather than distancing from it (Petrovici and Vanea 2011; Petrovici 2011).

### **3. Symbolic relational boundaries of the city and the career field it ends up containing**

This section looks into the tensions located at the level of the locality itself (as a middle size, rescaling, university centre, with a particular economic trajectory and history of grammars in which the city has been represented, appropriated and contested) attracts and prevents from leaving categories of people. The need for this discussion came from the recurring reference that people had to the locality itself. In line with their invitation to document empirically the contents, logics and boundaries of any career field, Mayrhofer et al leave the relevance of the physical locality within which a career field is contained as an open question. In the case of Cluj, the locality itself emerges as an important boundary in constant making. The way people invest the locality with structuring-meaning is not an argument about an abstract symbolic level. On the contrary, it is an argument about the dialectic relationship between the economic and the

There are three aspects that I will focus on, which were recurrently emerging in the interviews and are important for understanding several dimensions of “what is at stake” in people’s careers: 1) students coming from smaller scale places and wanting to stay. 2)

people not seeking international migration. 3) people not leaving for Bucharest. I will then attempt to contextualize these findings.

As one of the most important university centres in Romania, Cluj attracts many temporary migrants from all over the country, although primarily from Transylvania. Cluj as a location where to work and live is constructed in relation to the other possibilities. The most salient possibilities were a smaller city or a village (most often times their place of origins), Bucharest (the capital city) and “abroad” - a category referring broadly to Western Europe or North America. The people who were not originally from Cluj most often referred to “staying in Cluj after you graduate” as a personal success, following a real struggle, which required investment of energy and work, as they cannot directly fall back on the parental safety net (immediate free accommodation and food).

Despite the lack of actual personal experience as an international migrant, most of the interviews had references to this prospect. People had either contemplated the thought at some point, or were just exposed to the possibility because of the frequent cases around them. None of them was, however, an active seeker of such plans at the moment. Several of the interviewees had been involved in work projects with international partners and have taken and/or were planning to take regular business trips. Only Marius had a longer episode of migration to Spain as an unqualified worker and considered that time the hardest of his life. The lower status he had there, together with the difficulties of being uprooted from the family and friends made him return to Cluj and start his own business.

Rather than failed plans, I am sympathetic to Anna Ferro’s interpretation as “satisfied immobility” (Ferro 2006). Her study of IT workers in Cluj (less than 2 years before mine)

captures the way in which the locality's new insertion in the broader fluxes of accumulation directly impacts on the life strategies of professionals. She analyzes IT workers as potential migrants towards the West, and notices how the outsourcing strategies of the foreign companies reconfigure the options these people have and the way they make use of them. She formulates the hypothesis that a "net bourgeoisie" is emerging, as a class formed by those people who find it more tempting to be connected with the outer professional world only virtually, or by temporary visits while living in Cluj. This leads to a growing number of inhabitants of the city with a good income and particular life styles and patterns of consumption and leisure (Ferro 2006).

While the IT professional field has its technical particularities, which could make it privileged in its capacity of providing its workers with virtual connections to an outside labour market that does not require them to migrate, the study is indicative for the type of locality Cluj was becoming before the world crisis. The foreign investment, along with a relative macro stability that allows for the growth of smaller, "locally founded" enterprises brings about particular possibilities for individual life projects to be realized. It allows for a sense of "proper" and "dignified" business and lifestyle.

The potential alternative of Bucharest is a recurrent argument which presents the option of living and working in Cluj as an enacted opposition to a form of capitalism that is too close to its "pure" and "un-human" variant. Statements about how Cluj is a nicer city in which life is calmer and more sophisticated partly echo the widespread stereotypes about the interregional differences in Romania, in which Transylvania represents itself as the mannered, civilized and more Western part of the country. It is through reference to the

continuity with a past city, marked by the bourgeoisie ethos of civility, manners and Vienna-style cafes that the present is being constructed.

These differences enclose a dimension of mapping out existing variants of doing business and preference towards some rather than others of its elements. Bucharest is constructed as the place where the real economic logic prevails, and real market events happen (like headhunting as a recruitment strategy), as it is large and dense enough.

Bucharest is a different story, but I don't want it like that. There they just do business. You should see the headhunting there! Oh, it's amazing sometimes, like in the movies (laughs). Here, we have it more half way, but I like that, you know? Sometimes I wish people were more professional, but in the end, I still prefer it like this. And I know many people who left and regret the life they had here, and say it's not worth it, the money it's not worth it. But it's there, it's a temptation, sometimes.

Therefore, their expressed preference for Cluj is full of ambiguity, as the more "real" market from Bucharest is more dynamic, with more job opportunities and better salaries – all of which are seen as advantageous. The less real market in Cluj becomes more malleable and is expected to be able to incorporate alternative visions of doing business and building up careers. The smaller and less pure economically driven place opens up possibilities of imagination of alternatives.

People use the scale of the city in order to claim different nuances within capitalism and therefore negotiate for themselves a more pluralistic space. The multinationals, the consumption spaces, the city geography itself, the trope of city development needs to be

looked at in the context of the local history again, and the type of contrast it makes. The local administration with its strong nationalistic undertones has been for many years signifying the city centre, not only keeping the foreign investment away.

Therefore, the city of the middle classes as opposed to the city of the workers has a strong justifying layer in the opposition of claims for cosmopolitanism vs the ones for nationalism. The electorate of Mayor Funar was encouraged to translate into ethnic terms a fundamentally class problem, of the disempowered worker, idle and useless in the new economy. While the individuals who are now plugging into a justificatory logic of cosmopolitanism are not insensitive to ethnic conflict, they are interested in downplaying it. Also in opposition to the workers. This is a double way in which the

In relation to the treats posed to personhood by the pervasive neoliberal ideology, the fact that comes as a source of resistance and empowerment. The move, cannot, however, be fully understood if abstracted from the fact that this claiming of the city is made primarily from a middle class position, which comes with important exclusions in the way the city is appropriated. This way of manipulating (discursively and in practice) the city does not translate necessarily into inclusiveness beyond the middle class.

## ***CHAPTER 4. MIDDLE MANAGERS' CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THE CONTEXT OF THEIR CAREERS***

### **4.1. Introduction**

In year 2000, the Cluj County Council gave its official approval for the creation of a new Industrial Park hosting exclusively High Tech business. The project was part of the Council's strategy of "increasing the quality of life and insuring the proper conditions for economic development, keeping in mind the necessity to put to a good use the human and material potential of the county and stimulate its economic development"<sup>18</sup>. The construction started in early 2003 and in November 2005, Tetarom I – the first and largest part of the project, situated in the Western part of the city of Cluj – was inaugurated. It was followed in early 2008 by Tetarom II and III (North-East and East of Cluj, respectively). Tetarom III is principally devoted to Nokia's investment, while Tetarom II is mainly serving a large US owned electric engines producer.

In July 2008, I therefore arrived rather excited and curious to be having an interview with someone working in the major firm of Tetarom II. The industrial park built on the North-Eastern outskirts of the city, is only 2 kilometers away from the airport, but 12 km away from the city. It is very close to the end stop of the old tramline which was built in the late 80s which cuts across the city, connecting the most Western neighborhood (Manastur, built in the 70s) to the heavy industry area in the North East, via the city center and the train station. The access road was still under construction, making the walk from the tram stop rather problematic and easier to approach by car. The ride offers a

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<sup>18</sup> [http://www.tetarom.ro/en/index.php?page=tetarom\\_istoric](http://www.tetarom.ro/en/index.php?page=tetarom_istoric)



concise textbook-like illustration of the waves of industrial development in Cluj. Having passed by the heavy industry area, with its grey, huge and often abandoned factories and adjacent buildings, one suddenly arrives to an island of a different sort, not even literally yet properly connected to the old, the parking lot of an orderly spatial arrangement, new and contained. I was asked to leave my ID at the entrance to the park and got a pass badge instead. The lady at the entrance wished me a warm good luck, misled by my ambiguous reply that I was there “for an interview with the HR manager” to think that I was looking for a job. Hiring interviews were very frequent those days, as the branch was rapidly expanding.

On the inside, the new buildings are sparkling clean, orderly and quiet; the meeting room which was reserved in advance for the interview had little decorations, yet it was comfortable and pleasant. I find my interlocutor to be a sharp minded and kind young woman. Monica is willing to clarify my genuine lack of understanding of the concept of corporate business, its various divisions, levels and responsibilities. Throughout the conversation I get a clear sense of excitement in her when she talks about the process of putting together this major branch and her role in it. When prompted, she tells me in detail about the plans of building 2 new factories, about the research-intensive unit and the highly skilled jobs it would require, apart from the positions opened for workers. She had already seen many of these things happening and does not really doubt that the planned development will become reality. Still under the impression of the sharp contrast between the decaying area I had recently crossed and the space I was in now, I could easily follow her description of an area waking up to life, due to massive material and energetic investment.

After the fulfilling conversation, in which I had not only learned about Monica's work history, but also substantively upgraded my understanding of the principles of organization of corporate business, she wanted to hear more about my research project. I told her that I was trying to get to the variety of people's working experiences and to get a sense of the multitude of career paths and motivations. Her interest in reading the paper was increased when I casually mentioned besides people working in firms of various sizes and across industries, some interviews with those employed in the state sector. "Now that's a research long due! I'm curious what you will find there. Very different things from here (laughs)". While I smile back at her, not wanting to get in any further discussions, I realize that she expected a shared understanding between the two of us (as young, educated and ambitious/motivated/active people) that the state sector is the bad hero of the story, the static and old fashioned milieu, a depository of wrong attitudes towards work among its employees. As in much of the media coverage of the investments in the Tetarom industrial parks, she saw her new workplace much more than just a great career opportunity for herself. It was also a great thing happening to Cluj and a source of hope that the logic in which work and business is approached in Romania would finally change, and the socialist legacy of inefficiency would be left behind.

Monica had offered to ask her colleague coordinating the IT department whether he could spare some minutes to talk to me right now, so I wouldn't have to go through the hassle of getting to Tetarom II in another day. To my great surprise and joy, he accepts. Because of a little misunderstanding over which of the council rooms was booked and which we could have for the interview, I got the chance to walk through the huge room hosting two blocks of more than 20 cubicles each. I make a comment about the interesting spatial

arrangement, which I hadn't come across so far. Monica explains to me how it figures into the entire vision of the firm and it actually makes a lot of sense, because it creates the openness and it gives people a clearer sense that they are working in a team. It offers a better sense of the fact that they are accountable to one another, allows them to reach each other quickly and efficiently and "personalizes the whole machinery and smoothens its functioning".

This brief access I had into the shiny and fresh world of the multinational towards the end of my fieldwork activated some of my previous observations. It was only when Monica's praising of the new business model, its spatial arrangement and its potential for larger developments of the city was complemented by her explicit placing it in opposition to the state sector that I realized how many of the discourses I had been exposed so far had similar structuring lines. She felt part of a proper capitalist environment, which she could place in opposition to the inefficient state sector, which she view as one of the most concentrated remnants of the socialist type of social organization. Presenting a certain situation as worthy of their respect or enthusiasm often time allowed distinguishing the one it was in opposition with. The oppositions I had encountered often times had the state sector or socialism as their (implicit or explicit) negative point of reference, and "capitalism" or the "west" as the positive ones. The actual content these labels were placed on, however, is not straightforward.

I found these and other stories and description to contain dense and multilayered visions of right, wrong and the common good. They allow a privileged glimpse into the moral justification of people's engagement in their means of subsistence, in what has been

framed as their “careers” and ultimately in the capitalist system. What gets people enthusiastic about their jobs, their firms, their careers or living in their city is a rich source of critique-on-the-ground (Boltanski, 2009). In quite many cases, expressed satisfaction with a certain situation contains an active opposing and implicit dissatisfaction with its perceived alternative. The “socialist – capitalist”, “here- the west” or “private sector – state sector” pairs of opposites play an important role as structuring lines of these critical engagements. The middle managers which were the main informants of the current study are actors interested in offering both critique and in justifying their engagement. Eliciting their enthusiasm is also important for the firms. I start from the enthusiasms, which I read as transmitting simultaneously an indignation, but also look at the explicit negative evaluations that they have over their own present, past or other situations.

In order to see what it is that prevents people from disengaging from the system, or from engaging in it in a different way, we need to look beyond coercion and basic need. I refute the assumption that it is the bare necessity to survive that keeps people in their jobs and/or that their expressions of enthusiasm and satisfaction are successful and straightforward subjectification processes. People are kept in their jobs and in their positions by much more complex and morally imbued venues than mere need; even if “need” is understood in a more relational way, as the “need to have as much as (or more than) others, to consume as much as others that one identifies with”.

Consequently, this chapter takes the descriptions given by people about the reasons of their enthusiasm or satisfaction, or pride with their work seriously and searches in them a

sort of critical engagement with the world. Therefore, by critical engagement I do not mean the type of critique that aims to unmask the functioning of the capitalist system and its various exploitative dimensions. I rely on Boltanski's distinction between ordinary critique and metacritique. The pragmatist position, which he tries to recuperate together with the standpoint of the theories of domination have a particular. As detailed in the theoretical chapter, I adhere to a critical sociology of critique, which means that the sociological account on the one hand (in line with the pragmatic sociology) takes seriously the critical work performed by ordinary people and, on the other hand (in line with the sociological theories of domination) strives to offer a meta-critique starting from this material.

In a pragmatist vein, people's moral engagement with their world is omnipresent, contradictory and ambiguous. I hold the view (detailed in Chapter 3) that there are two observations about the career field in Cluj that can open the analytical moves which will allow me to put forward some of the critique-on-the ground that it is imbued with: its heterogeneity and the visibility of its historical stages (intertwined with that of the economic system and the educational one). Dwelling on its current (and past) heterogeneity, I will describe the different ways in which different types of organizations figure in people's imaginaries as "proper" and the type of enthusiasm this elicits. Using the process of the gradual and unequal institutionalization of the "new positions" in the labour market as the background, I will explore how the novelty of this world manages – through the opposition with the past constructed as a static and improper reality – to acquire people's commitment and enthusiasm.

## 4.2. The “properness” of business environments and individual enthusiasm

The feeling that I was in a place which fulfilled the emancipating fantasies of its high-level employees was confirmed during the second (and unplanned) interview I had the same day with George, the IT director. He describes his situation as a case of “being the right man at the right time, in the right place”. Having graduated 7 years ago from the Technical University, he was not interested in becoming a software developer, but rather a manager. He knew that his technical background is indispensable in managing IT units, so he was looking for this type of opportunities. He had a failed attempt of advancement in another large firm, reportedly due to internal frictions and saw the opening of this multinational branch as a great opportunity. He was willing to start from a lower position than his previous one and soon became one of the key people as the expansion plans needed someone to coordinate a new IT unit. “The opportunity was there, but I also knew how to take advantage of it”. His story was confirming much of the organizational studies literature about the extent to which the outsourcing strategies of the multinationals are sensitive to the local and how they indeed incorporate the local talents and use them quite effectively. I am further told several small stories about the adaptation process of the firm to the new ground and to the people and how important it was for the firm to have somebody with the type of knowledge he could mobilize. He presents me in a counterfactual logic the strategy of the firm and how things would have gone differently had not him or his colleagues reacted in a certain way.

George heavily embraced a discourse on the importance of having the right attitude, the skills and the willingness in order to succeed. He is aware that “if it hadn’t been me, it

would have been someone else”, but at the same time he knows and is quite happy about the fact that “I could’ve made it somewhere else as well”<sup>19</sup>. Both statements are in themselves expression of satisfaction with a system that allows for such interchangeability, approaching the model of the free market. It is not the fact that he abused connections that made him successful, not even the fact that he is an extraordinary individual. Anyone having had the commitment that he had, the knowledge and skill could have made it, because it is a just system. And, his logic would go, due to the new wave of large scale foreign investment, there are other places in Cluj in which this type of career evolution could have happened.

Despite their different professional profile and role in the firm– the HR and IT directors respectively – the business environment in which they work occupies a privileged position in the imaginary of both young people I interviewed that day. It is a positively valued entity, which stands for many things beyond itself. It is not only the fact that they get good money for their work that makes them content, but the fact that they get that money in what they consider a proper system and in a proper way. Their investment, loyalty and enthusiasm in the firm is directed not only towards a certain way of doing business per se, but also the larger aspects of societal organization this business model is believed to effect, and the ones it stands in opposition to.

This well organized, efficient and transparent business model is seen as opening opportunities for the talented and educated people like themselves and also for the less educated, the workers which have been made idle after the collapse of the socialist

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<sup>19</sup> This goes together with a certain interchangeability, which he also describes in relation to his managerial skills and position. “if not this firm, than another one. Managerial skills are transferable, it doesn’t matter so much what you manage. I could manage a series of other firms right now”.

industry. The HR manager, Monica, explained to me how the massiveness of the investment would solve one of the great problems of the area, “after the disaster of socialist industrialization, finally there are some opportunities for the workers as well”. This opinion was shared by other HR specialists I had talked to, who recurrently referred to the current massive wave of incoming foreign investment as a great opportunity for all categories of potential employees. For its upper echelon, the multinational firm stood for a transparent, efficient and therefore merit-based system, rewarding those who work and are worthy. Their own personal success achieved through other means than corruption and connections works as a confirmation for them of fact that the system is just.

The trope of the development of the city is a recurring one. In the stories told by Monica and George, it was the largeness of the investment and its correlation with the newly built shopping malls that was most visible. The Tetarom industrial parks are impressive both because of their size, and because they give the feeling of a distinct stage of urban and economic development. A stage that comes together with the opening of the first shopping mall in 2007 and the subsequent change in the consumption geography of the city. Seeing the newly built park next to the neglected heavy industry area is quite evocative for the type of difference that they see and why they think its benefits will trickle down to other people and categories of people than themselves.

The overtly and overwhelmingly positive take of Monica and George on their working environment can be at least partially attributed to the novelty of it; it could be argued that, as they have witnessed and reported to me their impressions in a very early stage of the multinational’s existence in Cluj, not enough time had passed for them to get



disappointed and have more nuanced opinions. Not even Monica, despite her position as an HR director making her particularly salient to encounter the views, motivations and evaluations of the employees working on any of the levels in the company, could have been yet exposed to potential voicing of discontent of people<sup>20</sup>. Quite contrarily in other organizational settings with longer histories, negative evaluations are more visible, both in the discourses of the managers I interviewed and in those of people occupying less central positions.

Because indeed, the “capitalist/ western inspired”, “desirable” model of employment (in terms of what the offices look like, how impersonal and “professional” the relationships are) has been present in Cluj before this wave of foreign investment, albeit at a smaller scale and in a more diffused way. The particular economic trajectory of Cluj in relation to foreign investment accounts for these phases. The strong economic protectionism of the ultra-national Mayor of the first posts-socialist decade kept massive foreign investment away from the city. This led to rather scarce possibilities for employment in corporate-like firms and made possible small-scale ventures; also, it had an incubating effect on the local capital and business, many of the small ventures growing to sizes that allowed them to become successful regional players once the new administration was elected (Petrovici and Simionca, 2010; Petrovici, 2011). Therefore, the new organizational space of the massive multinational investment, together with the relations it presupposes, stands in direct dialogue with two different types of past: the socialist one and the one in the first decade of the city, when, albeit existing, the business environments did not have the same scale.

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Luro is one of the few such firm that offered the possibility of “corporate jobs” in the second half of the 90s. It started off as a branch of a German firm, having little independence and being considered rather a business risk by its central management. It proved to be very successful, however, with a short period of crisis in which Maria, its current executive director that I interviewed had a crucial role. She promoted from a secretarial position to increasingly important positions in the hierarchy, until her current position of an executive manager now, in her late 30s. In 2008, it had the status of an independent firm, with both Romanian and foreign shareholders. The general manager who started off the business is remembered as a very inspirational figure (REF on mentorship), from whom she considers that her and her colleagues back then learnt how to do business and make it grow as well as how to motivate people. One of her strong recollections is that of the hiring procedures she went through in 1999 for the assistant/secretary position, which involved both written tests and several rounds of interviews and which left her with the sensation of a serious business that she could become part of. She was in her final year in the Foreign Languages department and had been imagining herself going back to her home town and teach English in a prestigious high school ever since she had been a student there. The alternative Luro offered was tempting but rather unexpected given the opportunities for hiring that were available at that time.

Before interviewing Maria, I had heard stories about Luro from a young acquaintance who was working there while still studying. She had a part time position which she considered to be reasonably well paid, however rather monotonous. However, being a full time student, she did not necessarily consider that her career had already started, and

perceived her job as one of the things she was doing alongside studying<sup>21</sup>. While not particularly excited about her job, an important aspect about the firm that came out in her accounts was the fact that it was a serious and proper business environment. The firm's headquarter looked very professional, the procedure of getting to the manager involved a standardized and polite interaction with the receptionist, a waiting room and being called in. The spatial arrangement was rather similar to the multinational corporation mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, only that the cubicles were placed behind a semi-transparent wall. The effective control felt, the exposure and lack of privacy came out strong and sharp as a source of discontent in my friend's case, however not lowering the importance of a "business looking" environment.

While both my informants converge in viewing the firm as a source of dignified employment, there is a great difference in the degree to which they take this opportunity for granted. My young friend started to look for a job at a time when Cluj offered a rather wide variety of entry-level positions, unlike Maria, whose very stay in Cluj became an option due to this particular firm, a rarity. The theme of "being able to stay in Cluj" and the sense of success associated with it is a recurrent one among my interviewees who had moved there for studying throughout the 90s. While the pressure of finding a job was felt by everyone, it was particularly strong for those having come from elsewhere who needed a reliable job rather quick in order to be able to stay, as they could not rely on the immediate support of their families for accommodation and food. Lucia, who was the Customer Care director of a successful local bank when I interviewed her dwells a lot on this aspect. Graduating the university and needing to find a job was still a vivid memory

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<sup>21</sup> (see the chapter on the "turning point")

in her own trajectory, and she derived a lot of the satisfaction in her current job from the fact that the call center for customer care she set up herself a couple of year earlier offered employment possibilities for students, which could – she claims – become the start for much better placed positions in the bank. The trope of “creating possibilities” for others through the development of business is a recurrent one that features into many of the stories of people. I read it as a variation of the “development of the city” one I referred to earlier. I find it important to stress the fact that while this aspect of framing one’s contribution to the greater good is part of the business scripts themselves, they become resonant with personal experiences and they manage to be framed as solving not only abstract problems, but also ones that the subjects have personally encountered and experienced.

During the last years of the 1990, the city’s turning point favored the emergence of many firms from scratch. Some of them have grown to be important regional players by the time of my field research. Others have had a more transient faith, which I could only recuperate through the retrospective stories, about the earlier employment of my interviewees. I will dwell on the contrasting comparison between the way two firms with very similar trajectories in terms of their growth, their overall market success, their small initial scale, their country-wise expansion both in terms of opening branches and in terms of clients. Also, an important aspect in the website presentation, as well as in the discourses of the managers is their connection with foreign clients, interpreted as a clear indicator of the quality of their services and their belonging to the certified business

world. InterArt and GroupImage developed in the same market and legislative constraints and spaces open for the exploration. The vision over the business model and the conceptualization of the roles and duties of the employees strongly impact on the way the two firms are configured as working places 10 years after their beginning.

InterArt develops, distributes and maintains software for keeping the records of orders and deliveries (for sales departments). It is the firm to which I had the most varied access, enabled by a close friend of mine. I interviewed 3 of her colleagues and met in less structured occasions many of the other employees. A constant in the discussions with people working at InterArt was their overall sense of content with working in a firm providing high quality services, proved by the international awards they had received, their participation in specialized conferences, and being covered in positive terms several times in the major Romanian business journals.

Another relative constant type of evaluations I was exposed to referred to a sense of content over the way they were treated as employees. Salaries, other allowances like high quality gym subscriptions, firm based parties or art projects as well as case by case attention to needs and plans. In the words of Eugen:

One is never fully satisfied of course. But where I told you I worked before, in Brinel, people didn't matter. It was the very-very small and restrictive circle of core people and the others, we were regarded as... secondary somehow. I tried to talk to my boss about my complaints but I faced a wall. The fact that I worked very hard and I did things well never mattered. They lost many good people because of this, but they don't seem to care. Or they don't understand, whatever. So I don't feel like leaving Interart. Ok, ok, if Microsoft calls and offers me to be

their general manager on Romania, I might consider it (laughs). But otherwise...

Of course it's never perfect, but still... I got quite a few calls in the last years, actually. My CV remained uploaded on E-jobs and they called to offer me a position, but I wouldn't take it.

How come?

Well... I guess the bottom line is that I feel respected here. My work is valued, I have a say in what I do and in my future. And if you're respected, you tend to respect back.

It became clear throughout the accounts of various episodes of both expressing loyalty to the firm and dissatisfaction with some policies or decisions influencing only particular cases that InterArt has quite a coherent commitment on treating the employees in a fair and non-exploitative manner. While the translation into practice of this commitment was far from being perfect, the realm of claims in the name of this desiderate was considered widely legitimate. The very legitimacy of the right to formulate complaints or negative evaluations as well as to expect a subsequent change or at least engagement with the complaint was perceived as a given.

This aspect is in sharp contrast with the mechanisms of rendering resistance futile in GroupImage, as described in Alina Petrovici's recent ethnographic study (Petrovici, 2010). She offers a convincing account on the way in which many of the employees are unhappy with their working conditions, with the amount of extra hours that they need to put in in order to prove their loyalty to the firm. The way the higher management counters complaints before them actually being uttered is through a general claim that

these are the requirements of success and the price that one needs to pay if they want to be part of a prosperous “capitalist firm, not a socialist one” (Petrovici, 2010:PAGE). The local translation of the Great subject involves the demonstration of individual priorities in such way as to place the work highest, to demonstrate loyalty and involvement through putting in extra hours. Trying to keep work within its contractual limits is framed by the upper management as signs of unworthy employees, Little subjects. The author explains this as the translation of the general script for the neoliberal subjectivity through “seeing like an engineer”.

The crisis which started in 2008 exacerbated these tendencies, as the alternative labor market was shrinking and the employees were bluntly presented with the alternative of leaving the firm in case they lacked the shared understanding of what being Great means (Petrovici, 2010). A post field-work conversation with my friend working in Interart confirmed my initial diagnosis of this firm operating on different grounds. While the credit crunch also shrank their profits and much of the pleasant parts of the organizational culture of parties, gifts and bonuses diminished, people’s discontent was still at a different level than in GroupImage. The management decided to do some cuts and it was one of their female employees that had the worst evaluations from her immediate supervisor, the HR and also people in the team she was in. However, the decision to fire her came with the clause of offering her a 6 months notice, with regular pay and no more work tasks, so that she can search for a new job and she does not fall into hardship as a single mother.

For InterArt and GroupImage, belonging to the world of proper capitalist business is an important element both in the vision of the high management and in the personal sources of enthusiasm. However, this dimension ends up playing quite different roles in the two cases. In the case of GroupImage, it becomes a very effective tool in silencing any attempt to nuance the definitions of a worthy employee that might be taking place. In Boltanski's terminology, one type of ordinary critique (the anti-socialist one) colonizes the conceptual power of the subjects it targets and makes it impossible for them to reunite the elements of their indignation in a novel way, in an alternative ordinary critique. I will argue in the last Section of the thesis that the ordinary critique that is embodied in institutions such as the educational system or the mainstream intellectual field feeds into these incapacities and contributes to such instances of short-circuted critique.

The common element in the descriptions I provided above was people's strive for and enthusiasm about being able to access some already existing organizational structures that they would find proper and where they could occupy a position. I have pointed at the inconsistent ways in which Cluj has lived up to such expectations. For some other of my interviewees, however, it is another aspect that elicits their enthusiasm, namely the possibility of starting up their own business, which they can manage according to their own vision. An overall sense of malleability characteristic to an unsaturated market is present in many of the stories about the present situation in Cluj. Georgiana has set up her own HR agency, in partnership with her husband, for whom this is a side project next to his job in the IT sector. Her source of enthusiasm is the fact that she can implement the vision behind such an organisation. Having worked as a senior recruiter in 2 other firms in 2 different cities, she appreciates the moment in the development of Cluj when a firm



such as hers can still start from scratch and grow. Other people report similar accounts over their own organisational consultancy business, owning and managing a private kindergarten or their own food distribution company. In the case of Marcel, who has reported me a rather long series of unsatisfying relationships with the managers he had worked for before, running his own distribution firm, which he intends to keep as a small scale, mainly family run business is the only satisfactory solution.

While not a completely rare occurrence at the time of my fieldwork, small scale entrepreneurial activities appear as more frequent in the stories referring back to the early and mid 90s. As it was only several banks and the large mobile communication firms that offered the possibility of “corporate jobs” in the first post-socialist decade, most of the stories of people feeling part of “market practices”, in line or in dialogue with business models inspired from the West are reported as quasi individual endeavours. Even the firms who ended up being rather large scale at the time of my fieldwork (like InterArt or GroupImage) started off like this. Much of the orientation towards market practices and business models from the West are mainly at the individual level. Stories like Radu’s who had travelled abroad, consulted specialised literature and then tried to implement those principles are the most typical. He is now working part-time for a advertisement company while also having his own consultancy firm and reflects on this transformation:

there used to be more freedom; now you can’t just do whatever, there are more rules, and generally the law is more strictly enforced; this is double sword: on the one hand it’s an incentive to have your own business because of the safer environment, but also the “law” comes together with a clearer game generally, which makes it less possible to do “whatever” also because there is more

competition, there are others who already do something similar, you need to take them into account.

The young entrepreneurial model worked quite well in Radu and many other cases. He is well aware that the comfort of one having been born in Cluj and therefore relying on the family's support with accommodation made the risk taking situation more inviting. Later on in the interview, when he ponders on how he had grown older, and how he sees he starts valuing more and more certain material benefits. Back then, he did not pay much attention to these aspects, and his involvement and enthusiasm were rewarded by other venues, like the feeling that they were part of a "proper" way of doing things, even if unclear, and have opted out of something too static and patterned.

This section has dwelled on the various aspects of the business environment that elicit people's enthusiasm, in order to shed light on the type of oppositions that they are embedded in. Some of the elements of comparison are more monolithic than others. For example, the category of a socialist-specific economy is signified in a negative manner, an association that is rarely challenged. On the other hand, within the category of non-socialist economic practices, the heterogeneity of critical positions is much greater. I have shown this in relation to people's take on the non-saturatedness of the labour market. Being part of "proper" business might nearly always hold as a synonym the non-socialist aspect, but is much more varied when it comes to the size of the firms and the degree of autonomy it allows. We have seen how both the large scale investment that goes in the same trope with city development and the possibilities for smaller scale firms to exist equally elicit the enthusiasm of people. In order to better get at these more fine tuned resonances that people have with the different operationalisations of a "proper" business,

I will further discuss what comes out in their engagement with the categories of labour market themselves.

### **4.3. New positions in an emerging career field**

A different entry point into the dynamics of working environments and the tensed oppositions they stand for are the legitimate positions on the labour market themselves.

It was quite often the case that my informants found it difficult to give me a clear cut answer to a question like “what position were you working on at that moment?” when I was referring back to the mid and late 90s. Lucia’s reaction was to adopt a serious tone with a clear underlying irony pointing at the absurdity of what she was about to say: “I was no more but not less than the Assistant Director of Marketing, Sales, Customer Care and Intelligence Development”, and then continued with an explanation about what her actual tasks were and a commentary about “how crazy it was back then [mid 90s]”. She was at that time working in a small but successful mobile communication provider and she was doing more or less all the tasks that were neither technical, nor purely managerial. It was her first job as a fresh Business School graduate and she was simply an “Assistant” in the beginning, but in the following year, the general manager decided that there was a need to update the structure of the firm and make the names more compatible to the “Western style”. 10 years later, she is now the Customer Care director in a bank

It’s really funny now that you made me think back of those times... I mean it’s obvious from what my position was called that nobody had a clue on what Marketing or Customer Care were actually about. While now... in the bank...

but not only in the bank! Everybody knows that these are very different things, you need to do completely different things, it's like.... But back then... It's really funny

Many of my interviewees were among the first ones to hold positions as “Sales managers” “Marketing directors” or “PR responsible” in their immediate environment, in their firms or even in the country or the region. They were, however, aware of not stepping on completely new grounds, as these occupations were already well established/ perceived as being well established in the Western context. Many other stories reflect the changes in the names of the positions, which was not all the time coming from an actual change in the functioning of the firm. People doing the same job as before, but having the name of their position changed. Other times, these changes were indeed mirroring transformations in the logic of the firm's organisation or simply reflecting its increase and therefore need for specialisation. However, even when the need to change the structure and organisation of the firm was “internal”, the solution was always found in an attempt to resemble the model of the capitalist firm.

A recurrent switch to the new occupations was that from technical backgrounds to “Sales”. Firms would take especially in the early and mid 90s people without any background and offer them training, as no outside training was available. It is like this that Mihai, who comes from a working class family, which directed him to get a technical education in order to have a safe and prestigious job as an engineer could drift away from this track and become the General Sales Manager of a large dairy products firm by 2007. He remembers very clearly this moment of choice and his parents worry about the uncertainty that he was embarking on.

It is in Simona's amused account of the moment she opted for a Sales position instead of a Programmer one in InterArt (her career is described in detail in the following chapter) that the shaky status of the new professional identity outside the firm becomes clearer. Confronted with the firm's growth, the high management decided to hire an external consultant who, after a two months assessment firmly advised the separation of Maintenance and Sales into two different departments. The firm organised some trainings which gave both her and her new colleagues a sense that they were doing a "real job", with clear boundaries and duties. However, her newly acquired certainty was still disturbed by many interactions with people around her, who failed to see that doing "Sales" was a very different activity from simply being a shopkeeper for example. She evokes to me on a kind tone the interaction with her mother, who apparently confronted her over

is this why you went through the university, to become a *vanzatoare*?!. I had to be careful with many people when telling them that I was selling things, because they would immediately make the link with the shopkeeper. No, I don't sell sweets and tobacco in a small shop, I sell software, for heaven's sake! (laughs)

Another example of such "choice" between two worlds – an old one and a new one comes out from stories such as Radu's. With rather small adjustments, it is a recurrent event. His choice was less in favour of a clear "new profession" and more a reaction of exiting an established one. In fact, Radu remembers to have been quite fond to the idea of practicing Law when he opted for this specialisation at the admission for university. However, during the university years, he and his friends started finding the prestigious profession too "stiff" for their taste, with "ossified ways of doing things, of getting

anywhere”. Towards the end of his BA studies, therefore, he made school into a second priority and, while successfully graduating, “went on exploring the possibilities” in an entrepreneurial spirit. Together with his friends, they set up a marketing and market research firm.

It was great, it was an adventure. But we took ourselves seriously, you know?

You can’t do these things unless you really do your best, that’s what I felt. I wanted to do them really professionally. So I started – we all did – reading the literature on... on how these things were done abroad. They wouldn’t teach these things in Economics anyways at that time, so in this sense I’m not sorry I went to Law School. No other faculty was ready to teach anything for real. But we learnt [on our own] and we did things well.

While outside of any large organisational environment embodying a western business model, one of Radu’s recurring references while trying to explain to me what was at stake in those years is that to the “western practices and standards”. The gap identified between what was being taught even in the Business Schools and what reality needed can also be seen between reality and what the westerners knew. Local knowledge and determination felt many times like the only things needed in order to succeed. Radu remembers the episode when he and his team were competing against a Dutch firm that offered a proposal to do the same research for a client.

And we were better, of course. Because they had all their theories based on the situation in their country, where everything was neat and clear, where there was a long history of this type of research, so they had everything mapped out. They thought they can just apply it here. But of course it wouldn’t work, and we knew

that well, we came up with a better proposal, so we won the deal. It was a big achievement at that time, it made us feel good about ourselves.

The sharp contrast with the counterfactual of the world of practicing Law that Radu contemplated in the beginning comes out in his account of the meeting between him and an old university colleague of him, who “has turned into this totally boring and narrow minded person, taking himself and his lousy job so seriously. He looked... grey and stiff (laughs). He didn’t like me either, don’t you worry. We went on different paths, it’s very clear”.

The stories of the early 1990 evoke a period of loose definition resembling those described as “market closure” processes (Collins 1979) or the “formation of the *cadres*” (Boltanski 1987). In the language of career literature, this tension can be translated as the occupational boundaries being not only permeable, but in the making: the difference between *chalk lines* and *open frontiers* was an irrelevant one (Gunz et al 2002:69).

The two pillars that the career field depends on, namely the economic and the educational systems (Mayrhofer et al) are in a tensed relationship, both committed in their own internal logic to embracing the new open market model. On the educational system’s side, the commitment is rather outspoken - the reforms meant to meet the needs of a market [that was in itself a project]. ). On one level, the legitimacy of the skills and knowledge of the new specialisations in Business Schools themselves was contested. On another level, even if there was agreement that “marketing”, for example, requires special training and particular knowledge, the ability of the universities to live up to the standards required by the “real” functioning of the market was contested. On the

educational system's part, this was perceived as a constant source of pressure for aligning the offer of specialisation, contents and principles of teaching to the new market realities

The varying degree of permeability of the boundaries within the career field is important on 2 levels. The objective possibility of switching or trying out (enabled by the lack of clear qualification requirements and lack of a stock of trained people for these positions) is extremely important. Equally important, however, is the perception of it, with the enthusiasm and willingness to get involved and committed that it brings. The perception of permeability of boundaries, of lack of fixity goes together with the idea that "things happen" and it captures the vital energies of many people, who are willing to invest into forms of activities in opposition with a perceived static past (Verdery 1996).

By 2008, the relative looseness in the definitions of positions on the emerging labour market that I hinted at is therefore significantly diminished. On the one hand, the educational system had greatly strengthened its training for the occupations related to Business. While not an assertion about the actual relevance of the skills and knowledge that the graduate ends up embodying, this dimension tells a lot about the imaginary of the market and its possibilities. Also, the Human Resources departments within organizations as well as the specialised agencies that offer HR services became a recognised actor, albeit with not directly traceable results. What has emerged is the legitimacy of operating with more standardized selection procedures, more precise job descriptions and entry requirements that include specialised credentials.

While both from the people's own evaluations and from looking at the configuration of the business environment on "objective indicators", one line of narrative about the



historical dynamic of the local career field can be constructed in terms of the gradual institutionalisation of the new positions in the career field as legitimate. Indeed, positions such as Human Resources Specialist, Sales Manager or Customer Care Officer become well established in the organisational structure and in the general knowledge. However, this holds true on the level of the market imaginary (sustained by various *institutions*), and not as an accurate empirical diagnosis, which would hold that these positions have very specific meanings, very clear duties and the knowledge and skill required to occupy that position is highly structured (the means of access have been successfully monopolized through diploma requirements or other type of training).

Empirically the tensions are still wildly visible. The case of GroupImage, the firm I have referred to earlier, is a clear example of such an island, where the new occupations continue to be considered “soft” or un-professional, and accessible to anyone (as opposed to the privileged position of a specialist) even in 2008 (Petrovici, 2010). The managerial style corresponding to “thinking like an engineer” constantly undermines the legitimacy of occupations seen as “soft” in comparison to the “hard” ones (Petrovici, 2010). The tension is visible within the category of “engineer” positions itself, where the relevant distinction is that between performing the “actual engineer job” and the second-rate activities, perceived as threatening it.

## SECTION III

### UNPACKING AND REPACKING CAREER FLEXIBILITY

*Section Three* takes the analysis to the level of individual careers in order to explore the patterns of similarity among the sequences, as well as the dimensions on which their flexibility can be described

*Chapter Five* operates a move of zooming in and out of individual career stories. I first present in detail three contrasting careers, presenting in detail three individual working life stories in order to show how contingency and structural elements intertwine. In the second part of the chapter, I rely on Sequence Analysis to offer an account from a distance of all the career stories I have collected. I explore the possibility of grouping them into clusters of similarity on several dimensions on which change could be theoretically observed and on which it is empirically realized: switching firms, levels of hierarchy, domains of activity, location. I also take into account a recurrent event in the stories of the people interviewed, namely the fact that they occupy positions that are held for the very first time in the firm they work in itself. As part of the process of gradual institutionalization of positions in the labor market that I described previously,

*Chapter Six* also looks at individual careers, but instead of taking as the unit of analysis the entire sequence of states, it operates a cut into a single turning point that is common to all the careers, namely transition from school to work. The argument developed here is one of change in the last two decades of the way the relationship

between the world of work and that of studying are being imagined and acted upon. In order to secure a more solid ground for such comparisons, I rely on additional interviews with people who were undergoing that very turning point at the time of my research.

## **CHAPTER 5. SEQUENCES, TURNING POINTS AND SENSE- MAKING: ON THE FLEXIBILITY OF MIDDLE MANAGERS' CAREERS**

This chapter takes entire careers as the unit of analysis and attempts to address systematically the question of their flexibility. In *the first part*, I dwell in detail over 3 working-life stories; this description is meant to give a thick sense of the contrasting ways in which individual experiences are entangled with the elements of context, so that elements of contingency, reflexivity and practical takes on the environment become visible. Instead of treating these stories as representative cases of a typology, I use them to ground the analytical grid I develop in *the second part*, which is an analytical attempt of abstracting from individual stories and giving an account of the overall population of interviewees. The second part of the chapter is an application of Sequence Analysis: first, I discuss the dimensions on which the careers will be coded, the space of states and the relevant differences they aim at capturing; second, I provide the output of running the Optimal Matching algorithms on the data obtained through coding; and lastly, I proceed to the interpretation of these outputs based on the qualitative material behind them.

The aim of this chapter is twofold. *The first one* is to provide a grounded overall description of the careers of the middle managers I have interviewed, given the analytical themes I have discussed in the Introduction to Section III (flexibility, interchangeability and sense-making around them). *The second aim* is to make this very analytical process a

transparent one and to expose the links between a theoretical agenda, a political agenda, techniques of analysis, analysis outputs and their interpretation. Unlike the argument would go in a positivist vein, I give my outputs of Sequence Analysis the status of a fragile and selective meta-construction, that does not mirror or reflect reality, but is a theoretically and politically imbued representation of it. In Section IV I will take as a starting point the fragility of all scholarly representations, problematize exactly these connections and will argue for a critical and reflexive use of formalizing methods.

### **5. 1. Careers zoom in: three working life stories**

In 2008, Simona was the Marketing Director of InterArt, a successful middle size software firm which had grown from the initially small venture of four close friends who still held the majority of the shares, alongside with a foreign investor. She was coordinating the activity of the two other people in the marketing department. On the national market, InterArt was doing very well in her vision, as they had clients throughout the country and three branches open, in Bucharest, Timisoara and Iasi respectively. As for the future, she was well aware of a very dynamic market, to which they as a firm and herself as the responsible with the marketing strategy would have to respond, as they have done in the last 11 years she had spent there. Therefore, her main preoccupations and vision of her near-future work were focused on the firm's strategy to access other markets in Eastern Europe, most probably Hungary and Poland.

For example, Hungary has already gone through some of the phases we [Romania] are only getting at now. I mean the way in which the IT market functions and develops. I was talking about this with a friend who is working now on a partnership with some Poles. Things are very different there, even

things like “large / medium / small firm” mean different things. So the whole marketing strategy needs to be rethought. We have foreign clients, but we haven’t entered their market yet and that’s going to be quite a big step.

She was also contemplating the possibility of harder times, in which her marketing strategy would have to resemble that of “guerrilla marketing”. Her current preoccupation with devising a marketing strategy for markets with different logics, as well as with exploring the potential benefits of on-line consent-based marketing and branding techniques were not what she would have imagined for herself in 1995 when she graduated Computer Science. Inspired by her older brother’s experience with this specialisation and the direct contact this allowed her with computers in a time when they were not omnipresent, she recalls to have been excited of doing “something that not everyone did, I thought I would have something extra compared to other people”. Holding on to her idea of remaining close to her specialisation as a programmer, but also insisting that she has a minimum time of idleness between her graduation and the first job, she applied for a position in the state sector. They did not take her there, but she quickly afterwards ended up having her first job working for a magazine. She remembers her greatest frustration in the year and a half she spent there to be mainly that she was growing further away from her initial idea of being a “computer person”: “I kept feeling like I went to university for nothing, I was just typing texts in Wordperfect”. Gradually, she moved on to more inspiring tasks, like doing the graphic design of the magazine, which she found a more useful and challenging experience, but when the opportunity arose to change her job, she did it without much doubt. A friend called her attention on a position opened in a firm dealing with book and written press distribution who needed

someone for the maintenance of their software part time and doing more general administrative tasks for the rest of time.

It was much better paid, and I was happy that at least part time I'm doing what I prepared for in the university. But actually, after I redid some of the procedures in the application, there was nothing much left to do. The software was still not perfect, but these were the limitations in the programming language. So I ended up doing administration work most of the time, although it again had nothing to do with what I prepared for. These things proved useful, but only much later.

She only spent 10 months on this position after which she joined InterArt, where she still works today: "the firm was just starting up, with my brother as one of the associates and only 12 people altogether. I've seen it grown to its current 120. I came here with the promise that soon enough, if things went well with the firm, there would be openings in the programming positions". She started off working with a software application for administrative purposes, which proved to be a great challenge, because she needed to know it from a completely different perspective: not as a programmer that develops the procedures and functions, but as the person offering advice for maintenance, and therefore needing to understand the way it works for the users, translate their view and their needs. After being disillusioned with how difficult it was to perform this translation and her persisting frustration of growing further away from her initial training, she remembers how she started liking it a lot.

After a while I started going to clients, I was making trainings but also interventions, which are things that only programmers can do. Slowly I realized that I liked more working with the people, going to the field, seeing how they are

organized, what and to communicate with them. I liked it more than going to the office... It was a bit disturbing. 'But what do I want? Do I still want to do programming, or do I want to keep on the line with relating to people and doing fieldwork?' I knew I had to decide, as the other job [as a programmer] would come up. I thought 'well, I started liking it so much, I'll go on'

The next year was a very dynamic and rather unstructured one, in which her activities were very mixed: he was doing maintenance, selling and offering user-training for the new customers.

Selling services, the way we were doing, was very pioneering at that time. So we played by the ear. If someone called, you were happy. Or, if you hear someone needs your product, you go and talk to them. We had no idea of techniques of selling, you learnt from one customer to the other, because... well just because that's how it was (laughs)

In less than one year, however, the high management of the firm decided that something systematic needed to be done. They hired an external consultant who, after a two months assessment, firmly advised the separation of Maintenance and Sales into two different departments. Simona was in the position to choose between the two options once again and decided to go for the one she had least experience in, namely Sales. Both her and her colleagues were very much aware of stepping into a new type of activity that they did not know much about. A training organised for the people in this new department gave her a bit more clarity over what the particular activity called "sales" she had embarked on consisted in. Her certainty was still disturbed by many interactions with people around her, who failed to see that doing "Sales" was a very different activity from simply being a



shopkeeper for example. She evokes to me on a kind tone the interaction with her mother, who apparently confronted her over “is this why you went to university, to become a *vanzatoare*?!. I had to be careful with many people when telling them that I was selling things, because they would immediately make the link with the shopkeeper”.

The next major turning point in Simona’s career initially involved only changing her location, not her area of expertise. When the firm decided to open a branch in Bucharest several years later, she was asked to accompany the current Sales director, who would run it, and to help him out for a couple of months with hiring and training people. Once in Bucharest, however, the director got a job offer in the better developed job market of the capital city, which he found more attractive and decided to take. Therefore, Simona was left alone in the recently opened branch, which still needed to be developed. For the next 2 years, she ended up being the manager of the new branch, which she had up and running successfully. Besides the branch itself, she also used those years to improve her formal training, as she felt that without it she could not handle the complexity of her new job. She took accredited courses in Human Resources Management, Marketing and Financial Management. In 2001, the possibility of the same Sales manager that had left InterArt to come back arose and Simona was happy to return to Cluj. Inspired both by the two years of practice and the courses she had taken, she presented the central management in Cluj with her new ideas about possible marketing strategies of the firm. Her plans started to be implemented and the position of Marketing was created for the first time. Her joy was short lived, however, because the management style of her successor (and predecessor) in Bucharest proved quite unfortunate. Almost the entire team of the Bucharest branch left the firm within 3 months, towards the end of Simona’s

year in Cluj, dissatisfied with the new working relations and environment fostered by the new manager.

It was very frustrating, because I perceived – in this silly sentimental way – the Bucharest branch like my own baby... A baby that I had left in very good conditions a year ago, and to which I had to go back and start nearly all over. We had a very good team there, whom we had also trained, and for whom this training made it rather easy to find alternative jobs in the blossoming sector in Bucharest.

Her second stay in Bucharest was planned to be shorter, but ended up lasting for another nearly 2 years. When she finally could return to Cluj, she went back to her suspended plans and established the Marketing department, which she had been running for 3 and half years when I talked to her.

When at the very end of our discussion I asked her whether she feels there had been anything more or less constant in her twisted trajectory, she told me after taking some moments to think about it:

I guess it was... the idea of doing well what I'm doing and to make things work. I always tried to reach the maximum in what I was doing. In InterArt I didn't always manage to do that, but I was always engaging with a challenge. The idea of doing something new, also. Until I reached marketing, where I have the feeling that I found myself, I kept looking, I think I always looked for something new. Paradoxically, the constant thing was the need for change. Now marketing fills my need for constant change, of permanent evolution, I don't get bored. But I also think I started needing a bit of stability. I no longer want to go to the other

end of the world and do great things. If I had to, I would do it, but I don't long for it. Back then, I wanted to be in the front line, like any young person with revolutionary enthusiasm. I think I want to do something well, and you can't learn that in one year. That's why I was frustrated when I had to go back to Bucharest and temporarily give up marketing. I adapted to the needs of the firm, and I took them as challenges. I loved changes, but it's also that I sometimes didn't have much choice.

The two different temporalities – that of a career field which I proposed to look at as constituted at the tension between the economic system and the educational one, and that of a particular career, imbued with sharp elements of contingency – are closely intertwined and cast light on each other. The details of Simona's story become readable in an analytically enhanced manner when in dialogue with the elements constitutive to the process of the making of the career field of Cluj itself that I have referred to in the previous chapters.

At the time when Simona was striving to begin her career in the mid 90s, Cluj offered little possibilities for jobs for graduates, as foreign investment was kept to a minimum and the socialist industrial world had crumbled. What becomes visible in her choice of the university specialization and in her subsequent career choices is the desire to take part in the novel and up-to-date parts of the educational system envisaging the possibility of

an emerging business world, to have an education with “a future” and a “proper” professional life afterwards<sup>22</sup>.

The period starting in the last years of the 90s, which accumulates until it reaches its peak in 2004 indeed offered Simona and my other interviewees a dynamic environment to work with. I have referred to the process of gradual and unequal institutionalization of positions on the labour market as an intricate and open process in which both the economic system and the educational one play a great role. From the perspective of careers looked at as the succession of positions in a career field that is itself in flux in a different temporality this process translates into episodes of radical changes in the content of the job performed. A highly relevant analytical distinction is that between switching domains within already established frameworks on the one hand and switching to a new domain of work when it is the first time that the firm has a need for it and also when it is a rather “by the ear” play throughout the career field/economic system. This type of switches across domains that are not crystallized yet as such is very frequent among the interviewees; this constitutes one of the sensitive differences that the Sequence Analysis in the second part of the chapter will attempt to capture.

We have seen that Simona’s trajectory comprises two episodes, the one when she switched to Sales and the one when she established and then ran the Marketing department. This kind of radical and successive mobility across domains is much less

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<sup>22</sup> There is also the view on the role of the professional identity acquired in the university, which is a point of tension. That the idea of employability itself carries, between specialized skills and general skills. This I will look into in the next chapter on the turning point.

likely in the current stage of institutionalization of positions, despite flexibility being one of the prescriptions for successful careers.

The porous boundaries between professional identities within the firm at a certain point in time were turned on the level of interpretation into an ambiguously qualified story involving both the sense of agency and that of structural constraints. They had important effects on the level of motivations for doing things, and her enthusiasm was systematically elicited by the possibility of trying out very different things. The following two stories I will dwell on are introduced in a contrasting logic, in order to recuperate some sense of variety in the life situations/experiences of people living in similar environments. Despite this contrasting logic, the motivational aspect of “in the making” is a line that runs through most of the stories, albeit in different nuances.

Laurentiu was in 2008 the Sales Director of a large American company, which dealt with offering personal-needs credits. His original professional option was, like in Simona’s case a very different one. 18 years before, he had the idea of becoming an engineer and started attending the “Industrial Installations” specialization within the Technical University of Cluj. After the first 2 years, he switched from full-time to part time studying, and started earning a living through several jobs on the construction sites.

The major shift from an engineer career towards what would become a series of positions in Sales started soon after he took up a position within a retail firm in 1996. Initially, his tasks were confined to logistics and therefore in line with his background, but he soon realized that he was more attracted to the actual sales activities. The manager of this small firm encouraged him to reorient himself in this direction. It was in his next job, 2

years later, when he worked for a local dairy product company that he felt the switch to Sales would remain a potentially permanent one. He remembers the 2 years he spent there as the period in which he learnt the tricks of the trade from a very competent boss and colleagues. It was, however, this very aspect that made him look for a different company to work for, because he evaluated that he had virtually no chances of getting a promotion in that environment.

Following this desire, he managed to quickly become the Regional Sales Manager in the next firm – a product distribution one – he worked with. Despite his successful promotion to a managerial position that he wanted, he reported this episode of his career as a deeply frustrating and disappointing one. He referred to the “business ethic” of that firm and his boss’s understanding of strategy, connection and corruption as the source of all his discomfort. After a very charged episode, in which he was expected to give his signature on some contracts which he knew were actually covering up money laundry, he decided to leave the company, although he had no alternative available for him at that moment. What followed were 6 months of unemployment, which he remembers as being extremely difficult, as his wife had recently given birth to their second child and their expenses were therefore rather high. Even in this situation, he refused to take up entry positions and kept searching for something that would be at a similar level of payment and status as his voluntarily left job. After half a year, one of his former collaborators, with whom he had had very successful relations before alerted him on the opening of a middle management position in his expanding firm. He worked there for another 2 years, when he applied for the job in his current company. This last switch of jobs he reports to me as a major turning point:

I had around 8 years of Sales behind. I had sold a lot, I had sold many things. I had sold detergents, food products, chewing gum, sweets, what not... But the thing is I had always sold something that I could actually hold in my hands and say “look, this is the product, these are its features, this is the offer I’m making to you” and then I would make the deal or not. But in this new firm, I knew that I would have to sell a service, which is something very different. It was also an inferior position to the one I had previously held: out of a Sales Manager I was about to become a simple sales representative, rewind the 2 and half years of management and start again with doing field-work, the exhausting back and forth of it. Getting less money, and actually working in a bit worse organizational infrastructure than before. But I thought: it’s still Sales, and if you work hard, there’s no way you can’t make it! It was the beginning of micro-crediting in Romania, that’s when the micro-credits for personal needs started to flourish; I saw the trend, the potential in it. I took it as a challenge and I went for it.

Referring back to his voluntary unemployment episode in the light of the business style of his current company, he tells me that he thinks the EU integration is “the best thing that could’ve happened to Romania”. His explanation is that such foreign investors not only embody themselves decent business models, which no longer allow for the type of doubtful ethic that had bothered him and allow people to build their careers in such firms. He also values what he sees as their pressure over the local firms to modify their own logic of functioning in order to stay competitive. “I am actually optimistic, thinking that the type of firm I had to leave and the type of things my boss then could afford doing will no longer stand a chance. They will have to change their ways if they want to survive on the market”.

As we have seen, most part of Simona's trajectory was closely intertwined with that of InterArt, where she experienced being for considerable periods of time in Service, Sales and Marketing, as well as being a regional manager for 4 years. After the first two jobs, which she sees as rather insignificant overall, her moves between domains and locations have been strongly influenced by this particular firm and its development. Laurentiu, on the other hand, after an initial radical change from an engineering professional route to that of Sales has experienced 5 firms, in 3 of which he promoted from being a sales representative to a (regional) sales manager. It was this possibility of promotion that functioned as the driving principle behind his leaving firm nr 2, where he felt he could not get promoted due to the internal structure, despite otherwise being quite appreciative of the professionalism of his colleagues and boss. Another decision that he found risky was that of leaving his niche of expertise and re-orienting himself towards selling services. This was also done in line with his commitment to be "in the front lines of the market", of becoming and staying part of proper business environments while aiming for high managerial positions on the hierarchical ladder. In Simona's case (as suggested also by the lack of her desire to remain in a managerial position in Bucharest, which was a real possibility two times) being a manager in itself has a smaller importance; for Laurentiu, it is one of the greatest incentives. Firms have proven interchangeable for Laurentiu, while very little so for Simona. They have both operated a large shift in their domain of expertise, but while Simona's has been a repeated one, Laurentiu has rather worked towards different niches within the same domain, once he embraced it.

Despite these differences, these two trajectories share some elements of communality, which will become clearer by contrast with the next and last case I will dwell on in this



chapter. In the language of “career field” scholars, they belong either to the Company World or to Free Floating Professionalism: *coupling* is strong in both cases, while *stability* is strong in Simona’s case and low in Laurentiu’s. The last career story I will dwell on contains a radical switch from these two areas of the career field towards the subfields in which both *stability* and *coupling* are low.

In 2001, Adrian graduated at the same time from Economic Sciences and Law. As it will become clearer in the next chapter, his option of enrolling at the same time in 2 different specializations is not a unique case. Individual level attempts to counter the perceived weakness of the higher educational system training, coupled with the changed system of admission quite recurrently took the form of enrolling, attending (and many times actually graduating) in parallel 2 specializations. As quite a few of my other interviewees, he describes his first years as a student as being marked by the frustration that the Romanian higher education system was not providing up to date and dynamic skills and knowledge that would actually be relevant to the requirements of their envisaged labor market.

Despite the two sets of classes he was attending, Adrian was dissatisfied with what he was being exposed to and what he could incorporate. He thought back then, and still thinks the same, that there are things only “practice” can teach you and therefore he took up the first opportunity he saw to “dive into the real world” and work. He started off working part time for a branding company, but soon his new job became both his priority and his major source of learning. His involvement was project based, and he could therefore adapt the volume of work so that the university requirements can also be met.

After a year and a half, he switched to another firm, where he was responsible with marketing strategies and where he learnt a lot about what being a consultant involves. Despite a very tough schedule, he managed to take all his exams, graduate in due time and feel that he already has 3 years of serious working experience as a fresh graduate<sup>23</sup>.

Half a year after graduating, one of the people in the second firm he worked for decided to start his own business as an organizational consultant in Bucharest and offered Adrian to join him. What followed were 2 years of a mixed experience, in which on the one hand he felt he was learning enormously, getting the feeling of a much bigger, more diverse and more dynamic market in Bucharest. On the other hand, there were many small but piling up episodes of discontent with the working relations with his boss, with the logic in which the tasks, the amount of work, working hours and the reward of this work were distributed. There were two main conclusions that he drew at the end of those 2 years and he acted upon both of them, in a row. First, he decided he does not enjoy living in the capital city and he would go back to Cluj; and second, he wanted to eliminate the biggest source of frustration, namely being in a hierarchical organizational structure.

Before what he reports as the sharpest and most satisfying turning point, namely “going on his own as a consultant” in 2004, he used the opportunity given by some old friends to return to Cluj and worked for their firm for nearly half a year. The transition to an entrepreneurial mode was rather smooth as one of the biggest clients of the firm he left in Bucharest agreed to follow him. Bit by bit, he started having more and more contracts, with more clients, and collaborations with other entrepreneurs and firms.

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<sup>23</sup> The “experience” trope, next chapter

There is no clear schedule that I must follow now. I wake up whenever I want, I take the afternoon off when I decide to do that. And I love it. There's no office I have to go to everyday, we work online, we work on the phone, we meet in cafes. Of course, in the end I work much more than I used to before (laughs). My friends are also people I work with, there's always a bit of work involved even when we go out to chill over beer in the evening. But it's the best thing that happened to me. I couldn't go back to working in a firm.

One of the sharpest elements of contrast with the previous two trajectories I referred to comes from Adrian's organizational embeddedness. He is involved simultaneously in more projects, but not through a firm with other employees. He engages and disengages with other people as the logic and pace of the projects requires. There is a legal entity that could qualify as a "firm" behind most of these projects and he is simultaneously embedded in several.

Uf, I would have to think about it a bit to tell you for how many "firms" I work now. I am in many projects, as I told you, and they have different legal status behind. Lately it's been the same around 10 core people that are involved overall, but we don't all work at the same time in the same projects. And there are also of course some temporary collaborations we have. But the core people, it's my two friends who are ITsts, X is our guy dealing with any Human Resources aspects we might have, there are several consultants, on different niches. There's Y specializing on branding, of course. Some of them also have more stable jobs, like Y, who works for this other firm part time. Maybe overall his involvement in our projects are maybe less. Everything varies, it's very fluid.

The scale of the “projects” Adrian refers to is quite big, as some of the web portals that they have worked on ended up being sold further for amounts up to 2 million euros.

## **5. 2. Careers zoom out: getting at sequences and shapes**

The second part of this chapter zooms out from individual stories and attempts to offer a more integrative account of all the careers. The requirements of SA as a formal method will structure the analysis by discussing the dimensions on which the careers are coded and the space of states. I will use the cases I have described above not as ideal types, but as sources of dense information that the reader is familiar with in order to closely follow the steps of the analytical process of abstracting from highly individual stories, in order to keep the decisions (with the inherent silences and emphasis) visible and to be able to trace the consequences of these decisions in the final stage of interpretation. Selectivity is present at all stages, starting with the questions to be asked (the hypotheses to be tested) and ending with the decisions over what kind of differences are significant/relevant and which can be amassed together within categories. These decisions are informed by the qualitative aspect of the data I perform the analysis on, which allows me to fit the categories (the states) in order to best capture their character. However, the very decision on what are the aspects worth being captured is in dialogue with the theoretical concerns and their political underpinnings. I will make an effort to render this selectivity visible, to expose the process behind abstracting from individual cases to statements about “the career field”, “trends in people’s careers”, “career flexibility”. And to link apparently “purely descriptive” stakes with the theoretical and political narratives they are intertwined with. Relying on this aspect, I will build my argument in Section IV.

### *The framework of analysis*

The dimensions on which I will consider change or lack of change in a career are: firm, hierarchy (operationalised in 2 + 1 ways; in relation to the “decline of Company World” hypothesis), domain (operationalised in 3 ways) and geographical location. The unit of time is that of half a year. Therefore, each trajectory will be coded in 7 ways, with codes corresponding to each 6 months.

#### *1. Changing firms*

On this dimensions, there are 2 types of situations that need to be addressed: changing firms when there is a clear main employer; and change when there are 2 or more employers/firms at the same time.

For the first rule of coding, Simona’s trajectory will go up to 3 codes, as she has been working for InterArt in the last 10 years (20 units). The first years of her trajectory will be a succession of “1”s and “2”s. Laurentiu’s case goes up to code 7, as he has changed much more firms. For Adrian, after the first years, in which it was clear in which firm he worked and his trajectory can be clearly coded similar to the first cases, I will resort to a special code, “99”, which indicates that it is a special situation, which is better captured in the second dimension (meaning a situation that cannot be adequately dealt with in a “company world” logic of viewing the career field).

For Simona and Laurentiu, the second dimension will lead to a constant code, namely “1”, as they have always been working for one employer only at one point in time. This

dimension, however, allows me to distinguish those people who are embedded in a career subfield in which both “coupling” and “stability” are low, like Adrian.

## *2. Moving up, down or horizontally in hierarchical structures*

I will operate with four main categories for hierarchy, inside each of which the subjective evaluation of my interviewees will be the one taken into account:

*1. Entry level/no coordination function* (the difference between 11 and 12 meaning that there was a promotion, an advancement in the change, but not one that would put them on the level of middle management)

*2. Middle management* (the difference between 21 and 22 indicates an upward movement, still within the middle management category. Objective indicators such as “number of people under coordination” cannot be used to make these categories comparable across cases, due to the very different firm structures)

*3. Higher management* (a very rare occurrence)

*9. Position in a non-hierarchical organization* (coded with 91, it indicates again the inadequacy of “company world” logic to capture the situation; 92 indicates not only that it is a nonhierarchical organization, but that the firm is the person’s own venture<sup>24</sup>)

*0. No position* (unemployment)

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<sup>24</sup> An entrepreneur who established a firm that is hierarchical, and who is at some point the manager of that firm would be coded as 31, while an entrepreneur who established a nonhierarchical company would be coded as 92

These two dimensions coupled should allow for a distinction to be made on the one hand between those trajectories (or parts of trajectories) that can be captured in the logic of Company World (where change occurs within firms or within hierarchies) and those trajectories who cannot. Also, they allow exploring the ways in which “within CW” differences are patterned.

### *3. Domain*

Domains – a construction, a stake of struggle in itself (Boltanski), impossible to pinpoint.

I will draw a distinction between radical and niche

Being the first one to take a position in the new domain in the firm. Then, building a department that she coordinates. Also a recurrent move. In her case, it is also the expansion of the branch, so twice she has this movement.

Switching to Sales especially: in many of the careers this happened, because as firms were growing, this specialization grew apart, as becomes obvious in her story. (search when the department of sales was first open in cluj and when in Romania generally, how many graduates when). Many of these examples.

Two types of “first time in the firm”, different (but how to put it down just how different they are): the expansion of a new branch, while in the overall structure that position already existed. Or, an existing firm, in which it is for the first time that such a department exists. Yes, two different logics of change. (this would allow to differentiate

between the current “first time HR manager” in the multinational and what was happening back in the 90s).

Switching domains mildly (niche specialization, different types of administrative jobs)

#### *4. Geographical location*

- 1. Cluj*
- 2. same scale cities (ex. Timisoara, Iasi, Brasov)*
- 3. smaller scale cities*
- 4. rural areas*
- 5. Bucharest*
- 6. Abroad*

### **5.3.The picture from above – representing and interpreting variability**

*Disclaimer: Due to technical problems, this section will be added at a later point. It contains the outputs of Optimal Matching algorithms ran with Sequence Analysis and further analyzed through clustering methods in UCINET.*



## ***CHAPTER 6. TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO WORK: A TURNING POINT THAT BECOMES DILLUTED***

### **6.1. In-between school and work**

This chapter focuses on a turning point that is common to all the careers, by operating a temporal cut into that part of the individual trajectory that is centered on the moment of graduating the university and includes the period when their career starts. I explore the way in which the link between the higher education system and the labor market manifests itself in individual biographies has changed in the last 15 years.

Given that a crucial part in the way the function and role of the educational system is conceived is that of preparing individuals for their future participation in the labor market, the most straightforward way to think of the temporality of individuals making the link in their own biographies between the two systems is that of a succession of states, one in which it is their status as a student that defines their primary role followed by the second one, in which it is their working status that matters more. However, the way in which this link is defined is a tensed point of struggle. I approach the question of change in the way this link is made on two levels:

- 1) How accurate is description that postulates clear cut sequences, the first of which is the a primary embeddedness in the educational system followed by a primary embeddedness in the labor market? Which are the elements that blur this distinction and which would remain unrepresented by such a model?

- 2) Are there identifiable and systematic changes in the ways individuals who enter, go through, and then exit the educational system think of themselves as actors in relation to these two institutional arrangements? Are there differences in the ways in which they conceptualize the relationship between given structures and logics and their own role in engaging with them?

In order to be able to address these questions, I will rely additionally on a set of 28 interviews collected in 2006 and 2008 with students in their MA studies and final year of BA. Supplementing the stories of working lives of the middle managers that have been central so far in this dissertation is necessary because of the way this main sample was constructed: all the middle managers have worked for at least 5 years and have been awarded (at least their first) BA degree no later than 5 years prior to the interview. Therefore, they have not been students in these last 5 years, when the educational system has gone through changes relevant for the questions asked. While they have felt the effects of these changes, they have done so only in a mediated way, as actors within the career field that is affected by the educational systems' transformations (Mayrhofer et al). As I explained in Chapter Two, the additional interviews were collected following a comparable logic and therefore the material is comparable on this dimension.

The chapter is divided into 3 sections, attempting to address the questions outlined above. First, the question of the overlap between studenthood and working life is addressed by describing the types of activities that blur this distinction and the way in which these activities become incorporated in the sense making efforts of individuals. Second, I will

discuss the changing idea of professional identity and its link with the BA specialization. Finally, I will conclude by...

## **6.2. Graduating in 2008: “being more than just a student”**

Carmen decided to enroll for an MA at the Faculty of European Studies after a year of trying to find a job she would consider decent in her home town once she graduated from Psychology. She had a 5 years break between graduating from high school and starting her BA and she told me at length about how she felt “caught between generations”

There were many challenges while I was studying. Now, looking behind I'm sorry I didn't take them... I was too much of a good girl... so I only focused on school, while other colleagues of mine, also coming from outside Cluj became part of the community, they made connections. They made many contacts, connections outside the university and that proved extremely good for them, because now they already have their own practice. Maybe they didn't learn as hard as I did and didn't get a scholarship. Maybe they even failed an exam or two, but they were forming themselves independently. I don't know, they had this intuition, that it's not all about school and therefore they got involved in many... in all sorts of professional circles, therapy schools and all sorts of those courses organized for students... Yet another difference between me and my colleagues... I was very concerned to get my BA thesis/exam over with, while they didn't care that much. Their problem was what they were going to do after they graduate. I was taking things one at a time! I felt the BA exam was crucial, I should pass that and only afterwards worry about what was to happen next.

Indeed, Carmen's observation that her colleagues had "an intuition" about a different way of relating to school than she did is confirmed throughout my other interviews with the additional sample (who were at the time of the interview either in their 4<sup>th</sup> year of BA or completing their MA, like was the case of Carmen). Almost unanimity was reached in expressing the opinion that a mere fulfillment of the tasks related to the academic programs themselves was not satisfactory in the light of their future (professional) lives. The necessity and desirability of getting involved in activities outside of school was not a matter of dispute, regardless of whether they saw themselves as future academics, managers, medical physicists, psychologists or they did not know exactly what path to follow. My interviewees confirmed the trends noticed elsewhere as well, that in the complex understandings that students develop concerning what it is that would make it likely for them to get a job after they graduate, the centrality of the degree itself is undermined (Tomlinson 2008; Vaughan and Roberts 2007). In the words of Mircea, a European Studies final year BA student:

If you have only a degree... well they ask for experience everywhere. But like this, if you have some trainings, you have a solid CV, they can tell you've been working with a team, you've been an Association president, they can tell you've been doing things with yourself. And they look at you differently.

The range of activities they had considered getting involved in was very wide and their actual content differed according to the Department they were studying in and the way in which they broadly understood their future careers. One of the recurring solutions to the need of complementing the academic program is found by getting involved in some of the projects that the wide range of available NGO's offer, among which Students

Association figure as well. The status assigned to this experience differs, however. For some, working in an NGO is extremely relevant for acquiring the exact type of skills and knowledge that are perceived as necessary for the desired position in the career field. For example, the Management line of study of the European Studies Faculty students finds in coordinating projects for the Association (regardless of the actual content of the project) one of the most valuable assets for future employment. In other cases, the link with the future job prospects is less clear and more emphasis is being put on acquiring skills and knowledge that would then be transferable to other types of jobs; also, the very involvement in non-mandatory activities is expected to be read as a favorable signal. Besides the link with job prospects, these activities are valued intrinsically and seen as personally enriching. Also, NGO activities are viewed as being part of the experience of being a student more generally:

I didn't just end up getting involved in an NGO, I wanted to do it, I came to Cluj with the idea that I have to find an NGO. I knew from my brother that studentship is all about doing NGO, that it's nice to work like this and... so I wanted to. I didn't just bump into it, I wanted this

Another recurring activity that students reported was having worked for three or four months in the USA, UK or Canada with a legal working contract. There are several agencies that facilitate the contracts and it has become a widely spread practice among students in the past years. They are doing unqualified work, for salaries that are still attractive for their purchasing power at the price levels in Romania. "Students going to the States in the summer" is one of the best instances exemplifying the rapid institutionalization of some practices. From the first walk through the campus, one cannot

help noticing the invasion of banners, posters and fliers that advertise the companies facilitating the formalities of getting the contracts and the degree of familiarity of this opportunity in the student's universe. It becomes part of what is "normal" to do, as there are visible antecedents. Therefore, the very fact that has become such a patterned activity makes it desirable and tempting even for those categories of people who do are not necessarily pursuing a dream of working abroad. The "culture" of going to the US, and the fact that so many people are doing it makes it one of the solutions out there, easily available and appropriable by individuals.

it's not like it was my dream to get to the US... it was more like: ok, I'm going, I'll have an experience with the States, I'll gain some money. It's the only moment when I can do that, and everyone was going, and it's easier to go as students. Probably if I hadn't found someone to go with, I wouldn't have gone... like it was in the 2nd year, I was also considering going then, but I didn't really find someone to go with that I would feel comfortable... And it was interesting, it was quite an experience... I had four jobs, two simultaneously. I was a waiter in two different places, I sold ice-cream and I sold clothes. It was super-interesting. You see another world; you do some traveling and also you get some money...

The gap between their future status as university graduates and the low skill character of these jobs does not go unnoticed. While most of the people consider it a reasonable discontinuity (because it is temporary and far), some take firm distance from this possibility. Summer schools abroad (many of which offer scholarships as well) were the

alternative some of the students preferred, as it made it possible both to have the short term abroad experience and maintain a greater degree of status-consistency.

Apart from NGO or Students' Associations projects and summer jobs abroad, the most widespread activity that accompanied students' full time enrollment in the educational system was having a job, either part time, or full time. In the sample I have interviewed, less than one third of them had at the moment or had had a job<sup>25</sup>.

I have tried to show so far that students preparing to graduate close to 2010 report a rather varied range of extra-curricular engagements, which they see as being perfectly compatible with their student status, as well as relevant and necessary for their future job prospects. While they factor into the life plans and strategies in different ways (I will dwell on that in the next section), all these activities can be seen as ways in which the clear-cut distinction between a period of their lives in which they are mainly students preparing (within their studies exclusively) for a subsequent period in which they would be mainly employed is blurred.

The question of whether this is a distinct way of relating to one's student experience from the previous generations is more difficult to answer. Few of the middle managers who had graduated before 2000 report any volunteering activities and summer jobs abroad were not an option. The more recent their university experience, the more likely these activities. Some comparative elements come from the members of the older cohorts themselves. When asked about their own university years, they often describe the situation in comparative terms, observing that it was not a realistic possibility for them to

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<sup>25</sup> However, a more recent study of the students from Babes Bolyai university shows that in the following years the number of students working increased greatly.

have all the engagements that current students have, as those positions and opportunities were not available.

This is less the case for having a job while studying. On this dimension, the strict temporal separation between the two statuses was often times blurred. These jobs had different statuses: part time or seasonal jobs held primarily for subsistence, which they thought they would leave the moment their newly acquired degree would make them eligible for a better category of jobs. Part time jobs that turned out to be a successful stepping stone for starting their career, as they advanced then to a better position within the same firm, or they could rely on this experience in order to qualify to apply for other jobs asking for experience. The last was the case especially after year 2000. A distinct type of job was the entrepreneurial activities of some people who made school into a second priority and opened their own firms (in marketing, consultancy, branding). They were, however rather pioneering for a type of relating to the years of education that was to become more and more mainstream.

What is a very common experience for current generations, like the Work and Travel programs, or volunteering opportunities lacked from the universe of possible for the previous ones. The change happened gradually, however. The educational system quickly responded to the new patterns. For example, in the first years of the Work and Travel programs, those who decided to go had to miss their exams because the session was scheduled after their departure. In the next years, the dates became flexible and in some faculties, there were special sessions organized for the WT people. The rules for mandatory attendance of courses and seminars have been modified so that working full



time is possible. Also, some of the employers plug into the discourse and practice of seeking general and transferable skills and dispositions and place little importance on the full fledged working experience.

It's very funny, if you think of it. When I graduated, opening positions in the bank looked for "minimum 3 years of experience". Now, last year they opened a position in which they specifically wanted fresh graduates, with communication and team work skills

There are several elements that come out in looking comparatively at the way the working and the studying activities actually get combined in the biographies of people. Throughout the first sample, of the people who were middle managers in 2008, I argue that there is a noticeable trend of an increased blurring of the distinction between the two stages. Some of the people have worked.

There are several elements in this interesting observation. On one level, the agreement over the necessity of such activities for a successful future does not necessarily translate into extended action in this respect. It is more a shared understanding regarding what the Great Person would have to do. One can agree that the source of success is to have a part time job, be a volunteer and do presentations in student conferences, but can still do only some of these things or none at all, for different reasons. The type of One is at the level of the actual practices, the fact that students tend to do many extracurricular activities. On the other level, what can be identified is at the level of sense-making out of the requirements of the current situation from the subject. The next section

If there are two constructions: a person who only does this (like Carmen in the beginning) and somebody who builds other things, the frequency of the behavior has changed and the educational system has adapted. Even more clearly what has changed is the degree to which the “only student” type of behavior could be associated to a Great Person behavior. While this was not the case before, even those who thought of themselves as ambitious and wanting to achieve high in life did not report the pressure of doing multi-layered things. Now, the normative pressure is much higher. Among the young people, I often heard the line “I know I should be more active, I wish I was, but somehow I wasn’t”. the type of regret that Carmen phrased, which people from the older generations who thought that it is through studying that their preparation for their future working life is best achieved did not feel the pressure of being the Small Person.

### **6.3. Professional identity and university specialization**

One of the recurring themes in the early career narratives of the older middle managers was the their continuous preoccupation of matching not only their level of education with the quality of the job they would have, but also the content of their training to the content of their working activities. For some, it was a great source of frustration not to be able to work as a programmer, an engineer, in a bank or as a historian. As I showed in the previous chapter, radically switching domains was a recurrent event (for example the people with a technical education that became Sales agents and then followed that career track). Regardless of whether retrospectively they were happy with the decisions made or not, people recall the moment of choice as a departure from what they had thought was the normal track that would follow from their educational specialization. While in

practice domain switches were rather frequent, they were considered rather as an abnormality; an abnormality that could turn out bad or good.

The clear professional identity of the graduates-to-be in my additional sample was rather an exception. Indeed, with a BA in any of the domains that people I have talked to have, a wider series of jobs can be imagined, making the predictions over the consequences of their educational choices difficult. The three different departments (European Studies, Physics and Psychology) proved to be a good choice for capturing, besides the differences inherent to their focus, the elements of communality that the entire higher education system had.

The European Studies Faculty one of the Departments which explicitly come closest to a neoliberal understanding of the role of school in training individuals, as it aims at offering the students knowledge from various domains that they can later use in order to adapt to the demands of their work place. The promise of flexibility and openness is appreciated by students, even when put in balance with the lack of a clear professional identity.

From European Studies, you can do anything. I really feel that I can adapt to whatever an employer asks from me. I had never worked in a bank before [this job mentioned], but I could easily adapt, it took me a while, but I had the tools that I needed to learn. It's this multitude of domains that we learn from: Law, Management, Marketing, European Integration, Sociology. We have a broader view on things.

European Studies, final year student

While the European Studies Department can be looked at as a particular case, as one of those faculties whose graduates are more likely to enter all types of subfields, the same thing can be noticed for the other two departments, where the type of skills that graduates have is more circumscribed and their profession is more institutionalized than European Studies. The same perception of a multiplicity of positions on which their qualification would be considered adequate can be found in the case of Psychology graduates. They represent a particularly interesting case in this respect, as the overall trend towards the loosening of the link between the domain of study and the future job comes together with the institutionalization of the liberal profession of “psychologist” in Romania. This is meant to make the rules of the game clearer and to standardize the steps needed in order to be a practitioner. Therefore, for graduates of this department who wish to be a practitioner, the steps needed in order to reach certain positions are becoming clearer and their transition from school to work more institutionalized. This is, however one of the

In my specialization, the number of Physics classes was reduced in order to make room for the Biology, Chemistry and Medicine. And we do a little bit of all. We don't know anything.... I mean there's not a well defined domain in which we can say we're very good. But it's in a way helpful, because we can squeeze in... a Pharmacy, a factory a... And this brings a little comfort... .And that's why we haven't thought very seriously about what's coming next, because we told ourselves... “something will come out of this”... I don't know, a physician in a hospital, when these guys get a new machine and we have to “fix” it... this is what keeps us alive.

Physics, final year student

The normalization of expecting a loose link between one's choice of profile and their future jobs is part of a larger narrative about the unpredictability and unsettledness of the economic and social environment in which they are living. On the one hand, elements of anxiety over this unpredictability appeared in all the interviews. On the other hand, many of the students value the openness of their future as a source of exploring what they would like to do, what would best fit their preoccupations or interests. Therefore, the blurriness of plans is not only lived as an unfortunate side effect of the conditions in which they need to make their moves, but also as an open space that allows for exploration and that gives the opportunity of postponing final decisions until more lived experience and information is being attained. Unpredictability is anxiety provoking, but also liberating because it offers a broad realm of what is perceived as possible, under both its positive and negative aspects. Like in many instances described in the previous chapters, the comparison with the socialist past comes in as important. The type of malleability of the future, retractable decisions and possibilities for exploration is contrasted with an image of the past in which these elements are seen as missing. The centralized repartition scheme of the socialist economy, which assigned graduates to their jobs, in accordance to a plan figures into the imagination of the young, despite their lack of any personal experience. The anxiety provoking aspects of their current situation are read as the necessary corollary of being part of a different logic, in which individuals have the responsibility for their own life paths, and the system does no longer provide it for them.

That's why I was saying that our discussion starts being depressing. Because we all delay thinking about this... until it becomes imminent. I have my graduation

ceremony in two weeks and I haven't really thought about it.... I'll apply for the MA, this will give me two years, I'll apply here and there, maybe I'll get a job... or maybe I won't... i'll see. In the mean time, I'll get to know myself better, maybe I'll know better what it is that I want... I can't think very far now, because many people ended up where they wouldn't have imagined, both in the bad and in the good sense

While graduates do not have a clearly sketched future plan that would imply consecutive and defined steps that require certain types of actions that they are aware of, they do not fail to relate to the future totally or restrict their appropriation to the “extended present” (Anderson et al. 2005). After having framed the entire situation as very uncertain and anxiety-provoking, discourses become quite rich in elements that “populate” their hypothesized futures and that map a certain vision of the “universe of possibles”. Or, referring to Emirbayer's terminology, the anxiety that they experience due to the high unpredictability of the future events does not imply a lack of projective engagement with their future (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). One of the salient features in students' narratives is the high presence of consequential ways of reasoning. Thinking in terms of “plan A, plan B and plan C”, having alternative projections of successions of events and positions in the career field as well as geographically is close to being the norm. Beyond the differences in the actual content of their thoughts, the predominant mode of conceptualizing their experiences is in a path-dependent logic. This is the case both when referring to the future (“if I do this, and this comes out, then I will be there and this will happen, or, if ...”) and when retrospectively reconstructing their (educational) trajectory

so far (“if I had gone to that university, if I wouldn’t have had that job...” “if I had applied for that internship”).

Some of the elements that populate their images of the future are quite clearly defined as goals that they would like to achieve. A series of other elements remain secondary, unclear or very subject to contingency. Which element is the one that remains fixed and for which multiple ways of achieving that state can be imagined differs among the interviewees. It can be either the domain of activity that is the one to which all other imaginable positions and actions are subordinated (like IR, clinical psychology, public relations) and become only secondary features that are allowed to have a broader scope of variance. In other scenarios, the fix element is related to the type of activity that the job would imply (like flexible program, tasks that would require creativity or that would imply a high degree of responsibility and coordination of others) or long time security. Other people are committed only to a broader expression of a field of interest, like “working with children” and experience mentally and actually with a wide range of imaginable activities that contain that possibility (from therapy to babysitting). In other discourses, what comes out is the “not” side, the things that are not in any way compatible with their general desirable understanding of their future lives (“not a routine job”, “not a badly paid job”, “not in Romania”).

Students struggle with accommodating the various elements of contingency into blurry and alternative paths. Therefore, accommodating the fact that exact outcomes cannot be predicted, the mapping out of the future rests in having only some elements stable, while others are allowed to be subject to variation. The activities and engagements that were

described in the previous section become integrated into these narratives: as intermediary steps, with consequences that cannot be fully predicted, “leaving doors open for the future, as something will give eventually”

In this section I have argued that the way students conceptualize the link between their schooling and working experience has changed in the last nearly two decades. Gradually, the expectation the specialization followed during the university determines to a great extent the career path they would take is becoming less and less the mainstream vision. Alternative activities during the university studies – what they refer to as “experience” – start to increasingly figure in their understanding of what will matter for their future professional lives. This brings many elements of contingency in the way they think of their future and plan it. The economic and social environment is seen as unstable and therefore they assign little predictability to the consequences attached to their decisions and actions.

However, to say that the current generations of graduates live in more uncertain conditions than the previous cohorts in this study would be misleading. The type of change I have tried to pin down does not refer to the actual adequacy of the older graduates’ prediction that their educational choices will determine their professional path. On the contrary, I have shown in the previous chapter radical shifts in domains of activity; also, I have argued that the current middle managers have been pioneers in many of the new positions in the labor market, thus arguably operating in even more uncertain situations. What has changed is the degree to which the environment is conceptualized as uncertain and the ways in which they understand their own role in such an environment.



Several changes in the way the educational system is organized account at least partially for the shift in the way people conceptualize the relationship between the studying and the working periods of their lives and the increased willingness to consider blurry professional identities, which are not clearly related to the specialization of their studies. The changes in the system of admissions to university which were introduced in 2005 have diminished the investment of time and energy in the choice of the specialization. Until then, the decision of the specialization to be followed needed to be taken early enough during highschool to enable the student to take the relevant admission exams. This involved an intensive anticipatory socialization and focused attention to the chosen niche. Also, the admission exams for the different Faculties were scheduled simultaneously, so students would not apply for more than one. The new regulations, in which what mattered were the grades obtained during highschool and the scores obtained at the standard national examination radically shifted the moment of decision regarding the specialization to be followed. Students no longer had to prepare for specialized exams, but could focus on the general national test and postpone the decision until after they have the results of this examination. Not only could they contemplate a larger span of simultaneous applications during highschool, but for the first time could actually file multiple applications, wait for the results and only then choose. Many of my informants in the sample of current students told me about the tough choices they had to make between more than one successful application: “to go to Psychology or to History”, “to go to European Studies, Sociology or Environmental Studies”. This type of awareness of counterfactual life courses was missing in the older cohort, as they were at most contemplated during highschool.

At the same time, the educational system went through many changes regarding the way it conceptualizes the graduates. Borrowing elements of the Bologna process of higher education transformations, students are more and more invited to think of themselves as acquiring transferable skills. This provides people with a grammar in which to understand themselves as actors, which proves to be quite useful in making sense out of their confusing experiences.

## SECTION IV

### **REALITY-THAT-HOLDS-TOGETHER AND THE (IM)POSSIBILITIES OF CRITIQUE**

The *Fourth Section* adopts a metacritical position and problematizes the links between the critical capacities of ordinary actors and the institutions of reality-making in the particular context of Romania. It serves as the discussion of the ...

*Chapter Seven* is in a direct dialogue with the first chapter. I employ the conceptual language of reality-that-holds together and focus on the semantic function of integration that the institutions have. I try to substantiate the claim that because it is the legitimate personhood that is primarily at stake for the individuals in the way they are targeted by the anti-communist reality, the hegemonic discourse that makes this reality hold-together short circuits the possibilities for the critical actions of individuals to turn into a strong alternative to this reality. While putting the reality of the capitalist mode of organization in a state of uncertainty is in itself a major challenge both for ordinary individuals and for those taking a metacritical position, the ways in which socialism figures into the justificatory mechanisms makes it hold together to an even greater extent.

*Chapter Eight* starts from the observation that people's understandings of their work occupy an important position far beyond the realm of sociological or anthropological research interests. For this reason, I find it crucial to evaluate the quality of research primarily in relation to its having met the challenge of the political

implications. The rich domain of methodological concerns emerged in close connection with the idea of maximizing the extra value added by the scientific accounts in comparison to mere opinions or speculations; in this sense, methodology should be strictly instrumental to a goal that is higher than itself. However, the methodological realm has gained a considerable degree of autonomy in relation to both epistemological preoccupations and those related to more encompassing definitions of the quality of research. It is in this semi-autonomy of the methodological realm that I find both one of the biggest threats and a great resource for social scientists. Anchoring my discussion in the substantive topic of the realm of work, I describe a mechanism by which both survey methodology and in-depth anthropological research may end up displacing political implications from the concerns over quality. I continue by arguing in favour of a reflexive and responsible use of methods and devote some space for describing both the potentials and the perils of utilising Sequence Analysis.

## **CHAPTER 7. IN THE MIDST OF NEOLIBERAL PRESSURES AND ANTI-COMMUNIST DOGMA: WHOSE IMPOSSIBILITIES TO REPRESENT WORK?**

### **7.1. Introduction**

The fall of the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe around 1990 marked a rare moment of adherence to a project of pervasive societal refashioning. At the highest level of abstraction, the direction in which these societies would model themselves was nearly unquestioned, enjoying tremendous legitimacy: away from Socialism and towards Capitalism. Market economy and the societal equilibrium that it was expected to produce become the utmost goal the Eastern European societies set for themselves. 1990 was, therefore, an important moment in the history of capitalism. The failure of its greatest Other was read as hard empirical proof allowing to distinguish between the *right* and the *wrong* imaginable models for societal organization. The last real (at least discursively real) exteriority to the capitalist system as such suddenly became easy to deal away with. Re-emphasizing its opposition to Socialism, which had been empirically proven to be unviable, adds the needed extra layers of legitimacy for Capitalism in a multitude of situations.

This broad commitment comes with numerous corollaries that would set further action and reform and provide guidance for telling “right” from “wrong”. A privileged domain for normative visions is carved out around individual level behaviors and attitudes. The possibility and the need for reworking the definition of what it is to be a worthy person, (citizen, worker, intellectual) is open. This paper dwells on the tensions created and sustained around the definitions of legitimate personhood in Romania two decades after

the macro turning point. I argue that the hegemonic anti-communist discourse in Romania has crucial effects beyond shaping the dominant intellectual field, through offering the representational tools of rendering illegitimate any claim or behavior as soon as it is associated with the socialist past. There is a traceable link between the type of silences that the intellectual field sustains and the impossibilities to represent individual level indignations because of their being rendered automatically illegitimate. The pressure towards certain types of subjectivity that the increasingly pervasive neoliberal logic exerts is being multiplied by presenting it as the ultimate alternative to the (indisputably bad) socialist past.

I use as a starting point for the discussion a recent blog post by a young researcher in the Centre for Institutional Analysis and Development, which delineates the features of the good and the bad employee. I further try to draw the connection of this type of formulations to the wider representational context in Romania, its possibilities and silences. It becomes salient how valuing certain individual behaviors and attitudes are linked to broader formulations of the public good, the direction and principles of economy and the state, and how the certain formulations of the macro coordinates are translated into prescriptions for personhood. The degree of specificity of this phenomenon is being then discussed throughout the second part of the paper. I argue that neither the existence of pressure towards subjectification, nor the main elements of the direction in which this pressure should go are specific. It is rather at the core of the way capitalism captures the enthusiasm of people in the current phase. The anti-communist aspect, however, plays a great role. It gives extra strength to this mechanism, paralyzes

critique even more, by making nearly impossible the attempts to formulate links between indignations and a greater good, which has been monopolized.

Crucially, this paper does not even begin to answer questions about how these scripts for personhood and impossibilities for representation and claim making are being dealt with by real people. Instead, it is thought of simply in anticipation of empirical analysis of the tensions of legitimate personhood that people actually experience. Mapping out the normative context in which individuals engage with pressures and find/fight their spaces for expressing/formulating alternatives is a necessary starting point. However, I argue that it is crucial that research focuses on the work done by people to fit their own experiences, enthusiasms and indignations in this existing normative milieu. While the space of this paper only allows for a brief hint at the theoretical direction in which this could be done, in principle I make a strong claim that the critical work done by people in their careers and representations is central and should be given both theoretical and political space.

Part 1 discusses the blog entry and tries to embed it in the wider field of representations in Romania. In part 2, I discuss several streams of literature with two goals: first, I aim at clarifying the role I attribute to the anti-communist rhetoric in shaping the tensions of legitimate personhood. Second, I aim at substantiating my call for focusing (further) analysis on the way situated individuals deal with the type of pressure delineated, rather than assuming successful processes of subjectification.

## 7.2. Good and bad employees: a recent blog entry

This section takes a close look at the description of desirable attitudes towards work, as it is visible in a recent blog entry<sup>26</sup>. A young project coordinator in the Centre for Institutional Analysis and Development (CADI)<sup>27</sup>, a think tank with an explicit center-right position, presents her analysis of the current landscape of Romanian employees. The story starts with a seemingly cautions statement, which is meant to guide the reader in understanding the subsequent analysis:

I delineate two ideal types (in a weberian vein) of employees: the Entrepreneurial and the Clerkish. Reality is, of course, somewhere in the middle, in between these two, closer to one or the other end of this continuum.

Weber's concept of ideal type is brought in to warn the readers that what follows is the delineation of some abstractions, not a description of any particular case. The two ideal types will define the two ends of a continuum and any empirical example that might come to mind will be closer or further away from these two imaginary employees. What this cautious statement does is to establish a linear continuum as the appropriate frame in which empirical situations are to be interpreted. Potential empirical cases are allowed to be very close to one end, to the other, or far away from both; however, we are told that

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<sup>26</sup> <http://auramatei.blogspot.com/2010/07/doua-tipuri-de-angajati-functionarul-si.html> Posted on 12.07.2010, last retrieved 01.11.2010

<sup>27</sup> [www.cadi.ro](http://www.cadi.ro)



what matters about them is only the distance to these ends. There is no other significant ideal type to refer to, no other “distance” to be measured.

As it will soon become clear, the two ends of the continuum are the positive and the negative respectively, the desirable and the undesirable employee<sup>28</sup>. The framework for interpreting reality proposed in this introduction derives its strength through the fact that it is not falsifiable. Any concrete individual can be understood and qualified through this framework, even if he or she has features belonging to both the ends. They will be “somewhere in the middle, far away from both ends of the continuum”, but we will still know what is desirable and what is undesirable in the mixture of attributes that they have.

The post continues with substantiating the two ends of the continuum – the Entrepreneur and the Clerk – in several typical situations (employment interview, starting the job) and regarding important topics (job satisfaction and motivation).

When becoming employed, the Entrepreneur is interested in the general development strategy of the organization and ponders upon whether s/he wants to be part of this strategy, if it will take her/him somewhere and offer development opportunities. The Clerk will be interested in the number of working hours, the length of leave, the food coupons and other incentives. S/he will not ask anything about the organization’s vision. The Entrepreneur wants to be ok with the mission of the organization, while the Clerk cares about not being disturbed.

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<sup>28</sup> Echoing almost perfectly Boltanski and Chiapello’s terminology of Little and Great people of a certain time, which will be discussed in the next section.

The Great Employee takes the organization, its mission and vision seriously. The Little Employee does not. However, this is not exactly how the opposition is expressed. Instead, what makes the Little the opposite of the Great on this dimension is their interest in the shameful practicalities. This excerpt seems to be about how good it is to be interested in the broader picture one is inserted to and the prospects of development (both personal and for the organization) and how bad it is not to care. However, what we actually learn is that concern with the basic elements of the working contract is not a dignifying one. It becomes shameful and a proof of ones' lack of real interests in the job, betraying the wrong reasons for which someone might be searching for a job: the remuneration, leave, perhaps pension fund and medical insurance. These are all the wrong end of the continuum.

This interpretation manages to make "interest in the practicalities" (instead of "lack of interest in the mission of the firm's strategy") into the antonym of what is being considered an indispensable quality of a good employee, namely interest in the overall organization.

Once hired, the entrepreneur will ask if s/he can start tomorrow.

There's no office and computer available for her/him yet? No problem, s/he will bring her/his own laptop and will work in the meeting room. The Clerk will ask whether s/he can start in a week, so that s/he can get a rest after the tiresome previous job [].

On the Great employee's end we see willingness to accommodate and surmount the imperfection of the organization through personal initiative. The irony in the last sentence

suggests that the Small employee uses an alleged tiredness from a previous job as an excuse. Unwillingness to “start tomorrow” joins the series of behaviors at the negative end of the “continuum” automatically, without much chance given to it being a justified claim.

We learn further that the Great Person is intrinsically motivated, by the “the content of the work, the relationship with his/her colleagues and will anytime be willing to work more next to people from whom s/he can get the tricks of the trade”. As work is rewarding in itself, as the purpose is always to learn more, to develop to unprecedented levels, as the person sees the greater picture, there is no need to be disciplined by the list of tasks, time frames or even paycheck. Both extrinsic motivations and external control seem to be completely irrelevant for the truly Great. Quite contrastingly, the Little Employee

will ask what time the “attendance sheet” needs to be signed. The first [the Entrepreneur] will not mention the attendance sheet, because they wouldn’t even be familiar with the concept. [] Two months after being employed, the Clerk will refuse to fulfill a task because it is not mentioned in the job description. The entrepreneur will, again, have no clue what the job description is. [] The Clerk derives satisfaction bi-monthly, namely when s/he gets the two paychecks. Once again the Entrepreneur is clueless: s/he does not know what the two paychecks are.

In an attempt to make the hierarchy of motivations more convincing, the author even reaches the conclusion that the Great Person is ignorant of the paychecks. Once more the

corollary is that expression of non-ignorance regarding the paychecks pushes one closer to the negative end.

The possibility of protest is brought into the picture, and then clearly defined and assigned to the negative end of the continuum. The only reason why an employee wants to be aware of their working profile is in order to avoid otherwise legitimate extra tasks, not – for example – to make sure they are willing and able to fulfill those tasks. Rejecting extra task is unambiguously a sign of the employee's poor dedication, never of abusive employers or realistic evaluations of possibilities by the employee. Any claim of abusive tasks or extra hours is unambiguously placed in the description of the Little Employee.

Lastly, the perfect reformulation of this opposition:

And, maybe most importantly, the Clerk feels unacknowledged, not appreciated to his/her right value, having been done injustice to and permanently pity themselves. Good things don't happen to her/him because of the others, while s/he is an undiscovered and unappreciated genius. The Entrepreneur evaluates his position strategically, thinks of what s/he has accomplished and what there is still left to be accomplished and attributes the lack of success to her/himself primarily.

The distribution of responsibility is also clearly mapped out. Without needing any additional information of the situation in question, we learn that the Great Person will not attribute responsibility to any other entity than her/himself (not the employer, not the team, not the state, not the free market, not capitalism as a system).

The crucial implication of this view is that attributing responsibility to any of these entities is illegitimate and makes one resemble the Small Employee. Attempts to formulate links between one or another element of either the organization's strategy, the manager or the capitalist form of social organization as such and concrete indignations that the person might have are made easily dismissible before their content is actually analyzed. It is an open venue for dealing away with an entire category of utterances without needing to treat each of them in their particularity.

Eloquently enough, there is an entire set of preoccupations that is rendered illegitimate, that is stigmatized in these oppositions. Care about one's entitlements is efficiently neutralized by the association with other features that are more unambiguously undesirable (interest in the overall mission of the organization, motivation, pro-active behavior). The same happens to resisting to extra tasks and extra working hours and to formulating critical discourses, that would attribute responsibility to anyone else but oneself.

This blog entry is a normative piece of writing, which distinguishes between what is good and what is bad in individual organizational behavior. Is it in any way important that it was written in 2010 in Romania? Fleshing out my "yes and no" answer to this question is the aim of the remaining of this paper. First I will formulate the "yes" aspect of my answer by discussing the blog as part of the broader intellectual and institutional setting in which it was produced and on which it impacts directly. Second, the "no" aspect of the answer is being addressed through a broader theoretical discussion, which mobilizes concepts from pragmatic sociology and the literature on neoliberal governmentality. The

paper ends with a call for reconceptualising the critical capacities of individuals and the different levels of articulation of critique.

### **7.3. Neoliberal subjects and socialist mentality**

The blog entry is not particularly interesting in respect to the type of employee it shows as exemplary. There is hardly anything surprising in that description, as the author quite diligently follows the general scripts for the worker of the flexible economy (see Part 2 of this paper). What is more interesting is the description of the inadequate employee and the resonances it finds in the hegemonic discourses and rhetorical devices of the Romanian intellectual field. Most interesting is to dwell on the tremendous extra-power that the scheme for interpreting (and modeling) reality the blogger proposed draws from its match with the hegemonic anti-communist intellectual field.

The link of the negative and inefficient type of employee behavior with the state sector is not a subtle one. From the “Our mission” section of CADI’s website we learn that they “do not hold illusions that the inefficiencies caused by the state can ever be eliminated”<sup>29</sup>, making their position on the need to reduce the state in favor of the market explicit. Naming the negative hero of the above story the “Clerk” is therefore no coincidence. But the state sector is just the “natural habitat” of the Clerk, as we have seen it represents a type which can potentially be found everywhere (and in everyone). Besides and through this association with the state sector, the Clerk also brings into the spaces of relevant comparisons the socialist past. The rhetoric goes that during socialism, the overall institutional logic was that of the state sector, allowing inefficiency to perpetuate by not

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<sup>29</sup> <http://www.cadi.ro/index.php/vizualizare/articole/agenda/57>

sanctioning Little Employees. The image of the clerk being able to have the inappropriate attitude and behavior because the state does not sanction is widespread. The description of individual level attitudes and behaviors are closely intertwined with visions at the macro level: about the role and the desired role of the state and the market, about the right and wrong principles for macro-societal organization (capitalism vs socialism). The moralizing tale of the Clerk and the Entrepreneur reformulates at individual level the oppositions of state-market and socialism-capitalism. The scheme for interpreting individual behaviors as desirable or not therefore draws its power from these larger oppositions to which it alludes.

Once the unequivocal path to follow was set at the beginning of the 90s, it is little wonder that most of the first two decades after this historical moment have been haunted by the trope of the communist legacy. Policy maker, reformists, politicians and economists alike went the extra mile in their efforts to identify the socialist legacy in institutions and in people's behavior. Searching for continuities in this sense is done from a normative position: continuities are to be avoided both on the political economical and individual levels. The radical macro shift that was sought did not go together well with continuities. While not the explicit intention of social scientists, their research often feeds into these mechanisms.

A concept that perhaps best embodies all these tensions is the "socialist mentality". A generously encompassing conceptual umbrella, it proves extremely powerful in normative discourses, and comfortably draws reinforcement from the social scientists as well. It connects individual behavior and understandings with macro conditions, as well

as the past with a desirable future. While a supra-individual phenomenon, the mentality resides within each individual and therefore responsabilizes each individual. As a diagnosis, “socialist/communist mentality” is used for pointing out the inadequate grasping of the principles of the market economy on the individual level. The Clerk would be guilty of such a mentality.

Anthropologist Monica Heintz’s book about the “changing work ethic in Romania” (Heintz, 2005) was well received. She rightly notices the centrality of the “mentalities” in the popular, political and policy attempts to make sense of the changes occurring, diagnosing problems and the crafting of solutions (Heintz, 2005). Not only does the political significance of her topic not escape her, but she puts great effort into documenting the extent and depth of this aspect<sup>30</sup>. The researcher expresses her commitment to bring a displacement to the lay opinions on the issue and add some extra understanding coming from the anthropological endeavour.

The displacement effort of this piece of research stays at the level of the causes: it is not an essential Romanianness which makes people have the wrong mentalities, but a complex of social and economic factors to which they were equally subjected (Heintz, 2005). While saving the work ethic (introduced as an alternative concept for mentality, one that would be more appropriate for the scientific discourse) from the level of essential national characteristics is indeed a laudable gesture, merely assigning it to a different causal constellation does not do much for challenge the normative discourse of

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<sup>30</sup> She argues that “mentalities” enable convenient causal models for Romanian politicians to responsabilise the individual and by this minimise the role of their own activity. This responsabilisation is presented however as an example of “incompetent local politicians trying to get away with their incompetence”, while the resonance with wider political discourse escapes her completely.



parting from socialism and embracing capitalism. The categories of the discussion remain the same: Romanians (while differently determined), their work ethic, an implicit description of a work ethic that would be the “right” one<sup>31</sup> and the wrong socialist mentalities; what follows is playing around with various comparisons using these categories.

The macro level turning point manifested itself as a dynamic moment, in which the set of justifications suggested to people for their involvement in capitalism was reshuffled in a particular way. What I wanted to stress as a consequence is the normative power that demands for subjectivity derive from being presented in opposition to the socialist logic/principles. Demands from subjects hold as legitimate to the extent that they can be presented as following from the alignment to the capitalist principles. Complementarily, once any element of behavior or understanding is successfully placed under the generous umbrella of *socialist mentality*, it stops being defensible, as it cannot relate to the greater good that is accepted (i.e. free market).

What we saw in the description of the Clerk as undesirable features: claims for contractual clarity, job security and boundaries of the self are presented as illegitimate in two mutually reinforcing rhetoric: first, they are illegitimate because this is not what a fully fledged capitalist subject would do. Second, it is what a socialist subject (i.e. Clerk) would do. The key for this valorization scheme is the association of such elements with the big “right and wrong”, namely “capitalism and socialism”. Alina Petrovici’s (2010) ethnographic study in a Cluj corporate environment clearly shows how the possibility for

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31 - oddly enough using Max Weber’s “protestant ethic” as an “ideology free” yardstick for empirical reality to be measured against, quite contrary to both the way in which Weber uses it and the understanding stemming from here that Boltanski and Chiappelo give to the “spirit of capitalism”

creating discursive spaces by the employees in which to resist the enormous pressure for overtime work is neutralized by the all mighty claim “we are a capitalist firm, not a socialist one” (Petrovici, 2010). What remains an impossibility for representation is decoupling defending “free time” or “work security” from references to socialism. This possibility is, however, greatly impinged upon by larger discursive and representational forces than the scope of situated individuals. The hegemonic status of anti-communism in the intellectual field in Romania offers great resources for this type of mechanisms.

#### **7.4. Diagnosis of nostalgia effectively neutralizing critique**

I have outlined the discursive mechanism through which people’s current understandings and behaviors are diagnosed as “wrong”. The explanation for the reason why Clerks continue to exist is often identified in the persisting influence of the past through the education and experience of people: the socialist system has already created the Small People of the present; as for the people themselves, they are guilty of not possessing the internal robustness to adapt, to transform themselves into Great People.

However, a mutation in this causal mechanism becomes crystallized in the last years, as two decades after 1989, the direct experience of the past is harder to blame. While this version of a causal model and its central actors is still alive<sup>32</sup>, a variation of it started to emerge. The figure of the “Nostalgic” and the threat of “nostalgia for communism” have been identified (Poenaru, 2010).

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<sup>32</sup> Communism still creates the mentalities of the young via the institutions that are still alive and via the education that parents who were themselves educated during communism give.

This becomes particularly well visible in September 2010, when IICCMER (Institute for the Investigation of the Crimes of Communism and the Memory of the Romanian Exile) published a report<sup>33</sup> based on the survey of Romanian's perception of communism. The figures showed how only less than a third of the population thinks communism was a bad idea, the rest thinking either it was a good idea, but poorly applied or even well applied, or have no opinion on the subject. When prompted to associate freely communism with a word, nearly a half of the associations were with positive terms ("a safe workplace" being the most popular). And only 42% of the people thought the system was illegitimate (the rest either rejected this idea or did not have an opinion).

One stream of reactions to the published results was that of stupefaction and blaming people for being irrational and dumb enough to have challenged the ultimate legitimacy of capitalism. Another line of reaction showed, however, more understanding. Nostalgia was indeed an irrational reaction (of retreat to an idealized past), but a normal one, given the difficulties of the present crisis. *What is being missed here is the fact that this is the only representation of the indignations of the present that is being allowed to reach the level of visibility given by such a survey report.*

The treat of being labeled "nostalgic over communism" is present in any expression of indignation, in any claim for a secure job, for contractual clarity and rights. It can successfully replace the label of "communist legacy". The creation of this new rhetoric of the Nostalgic makes the normative mechanism for interpreting reality operate in the same way, albeit with different accusations. It is another successful linking of the "wrong" to

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<sup>33</sup>[http://www.crimelecomunismului.ro/pdf/ro/evenimente/perceptiile\\_romanilor\\_asupra\\_comunismului/raport\\_sondaj\\_opinie.pdf](http://www.crimelecomunismului.ro/pdf/ro/evenimente/perceptiile_romanilor_asupra_comunismului/raport_sondaj_opinie.pdf)

the “past”, silencing the attempts to criticize the present, by rendering the whole category “nostalgic”, and linking it to the “wrong” past. If it is more and more difficult to deal away with criticism of the current situation on the basis of a communist legacy, it becomes instrumental to do it on the basis of irrationality and nostalgia.

The gallery is [...] enriched with a new one: the figure of the “nostalgic”, with a proteic face and any age. If until now, the profile of the enemy was sketched out plainly, in relation to ideological coordinates that were rather clear, in this new age, the entire population, without exception, can anytime become guilty, given the loose structure of the new forms of categorization. Nostalgia can hit anyone, even the youth. Especially the youth. Therefore, the anti-communist struggle, in its *reloaded* version is only now to begin” (Poenaru, 2010).

The hegemonic anti-communism of the Romanian intellectual field (with its subtle slide from “legacy” to “nostalgia”) and the blog entry discussed are formulations at different levels of the mechanisms which pressure in the direction of maintaining expressions of indignation in the present at a very low level of visibility. They short-circuit the articulation of links between personal situations and more abstract levels, like the common good. While the Small and Great person in the blog are described without any direct reference to the condemning of the socialist past, the image of the Clerk is one of its formulations. Diagnosis of socialist legacy or nostalgia for communism manage to effectively (so far) block the coagulation of radical and coherent critique.

The context in which the previous blog entry was written, therefore, does make a difference. The Clerk is not just the bad neoliberal subject, it is either the subject who could not rid himself/herself from the socialist habits and mentalities or the irrational

nostalgic. However, the bad neoliberal subject is the in the focus of normative representations way beyond a post-socialist nation state.

Therefore, the way anti-communism ends up factoring into the pressures over legitimate personhood in Romania is not a mechanism foreign to the workings of capitalism and its justifications, on the contrary. In the discussion of the blog entry, I have pointed out that the logic of the two ideal types and the distribution of features has a particular effect on person Y who would be both very careful with the contractual conditions and at the same time interested in the organization, participating in its well-going. This person could only be “somewhere in the middle”, because while s/he has many of the features of the Great, some of the negative aspects are also present. I tried to show that this type of displacements is not specific to the Romanian context: person Y cannot be the truly Great for any neoliberal view. The reason is mainly the fact that they do not understand where their security actually should come from (their ever-increased employability). Subject Y would also be accused in any other neoliberal script for not having rid himself enough of the old logic, the fordist one. This displacement gains a tremendous extra legitimacy in the Romanian context because accusations of being “old school” and “not fully adapted” economically can suddenly be linked with accusations of sustaining an authoritarian regime, of being against freedom of speech, of supporting dictatorship and its crimes. As the past is constructed as fundamentally different (just another phase of the capitalist system versus a system exterior to it, which has been deemed morally wrong), it also features differently in the pressuring mechanisms. The remnants of the past have a much stronger moral baggage than they do in a core western context, where similar demands for subjectivity are being made. However, the mechanism itself, that of presenting the

present/future in opposition to previous ways of doing things is a central element of the workings of capitalism, and the reason why the interaction with critique is so important.

“Empowering” critique in a macro model of social change might seem at first optimistic or naïve, but it is in fact a rather gloomy vision, as “successful critique ends up feeding the next wave of capitalism by offering it the moral elements that it needs”.

### **7.5. Middle managers and their ordinary critique**

Throughout the paper, I have argued for the necessity of giving weight to the pressures and scripts for subjectivity identified. I have also made a strong claim for the need to link the hegemonic anti-communism intellectual Romanian field to the reasons why these formulations have such delegitimising power, while not falling into the trap of too great specificity of these mechanisms.

At the same time I find it very important not to mistake the pressures for subject making with the subject making itself. The tension of the concept of governmentality and subjectivity should be maintained, by not deducing from the clarity of these formulations, or the pervasiveness of mechanisms like the anti-communist hegemonic discourse the behavior of people and their work with these pressures. This requires empirical exploration in itself and failing to do so contributes to the impossibilities of representing work, indignation and denouncing exploitation.

## **CHAPTER 8. METHODOLOGY AND THE QUALITY OF RESEARCH: REFLECTIONS ON AN UNEASY YET PROMISING RELATIONSHIP**

The realm of methodology<sup>34</sup> occupies a privileged position in relation to assessing what is recognised as good quality research of the social. The rich domain of methodological concerns and discussions emerged in close connection with the idea of maximizing the degree to which the accounts produced by social scientists add an extra value in comparison to mere opinions or speculations; in this sense, methodology should remain strictly instrumental to a goal higher than itself, namely the overall quality of the research outcome. However, I argue that the methodological realm has gained a considerable degree of autonomy in relation to both epistemological preoccupations and those related to more encompassing definitions of the quality of research. First, I refer to the attention given to technicalities in surveys and to practicalities in anthropological research as examples of two mechanisms derived from this autonomy, with different content, but equivalent negative implications for quality. Second, I argue that the relative autonomy from epistemological positions of methodology can be turned to the advantage of the researcher and will further discuss the positive potentialities and the dangers of Sequence

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<sup>34</sup> I refer to the broadest understanding of methodology, that of ideas and rules about how to transform ongoing life into observations that are further the object of analysis and reporting; the specifications for “how to do research” and “how to check whether research was done properly”. Further in the chapter, I use more clearly specified definitions of the various methodological aspects I refer to.

Analysis. The main claim of the future discussion is that a conscious and critical instrumentalisation of methodology towards the broader understanding of quality research is not only an effort that might be rewarded, but one that researchers cannot afford moving away from.

While I believe in their wider relevance, I use the substantive topic of individual understandings and practices of work throughout the paper in order to better ground my arguments. Before plunging into the methodological discussion, I will spend some time on substantiating my claim that all accounts centred on the experience of work and the understandings people have of it are intrinsically political in order to alert the reader of the imperative of taking this into consideration when discussing the quality of research.

The attitudes towards work are embedded more or less unequivocally in particular visions of the functioning of the entire social system. More importantly, struggles over the different visions of the macro functioning have their corollaries in one or more aspects of the work ethic of people. Discussions about the understandings of work are inescapably political. The relevant consequence for the current argument is the fact that the account of the social scientist about this realm is delivered in the midst of tensions and is therefore by default political. The quality of the research should not be thought about outside of what it brings to this political space; on the contrary, I argue for bringing the layer of the political implications of framing and reporting research at the centre of the concerns for its quality.



### 8.1. Measuring the understanding and practices of work in surveys

The sociologist presenting a report about various aspects of people's understandings of work based on a representative sample survey speaks from a powerful position. The report does not come across as just another opinion about reality that is being uttered, but as the result of neutral and distanced analysis; the fact that its language resembles that of the hard sciences and that evidence comes in the form of percentages and coefficients increases the credibility. The array of possible critical questions to ask in order to test whether a given report is legitimately presented as a scientific one is wide. Whether indeed it was measured correctly that 54% of the people in the sample value job security very much and whether indeed all the required conditions are fulfilled so that we can be 95% sure that the actual percentage in the whole population of Romania assigning this importance to job security is somewhere between 51 and 57% would be a small example. These tests of quality are sophisticated and question all the steps, from the design of the questionnaire until the last details of the statistical significance of any difference between two categories that is reported in a footnote. As a consequence, being capable to design and conduct a survey which can stand the test of quality as required by the technical voice is anything but an easy task.

Paradoxically, the strictness of the technical voice can end up significantly factoring into a mechanism that reduces the quality of the research in the broader sense. The multiplicity of issues raised by this one hard to please voice creates the appearance of a consistent and sufficient self-critical space, which can make its fundamental univocality hard to notice. As technical concerns can easily become a full-time job, drawing the boundaries of the responsibility of the researcher in a way that would strictly contain

them and exclude others – in a logic of the division of labour – seems almost natural: the decisions about the dimensions worth investigating are externalised to other actors, as is the embedding of the findings into wider explanatory discourses.

At the entry edge of the space of responsibility carved in this way, all the researcher does is to help translate the agenda of the actors who have decided (for reasons outside his/her concern span) that the understandings of work are a significant topic into questionnaire items. Whether this step is of good quality or not is again decided in dialogue with the technical voice only; it raises concerns about whether the response scales are well balanced, whether the right decision was taken about including or not a middle option and whether, linguistically speaking, the items are neutrally formulated so that the correct answer is not implied. At the exit end, the sociologist only needs to make sure that the reader is rightly made aware of all the possible sources of (technical) error of the report, that the language is neutral and not explicitly expressing any value judgment about what the new description of empirical reality. Again, the political nature of the lack of any engagement with the ways in which the categories which have just been upgraded to the level of “empirically documented” ones will be further embedded in discourses is effaced.

What is a proper understanding of work and of oneself as a working subject is at the centre of normative projects stemming from different interested positions. Perhaps the strongest one at the moment is the one trying to legitimate an understanding of society as being centred on a flexible economy. The individuals who populate it should therefore understand themselves as autonomous and independent entities, the sole (or at least main)

responsible for their success, and consequently expecting a minimum of protection or security from the state, trade unions or their employers; who see their working place as the source of self-fulfilment, as the place where their potentialities have the chance of being accomplished, where they should invest their creative energies; they should seek and find meaning in constantly upgrading their skills, in reinventing themselves so that they do not become outdated and stay in the way of a harmonious economic development. The flexibility of the economic action requires individuals to value an understanding of actorship that would fit that logic.<sup>35</sup>

Therefore, if the questionnaire comprises different dimensions of the operationalised concept of “flexibility”, if we ask questions about “how many jobs have you changed”, “how important is security for you” and “how important is it for you to have the possibility to constantly learn and upgrade your skills” we decide that these are the important dimensions, the dimensions worth being evaluated. The fact that the questionnaire has just ossified the set of categories in which a terrain of multi-faceted struggles such as the realm of work can be further talked about goes conveniently unnoticed. The uneasiness which would come with acknowledging the deeply political nature of the act that was actually being performed by the research team when designing the questionnaire can be relieved by displacing these concerns into the strict but comforting space of technicality.

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35 Problematising the existence of shared expectations around the characteristics of a worthy subject might resonate at first glance with the type of concerns quantitative sociologists have for “desirability” as a source of error in measurement. This problem I refer to is at a completely different level and it concerns the researcher rather than the interviewee: questionnaire items trying to grasp “flexibility” are not susceptible to it because respondents have sensed that it is desirable to answer the questions in such ways as to prove their flexibility, but because the researcher does not address the fact that flexibility is an interested category in itself, embedded in a normative vision of the workings of capitalism.

The fact that the sociologist is very careful in phrasing the report and does not imply at any point that valuing the security of the work place is another proof of the socialist legacy which is still visible in “Romanians’ mentality” does not take away the responsibility of the two acts that were depoliticised through technicality: the responsibility of having included this category in this particular way in the survey and that of not having made the effort of embedding the result in an alternative explanatory discourse, which gives job security another status, while being directly engaged with this possibility<sup>36</sup>.

What I want to point out as the fundamental problem in the (admittedly extreme) scenario I described above is the way the space of voices that the researcher needs to account for in order to justify the quality of his/her work is structured, namely its technicality centred univocality. The argument that I make throughout this paper is one for a hierarchical plurivocality within these spaces. In this case, it means that the technical voice is indeed important for large scale research borrowing from the insights of probability theory. But more fundamentally, it means that its role should always be subsumed to those drawing the attention to the political acts that any research performs in the end: setting the categories in which a phenomenon can be talked about and opening up the potential of their appropriation into broader discourses as empirically laden facts. Otherwise, just as any other method, the survey could be used in a politically conscious and engaged way.

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36A clarification is needed about my position towards the recent developments which gradually make Romania part of the established international surveys. Rather than implying that nothing meaningful is found out about people’s experiences, I made an effort to show that despite the effort and resources that is being (laudably) channeled into assuring the highest technical standards of conducting research, the empirical material obtained and their embedding in a report or argument is not neutral and a-political. One of the background narratives which such data is most prone to be integrated in is that of regional or national differences standing for differences in the properness of the work ethic of the people.

Actually, its legitimacy as a scientific endeavour could be in principle turned around and used as a powerful tool for consciously challenging the grammars of interested actors instead of uncritically reproducing and further empowering them. The fact that the actually existing surveys are unlikely to do it for a great number of reasons is a different (and perhaps fundamental) aspect.

What the voices linking the quality of research directly with its political nature and implications do to the researcher's overall uneasiness is very different from what the technical one does. The technical voice is harsh, sets high standards and has complex rules to follow, but is at the same time predictable, logical and knowable for sure. At the end of a conversation with it, the researcher might be unhappy with the verdict having specified the degree to which s/he reached the standards, but lives with the comforting sensation that the extent to which the standards were met is entirely knowable; and so are the steps for future improvement. Quite differently, the inbuilt tension in dialogues with the other voices can never be dealt away with completely, nor can the researcher afford the peace of mind coming from the certainty of having done the right thing to the end. Having realised a new layer of political implications of one's account of reality just delivered in an article does not come with clear steps to be followed towards the improvement. This has profound unsettling qualities for the lived experience of the researcher as a person. One of the important venues for maintaining univocal critical spaces is a more or less conscious effort of dealing away with an unsettling condition on the researcher's behalf.

## 8.2. Going anthropological?

The anthropological logic of doing research might come to mind as the first place to look for alternatives, given its fundamentally different approach to the relationship between the researcher and the researched world. Its history as a discipline intimately entangled in the colonialist project has favoured various types of self-other encounters which urged for the problematisation of the role of the researcher as a non-neutral entity in several ways<sup>37</sup>. The power asymmetries present both in the process of doing fieldwork and when writing about it, as well as the status of empirical observations as *obtenu* rather than *data* are not dealt away with, but rather given crucial importance<sup>38</sup>.

These epistemological considerations resonate best with certain practices of research and of writing. Prolonged and participant research, in which the researcher spends a long time doing fieldwork, following different threads of informants, treating everything around as a possible source of data, keeping field diaries which contain detailed notes of events, many of which centred on the researcher herself/himself are the usual elements of the anthropological “how to”. The practical voice of this logic of research does not ask questions about neutral formulations or statistical significance of tests, but about the degree of in-depth-ness, length of contact and reflexivity.

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37“‘The desire to speak for others is often born of a desire for mastery, to privilege oneself as the one who more correctly understands the truth about another’s situation or as one who can champion a just cause and thus achieve glory and praise. And the effect of the practice of speaking for others is often, though not always, erasure and a reinscription of sexual, national and other kinds of hierarchies” (Alcoff, 1991:29).

38“‘We would be better off looking for the natives’ points of view to realise their vision of their worlds while at the same time acknowledging that “we” do not speak from a position outside “their” worlds, but are implicated in them too: through fieldwork, political relations and a variety of global flows” (Narayan, 1993:676).

The anthropological practices of research spring from an epistemological position which takes the political nature of the act of research seriously, as well as the constant need to rethink the implications on this level. However, following these practices does not automatically make the research outcome in line with the epistemological nuances they should be embedded in. While raising substantively different issues than the technical voice of the survey, the practicalities voice of the ethnography has an equally limited power in ultimately leading to good research. And can have the exact role of comforting the researcher worried about the quality of her or his endeavour, by judging whether enough time was spent in the field, enough fieldnotes were taken, and whether the self-reflexivity diary is consistent enough and giving a verdict about the quality based on these parameters.

Shifting back the discussion to the substantive topic of the understandings of work: Monica Heintz rightly notices the centrality of the “mentalities” in the popular, political and policy attempts to make sense of the changes occurring, diagnosing problems and the crafting of solutions (Heintz, 2005). Not only does the political significance of her topic not escape her, but she puts great effort into documenting the extent and depth of this aspect. The crucial step of realizing that how we talk of work and mentalities is of importance, and implicitly that the account of the anthropologist would be integrated in such a tense realm is successfully made. Furthermore, the researcher expresses her commitment to bring a displacement to the lay opinions on the issue and add some extra understanding coming from the anthropological endeavour.

The displacement effort of this piece of research stays at the level of the causes: it is not an essential Romanianness which makes people have the wrong mentalities, but a complex of social and economic factors to which they were equally subjected (Heintz, 2005). While saving the work ethic (introduced as an alternative concept for mentality, one that would be more appropriate for the scientific discourse) from the level of essential national characteristics is indeed a laudable gesture, merely assigning it to a different causal constellation does not do much for challenge already existing discourses. The categories of the discussion remain the same: Romanians (while differently determined), their work ethic, an implicit description of a work ethic that would be the “right” one<sup>39</sup> and the wrong socialist mentalities; what follows is playing around with various comparisons using these categories.

The overall argument bluntly reproduces the discourse which presents the socialist Other as having to yet make some effort to rid itself of the (undoubtedly) wrong “socialist legacy” and grasp the proper categories of thought and behaviour that are (just as undoubtedly) found in the free market societies. Anthropological research has not only been used in a way that does not disrupt such a well entrenched meta-narrative (which was rightly spotted by the researcher as being insinuated at all levels and playing an important role as a justifying token for various reform and policy directions), but it reinforces it and brings the aura of the in-depth study to its use.

I referred to this example not only because it is one of the few pieces of writing referring to the substantive topic of “work ethic” in Romania, but mainly because it serves

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39 - oddly enough using Max Weber’s “protestant ethic” as an “ideology free” yardstick for empirical reality to be measured against, quite contrary to both the way in which Weber uses it and the understanding stemming from here that Boltanski and Chiappelo give to the “spirit of capitalism”



instrumental purposes in my overall argument about the role of methodology. I wanted to stress that the main arena for discussing the quality of a piece of research cannot be that of the technical voice versus the practicalities one<sup>40</sup>. A discussion on the level of “how to” does not automatically neither mirror nor invoke one at the epistemological level. While deeply entangled in the epistemological pillars of the discipline they might be primarily associated with, the “how to”, the “methodology” does have a degree of autonomy from them, or it can negotiate it for itself. Just as we can imagine a scenario in which a survey is used in a political conscious and responsible manner, through the categories it proposes and the way it is embedded back into the discursive realm, it does not take much imagination to see how “in-depth fieldwork” can be conducted and reported in a way that does not meet any of the epistemological subtleties of anthropology.

By this observation, I wanted to draw attention to a recurring dangerous move: that of using methodological positions as a proxy for epistemological ones. Awareness of the roots of a methodology is important, but it has a limited predictive power over the type of research endeavour it can become embedded in. The centrality of either the technical or the practicalities voice in the space of discussion of the quality of the research is dangerous in a similar way. By the same token, engaging primarily with the toolkit of the “how to” of the other imagined camp does not automatically result in a substantive engagement with neither the underlying assumptions nor the arguments made.

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40 The practicalities voice could have maybe insisted more on the selection of the organizations to be included in the study; also, for the quantitative sociologist, the way personal anecdotes are included to support arguments with the justification that they speak beyond their singularity might be a scandal; in an anthropological logic, this is a perfectly legitimate practice.

I have described so far ways in which the degree of autonomy of methodology from clear epistemological positions is mainly a negative move. Simply following the methodological standards of any disciplinary niche does not guarantee much else apart from assuring for oneself a space within which the legitimacy of the endeavour is not disputed. However, I would like to stress the positive and constructive potential of this degree of autonomy. I argue that from the fact that methodology can be used to serve different purposes, conscious effort should be put towards instrumentalising it towards the goal of doing aware and responsible research. While it does not guarantee quality outcomes it can be a powerful ally.

### **8.3. How can methods help? The example of Sequence Analysis**

In what follows, I will present Sequence Analysis<sup>41</sup> as a lens for looking at empirical material that has positive disruptive potentials for talking about the work experience and the understandings people have of it. I argue that the particularities of SA can be mobilised towards the higher goal of research, namely engaging substantively and

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41 Sequence analysis is a method that was adopted by social scientists from biology, where it was used to analyse protein and DNA sequences (See Abbott, 1990; Abbott and Hrycak, 1990; for a recent critical discussion see Aisenbrey and Fasang, 2010; Brzinsky-Fay and Kohler, 2010). Sequence data can come from a variety of fields of inquiry, among the most frequent ones are occupational careers, life course research and criminal careers. It is an exploratory method, which aims to discover patterns in the data, by generating typologies of sequences empirically. The entire career (or meaningful selections of it) becomes the unit of analysis. For each dimension on which the career is considered, there is a finite set of “states” in which a person can be at a given moment in time. The definition of these states is the responsibility of the researcher, and the results of the algorithms that are further applied heavily depend on the way these states were conceived. Then, a time unit is chosen (a year, half a year), and for each of these points in time, the adequate category is being assigned. The next step is to compare the coded trajectories to each other. One of the logics of comparison is with a theoretically significant trajectory. The other logic is to establish the degree of difference among each pair of trajectories. The way the comparisons are made is by estimating a distance between them: the minimum combination of replacements and insertions/deletions that need to be performed in order to transform one of the sequences into the other. Different replacements can be assigned different “costs” (matrix of costs between each pair of states) if there is a theoretical reasoning behind this differentiation. The matrix of distances that results between all the pairs of trajectories (after the algorithm is applied) is being further analysed by either cluster analysis or multidimensional scaling, and the final outcome is represented by these empirically generated typologies of sequences.

responsibly with the consequences of the cultural significance of its topic. However, the main status of this presentation is not that of a plea for the proliferation of the use of SA. The plea remains one for awareness of the role and implications of any methodology, for its critical and creative use.

### *Careers as sequences*

SA can be used to engage with longitudinal data obtained in any way. When used with empirical material gathered in the form of working life story interviews, which stand in themselves, the role of SA as simply a lens enabling the analysis to take a particular shape becomes even more salient. Through the way it sets the researcher to look at the empirical material, it promises to operate several welcome disturbances in the way we account for this realm.

As it was introduced partly as a critique to cross-sectional approaches, SA has incorporating temporality at its core. The unity of a trajectory is taken as the starting point, making salient the evolution in time of a person's situation and escaping the risk of taking episodes out of the broader life context in which they are embedded. To take an example: in a simple cross-sectional approach, what an episode of 6 months of unemployment is preceded and followed by in a person's life is lost for the analyst; the only layer of information that ends up being represented in the "data" is the existence of a case of unemployment in the sample. While easy to consider formally as the same situation, it makes a crucial difference whether this episode was followed by a better position than the one preceding it, or if there is significant difference in the domain in

which the person worked before and after. Also, if this episode is part of a succession of unemployment – employment states, it should figure differently in the analysis.

SA allows a focus on subsequences. While maintaining the unity of a trajectory is good when an alternative for a cross-sectional view, it might be too totalizing. Other levels of zooming in might be of interest: the important similarities or differences between careers might be at smaller levels. It might be the case that what is important is the recurrence of a certain pattern regardless of when in the career of an individual it occurs. Larger scale processes might be visible in the recurrence of a certain pattern at the same historical moment, while in different positions within the various careers themselves.

The algorithms for grouping trajectories can be adapted to serve the logic of accounting for variety which best mirrors the theoretical argument: searching for similarities, exploring crucial types of differences, or comparisons with a theoretically relevant ideal-type of a trajectory.

These are all relevant potentialities for trying to come up with an account of the understandings and practices of work in Romania, as they help the empirical material oppose resistance to three major dimensions of homogenization as a simplifying gesture: in social time, personal time and across cases. It allows difference to become visible under alternative coordinates than the usual demographic variables. The representativity of the sample of interviewees (even in its qualitative understanding of “conceptual saturation”) would not address these issues. While the way SA is structured as a lens potentates this visibility, it takes the researcher to actually deal with that difference made visible.

### *Flexibility, sequences and categories*

At a first glance, SA's inbuilt necessity for specifying clear categories to which people can be assigned at a given moment makes it particularly unfit when trying to engage with empirical fluidity and fuzziness. However, I will argue that the main unsettling potential the method has in accounting for individual careers comes exactly from what it does to and with categories.

I have hinted before at the centrality of the concept of flexibility and the political stake around people valuing an understanding of themselves as flexible actors. Any argument revolving around flexibility or flexibilization has an underlying imagery of the (most times materialised) potentiality of change. Therefore, the assumption that there are categories among which people switch throughout their career is not something artificially imposed by the method, but one intrinsic to this level of argumentation. What happens most of the times, however, is that what “change” consists of remains underspecified. In what way exactly people have changed or should be eager to change is conveniently left semi-implicit. This semi-implicitness on the abstract level of definitions can be instrumental in concrete situations, when the concept of flexibility can be stretched to mean different things serving different purposes.

SA forces spelling out the definitions of “change” that we operate with: the dimensions on which change is to be documented; as well as the space of change – the possible states in which a person can be and then stop being. To take an example: a first legitimate temptation would be to consider the position in an organizational hierarchy and working within a certain firm as two dimension on which change can occur in one's trajectory.

The interviews I have conducted with middle managers in Cluj made salient the importance of people's trajectories being entangled with the trajectory of a firm. One recurring empirical observation I made was that of people whose enthusiasm and involvement as managers in the firm comes from the fact that they had been with that firm from its beginning or early stages; they have been there at crucial moments in the survival of the firm and feel they had played an important role; their coordination functions came together with centrality in the firm and with their willingness to factor the firms' interest into their decisions because they found it a meaningful entity. A different source of enthusiasm for being a manager, empirically recurrent as well, is managing itself, as a configuration of duties and activities, which is more or less independent of the actual content being managed. People report the tensions of these turning point as being about the new duties, about the increased complexity and responsibility of their job and only secondarily about the firm. Even if the upgrade happens within the same firm, it is not the fact that this firm in its singularity will be a more prosperous one due to their input that elicits most enthusiasm, but the newly arisen opportunity to manage more complexity and to shape the direction of a firm (which might have as well been another one) to a greater extent.

The difference between the two ways of thinking of oneself as a manager and the progression of one's career that I described above would be lost if that first temptation was followed and their careers were looked at as a succession of positions in a firm and (simultaneously or in parallel) as a succession of positions in the labour market. It was SA's inbuilt necessity for such specification that made visible the understanding of

change that I was holding and alerted me to what I was implicitly treating as an identical experience.

There is no restriction over the type of categories to be used with SA and they can be brought at the theoretical level needed, and with the content needed. Therefore, an alternative is to inquire into the stakes and tensions of the turning points involving changing firms and/or changing positions on the ladder and to allow these newly emerging dimensions of differentiation to become the categories that SA is fed with. It is a significant step towards unpacking flexibility, decoupling the idea of change (and, more importantly that of stagnation) from it and re-embedding it in different discursive categories.

While not thick enough in itself, the difference between the two logics in which people can conceive themselves as managers starts opening a space in which the relationship between attachment, willingness to change, involvement and commitment to quality can be reassembled in a different way than the narrative of the flexible individual pushes us to. Attachment to a firm, for example, can be re-told in a different narrative, that does not stigmatise it as a propensity to stagnation, indicating the negative shadow of the socialist legacy threatening over people's mentality.

SA defined a space to discuss variety and difference, forced out the spelling of the assumptions and acted as a constant reminder that theoretical decisions are taken at every moment as to how the final account is produced. Arguably, this significant dimension of differentiation could have become visible without such an explicit analytical strategy. Indeed, there are many studies that end up presenting typologies of trajectories as a way

to convey an argument about variety, without using SA. I would argue that using the method significantly increases the chances of making alternative dimensions of difference visible, as complexity is quite high. Also, it allows for a suggestive conveying of the new categories and dimensions.

#### **8.4. Concluding remarks**

I have argued that methodology has a certain degree of autonomy from epistemological assumptions and theoretical positions. I have spent some time on delineating what I see as some negative potentialities of this autonomy. However, my main argument is that the methodological level should be seen not only as a dangerous source of perverted legitimization mechanisms, but as an important instrument in the attempt to convey accounts of the social. If held accountable firstly to the political voices in a space of discussion about the quality of research, the voice of technicality or of practicalities can prove sharp and lucid.

I have presented Sequence Analysis as such a potential ally in an attempt to disrupt well entrenched discourses about people's understanding and practices of work. It is hopefully apparent from my discussion that the place I have assigned to the technical voice is a subordinate one. Formal methods – such as Sequence Analysis or Social Network Analysis – come with the great danger of turning their use in attempts to legitimise the scientificity of the endeavour. SA displaces one of the pillars of a positivist view of the world by incorporating temporality and processuality. SNA dissolves another pillar, the view of individuals as isolated entities. In this sense, they are both a shade of critique to inferential statistics and its underlying assumptions about the social. The pillar of



scientificity, however, is not explicitly of concern. This makes research based on this type of methodology extremely susceptible of not engaging to the end with the other critical voices, which problematise the status of the social scientists' account. The very introduction to the reader of SA as a method that was adopted from biology plays implicitly to some extent the card of credibility derived from the resemblance to the hard sciences.

Choosing SA as the example for discussing my overall argument in favour of turning methodologies into allies had two reasons: one of them comes from my genuine belief that it is a useful analytical tool. The other reason is related to its problematic status as a methodology rooted only partially in an explicit critique to positivism, which is visible in its in-built tension with the card of scientificity.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study looked at non-extraordinary capitalist actors and the way they engage the system in which they live. The people who shared their experiences and views with me and who allowed me an insight into their enthusiasms, struggles, disgusts and indifferences are neither the typical elites whose exit on the winning side from the 1989 change of regime (with the privatization processes and the routes to political power that were opened) was amply documented, nor those marginalized categories whose life chances are most seriously threatened by the current neoliberal policies. They are people with higher education, working for relatively good salaries, in a middle scale city. They are also relatively young, as all of them graduated university after 1992 and had no significant working experience during socialism. Their enthusiasm and involvement in the capitalist enterprise is one of the crucial factors of its success. They constitute the middle class invoked by the politicians and analysts, individuals whose proper mentalities are hoped for and whose proper involvement is believed to lead to the accumulation of wealth that would then trickle down to the others as well. They are not left out of the current imagery of society; on the contrary, they are called to be its heroes. At the same time, their position is a vulnerable one, as most of them live off their salaries and are therefore affected by the flexibilisation inherent in the labor code changes and the cuts in social security.

Therefore, this dissertation was a study of the way individuals live within and engage capitalism in a particular historical context. A distinctive feature of this particular context is the relationship between its relatively recent past, its present and its imaginable futures. The past – socialism – is being unequivocally deemed negative and capitalism becomes

the *right* systemic alternative to this morally, socially and economically *wrong* regime – yet to be fully achieved in the future. The intensely sustained politics of memory feeding the hegemony of the anti-communist discourse has been documented in an increasingly coherent manner. This reality of the wrong and right is difficult to put in a state of uncertainty because a series of institutions are invested into its holding together. The robustness of reality (Boltanski, 2011) and the sanctions associated to the attempts of its critique are highly visible in the intellectual field. The main underlying argument that I tried to substantiate throughout this dissertation concerns the existence and relevance of the link between anti-communism as the dominant discourse of truth and ordinary individuals’ possibilities to maintain a sense of legitimate personhood while making claims that do not fit the main lines of this discourse. Not only intellectuals get sanctions when their positions fail to be containable in those provided as legitimate by the anti-communist discourse. On the contrary, ordinary individuals’ capacities of critique and claim making based on their sense of justice are constantly short-circuited in a similar manner. Therefore, I argued that it is vital to operate with a theoretical understanding of the working of capitalism that takes individuals’ critical capacities and their sense of justice seriously.

I tried to show that at the level of the politics of knowledge, a “socialist effect”, is being worked towards by various contemporary institutions, academic knowledge production being part of them. Socialism becomes a monolithic entity, which infuses all the levels of understanding, of all actors, albeit in different ways. There is a serious convergence in efforts of various institutions in producing the effect of a monolithic reality of socialism. I used the ambiguous status of methodology within the sociological production of

knowledge to restate both the fragile position it has in relation to the other institutions that confirm reality and the necessity to work towards living up to the responsibility of feeding into critique.

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