"This job saved me":

The Subjectivity and Imaginary of Cluj IT

by

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Abstract

The post-socialist cities are excellent targets for digital services outsourcing since they can provide cheap labor without great cultural and geographical distance from Western European companies. The municipality of Cluj-Napoca, Romania, has been tapping into this fact, building an image of a European and 'smart' city to be attractive for foreign direct investment. The IT sector is thus made into the poster child of both the country's and the city's government. The average wage of a person working in the IT service sector in Romania is twice as much as the national average wage, making the industry rank the highest in the country ('Câștigul Salarial Mediu Lunar' 2022). Represented by 22 thousand people (Petrovici and Mare 2020, 51), the IT sector of Cluj-Napoca is especially large and dominant, both from an economic and a social point of view. Through presenting my empirical material collected by conducting semi-structured life-history interviews with professional converts to IT, I show the imaginary that is driving a flow of highly educated professionals towards changing their careers to IT. In my thesis, I argue that technological solutionism (Morozov 2013), zombie socialism (Chelcea and Druță 2016), and the myth of the middle class (Weiss 2019) are together creating the 'myth of IT', which is forming neoliberal subjectivities and depoliticizing collective struggles.

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Introduction

Social reality is more than the objective, material reality. It contains people's perception of this very reality as well, as a constitutive element to it. Thus, sociology must also deal with "a sociology of construction of visions of the world" (Bourdieu 1989, 18). Having lived for six years in Cluj, "the Silicon Valley of Eastern Europe," I couldn't help but realize that my own "vision of the world" has been narrowed down. Witnessing the closing down of multiple independent cultural venues while more and more IT offices are being built, and having everyday conversations about how all of my friends both despise and envy IT specialists for their stable, well-paying jobs which allow them to pay the skyrocketing prices of rent, I caught my own imagination about my own future change. I can try following my aspirations, but if all else fails, I can always become an IT-ist.

The average wage of a person working in the IT service sector in Romania is twice as much as the national average wage, making the industry rank the highest in the country ('Câștigul Salarial Mediu Lunar' 2022). Represented by 22 thousand people (Petrovici and Mare 2020, 51), the IT sector of Cluj-Napoca (hereafter, Cluj) is especially large and dominant, both from an economic and a social point of view. This has been expressed by many, ironically or non-ironically, referring to the city as the "Silicon Valley of Eastern Europe" (e. g. Hosu and Hosu 2019; McElroy 2020; Birtalan 2021; Zamfir 2022), even though it is, in fact, mostly providing outsourced services to Western companies (Mateescu 2022). Due to this, there is a public fascination with Cluj and its IT sector (Guga and Spatari 2021), being framed as a leader in terms of contemporary working practices, work ethics, and an overall new – allegedly 'European', increasingly neoliberal – view of work and life (Troc 2019; Birtalan 2021; Petrovici and Deneva-Faje 2020).

While there have been numerous ethnographic works produced about digital labor in the semi-periphery, especially in and from India (Amrute 2016; Aneesh 2006; Irani 2019; Upadhya 2016; Vora 2015), but also from Mexico (Beltrán 2020), there has not been much work done about the sector's relevance in the post-socialist block. In the Romanian context, Oana Mateescu and Erin McElroy conducted ethnographic research about the IT sector of Cluj. While Mateescu shines light on the appropriation of creativity by the innovation-centered IT discourse and the precariousness of IT service workers (Mateescu 2022), McElroy tackles the socio-economic inequalities present in the city that are reinforced by the arrival of a digital elite (McElroy 2020). However, neither of them discusses the relationship between the discursive production of the sector and post-socialist ideologies. In this thesis, I aim to fill that gap.

As any post-socialist city transitioning from a post-industrial to a service-based economy, Cluj has intensively privatized and repurposed its infrastructure. At the same time, its labor force is getting refashioned as well (Mateescu 2022). The IT sector is continuously growing and attracting labor (Ionescu-Heroiu et al. 2013). It even started developing its very own 'informal' educational system (Buta 2017), while at the same time, there are also numerous people learning to code at home, on their own, as well as people starting a tech support job without any prior targeted knowledge. However, the sector is more than just a provider of well-paying entry-level jobs and an attractor of foreign capital. It has a status of facilitator of social ascension and of importer of European ideas. How is this image created? How does it affect people's career choices? What drives people towards professional reorientation to IT? What assumptions do they share about the field, and how are those assumptions constructed? What is the imaginary that makes people take on the risky and arduous road of re-professionalization, and how are they transformed in the process? To answer these questions, I will present my empirical findings and provide relevant concepts from the literature to build my argument.

In Chapter One, I will examine the discourse around the IT sector in the Romanian public and specifically in Cluj. I embed the phenomenon of professional reconversion[1] to IT into the context of Romanian neoliberalism and the local 'smart city neoliberalism' that drives the municipality's governance. I discuss the relevance of transnational migration in the country's political economy, and the insights it provides for understanding professional reorientation. Then I unpack the anti-communist ideology specific to post-socialist societies and its resulting preference for radical neoliberal doctrines. I also introduce the 'myth of the middle class' that is mobilized in constructing the image of the IT sector. Finally, I summarize what is unique about IT in Cluj and set the stage for my empirical analysis unfolding in the following chapters.

In Chapter Two, I show how in order to arrive at the high wages promised by professional reconversion to IT, a self-development doctrine has to be internalized. While workers choose their new professions by their free will, the workers themselves are also being created by their workplaces (Willis 1981) and thus the jobs available in the labor market. This facet of neoliberal subjectivity is endorsed by the hacker ethic associated with coding work but problematized by outsourcing labor relations. Here I argue that even if this subjectivity is hegemonic, there is space for one to distance oneself.

In my third and final chapter, I elaborate on the 'myth of the middle class' and how it is used for catering to, and generating a consumption imaginary attached to the idea of work in IT. I also tackle the ambiguous flexible stability that my interlocutors seek in their new profession and its associated lifestyle. Finally, I argue that my interlocutors share a consciousness of their positionality in the global value chain of outsourced digital labor, and

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[1] In my thesis, I interchangeably use the terms 'professional reconversion' (Mateescu 2022), 'professional reorientation', and 're-professionalization', all referring to occupational mobility from non-IT positions to jobs in the sector.

that this reinforces the 'catching up' ideology, facilitating the appropriation of neoliberal subjectivities.

I aim to show that it is a facet of neoliberal governance to overemphasize the importance of the IT sector in providing well-paying jobs, as a way to outsource social functions onto the market. Creating an illusion of social mobility reinforces the myth of meritocracy and individualizes the struggle for a decent life. At the same time, through this individual quest for professional reconversion, neoliberal subjects learn that they have to reinvest in themselves continuously: keep learning and seeking the next step in their 'boundaryless career' (Greenhaus, Callanan, and DiRenzo 2008).

Methodology and motivation

In April of 2023, I spent three and a half weeks in Cluj. It fills me with ambiguous sentiments to call this fieldwork, partially because of the lack of time and partially because I was returning to a place I used to call home for six years. As every anthropologist researching at home, I had to face the ambiguity of having valuable insight from a non-research context while also having biases that are difficult to identify thoroughly. Witnessing the slow depletion of the city's cultural scene and seeing people around me one by one give up on their dreams and turn to a job in IT left me with many of questions – and a problematic moralizing perspective. Wanting to understand the larger processes that I saw unfolding on a small scale drove me to try and deconstruct my own assumptions. This is why, first and foremost, I wanted to talk with people who went through this process. I chose to reach out to professional converts because their unique positionality allows me to grasp the imaginary surrounding IT 'in action.' I wanted to understand what keeps the flow of people turning to IT in motion and what are the experiences of those who successfully made the move.

Partially through mobilizing my connections in the city and partially by contacting workers on Linkedin, I ended up talking to 19 interlocutors. The criteria for contacting them

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were: first, to have a degree or having studied in a non-related field prior to occupying a technical position in an IT company,[2] and second, to have some connection to Cluj, either by having lived there, living there currently, or working remotely for a company based in Cluj. I conducted my interviews either on-site in Cluj or online, depending on my interlocutors' the availability and preference – some living in different parts of the country, some preferring the comfort of their home and the familiarity of a Zoom call.[3] Eleven of my interlocutors are male, and eight are female.[4] Six are Romanian native speakers, and thirteen are ethnic Hungarians.[5] They are aged between 26 and 43, with most (ten people) aged between 30 and 33. Fourteen of them live in Cluj, and five live in another city or the countryside. One interlocutor has a non-technical job, all the others are currently in technical positions, working either as software testers, software developers, web developers, DevOps engineers, or in tech support positions. To protect their identity, I gave them pseudonyms, eliminated the names of the companies they work for and all other information that might lead to identifying them.

By conducting semi-structured in-depth life-history interviews, I aimed to get an understanding of my interlocutors' professional and educational background, their class positionality and original aspirations, as well as their narrative of why they pursued professional reorientation, what trajectory they took within IT, and how they view their future. Asking these questions allowed me to understand their assumptions before joining the IT sector and how that changed after reconversion. Taking up the positionality similar to that of the halfie (Abu-

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[2] There was one exception. I also interviewed a person working as a project manager, a non-technical position, who also enrolled in a web developing course, however soon realized she wanted to stay in the non-technical field. I use her example to discuss the relationship between a passion for technology and work in IT.

[3] I also got written answers to my interview guide edited into a questionnaire from two converts who preferred written communication. However, due to the limited insight I got into their stories and attitudes, to avoid misinterpretation, I am not using directly the data provided by these respondents.

[4] These proportions incidentally correlate with the ratio of females enrolling in the largest IT school for professional reconversion in Romania, which according to the school, is more than 40% (Popescu 2023). However relevant the question of the genderedness of the profession, this topic exceeds the scope of this thesis.

[5] The higher proportion of Hungarian speakers is a consequence of my own positionality. While the ethnic aspect of the structuring of the labor market is interesting, it is not in the scope of this thesis to unpack it.

Lughod 1991)[6], they were able to support me with both an outside and an inside perspective on the sector, providing an opportunity to get a unique look into the imaginary surrounding IT. To understand the broader discourses, I also engaged in limited semi-systematic browsing of Linkedin and social media pages of IT companies and schools, as well as media statements of the municipality.

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[6] Lila Abu-Lughod coins the term 'halfie' to mean people whose cultural or national identities are mixed, enabling them to have both an inner and an outer perspective on what classical anthropology would call a homogenous 'culture' (Abu-Lughod 1991). By calling professional converts 'halfies' I aim to highlight their multiple identities and sometimes contradictory positionalities.

Chapter One: Neoliberal techno-fantasies in a post-socialist city

Right next to one of the biggest intersections of Cluj, in the area of Piața Cipariu, there is a small patch of green – a couple of square meters of grass with a handful of bushes and a white sign about the same size as the plants: "The Municipality of Cluj thanks the company Dual IT for adopting this green space."[7] Once it catches the streetwalker's eye, she cannot help but keep noticing differently sized green spaces all across the city, with the logos of various, proportionately sized tech companies as their adopters. This is the outcome of an initiative of the Municipality of Cluj, launched in 2012, called *Adopt a green space*, which offers public spaces of various sizes[8] for companies and institutions to plant with decorative flora "so that the green spaces in the inner city of Cluj-Napoca meet European urban landscaping standards."[9]

This is just one tiny facet of the symbiotic coexistence of the city government and the myriad of information technology (IT) companies based in the city, transforming the urban landscape and the lives that it contains (Udișteanu and Varninschi 2022). The way the municipality outsources the maintenance of public spaces to private companies, giving them an opportunity to self-advertise while at the same time trying to appeal to a "European standard," can be understood as a metaphor for its relationship to its labor force.

In this chapter, I argue that through building an image as a 'smart city' and an IT hub, the governance of Cluj is tapping into a general tendency of cities engaging in a technological solutionist discourse while at the same time appealing to the anti-communist bias of post-socialist societies, and thus creating an imaginary that shapes individual career choice. To show this, I will first outline Romanian neoliberalism and its specific characteristics to explain the special status of the IT sector in the country. Then I turn to describe the Romanian IT sector,

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[7] Romanian in original. All translations from Romanian and Hungarian are mine.
[8] The spaces available at the moment range from 16 to 3960 square meters.
[9] https://primariaclujnapoca.ro/spatii-verzi/adopta-un-spatiu-verde/

and finally to introduce Cluj as a case of, and a scale for, studying neoliberal transformations framed as technological innovation and development and to argue that it is in the interest of IT companies, the city and the state governments that changing careers to IT is imagined as a means of social mobility.

A bit of (Romanian) neoliberalism

> Here in Transylvania, or in Romania, basically [...] it is for sure the case that whoever was good for something either emigrated or became an IT developer.
>
> (Csaba, tester, MA in Philosophy, 35)

To contextualize the Romanian IT sector in the political economy of the state, after positioning my stance in the neoliberalism literature, I will discuss three facets of Romanian neoliberalism that are transforming how people view themselves and imagine their possibilities regarding their future career trajectory. First, I discuss how aggressive privatization and liberalization of the Romanian economy led to a massive wave of emigration and how that, in turn, became a channel for transferring back not only wealth but also ideologies. I will also outline how this process can be seen as a parallel to the functioning of Romanian IT outsourcing and its relationship to the 'West.' Second, I unpack the notion of zombie socialism, which gives an ideological nuance to post-socialist perceptions of this 'West.' Finally, I introduce the 'myth of the middle class' that is influenced by zombie socialism and which helps us understand the state's interest in supporting the IT sector.

As a form of governmentality, neoliberalism is seen first and foremost as a cultural project and a disciplinary mechanism aimed at transforming the subjectivities of the governed (Rose 1992). Neoliberalism is a technology of "governing through freedom" (Ong 2007, 4), aiming to produce subjects who govern themselves. The neoliberal subject imagines itself as an enterprising self who "will make a venture of its life, project itself a future and seek to shape itself to become that which it wishes to be" (Rose 1992, 6). We can understand this by

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considering neoliberalism as a political economic regime. From this approach, scholars have coined neoliberalism as a system of upward redistribution, a solidification of capitalist power against worker solidarity, with the state as an ally in safeguarding private property and fostering free market activity (Harvey 2007). While a common feature of neoliberalism is economic redistribution in favor of capital, actively intensifying uneven development (Brenner and Theodore 2002, 352), scholars have generally argued that post-socialist states are prone to a particularly radical form of this, due to their anti-communist stances (Kofti 2016).

Cornel Ban (2016) shows that in the case of Romania, neoliberalism did not immediately bloom right after the fall of state socialism. However, once it started to nestle in, it quickly manifested in the state disembedding the economy, favoring market rationality while disregarding social cohesion. Amid a massive wave of deindustrialization throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the state engaged in aggressive privatization and liberalization processes, leading to society-wide state of precarity. The result of this was the biggest migration wave of the period within the EU, involving more than one-third of the country's labor force. Working abroad became a safety valve for extreme social dislocations, and through the remittance flows, migration solidified and became part of the very structure of the Romanian welfare system (Ban 2016, 66–68). As sociologist Dana Domșodi puts it, the country started "exporting its social contradictions" (Mateescu 2022, 245). However, despite the uniqueness of scale in Romania's case, this tendency itself fits nicely into a global trend of international migration becoming an attempt in trying to even out inequalities and reduce poverty (Boatcă 2016; Milanovic 2011), while through the process of neoliberalization, the state is changing its role from the caretaker of people to the supporter of the market (Harvey 2007). This is an important idea for the purposes of this thesis, because re-professionalization to IT is framed as possessing some of the same functions as migration.

First and foremost, IT promises Western wages to be spent in the Romanian market. Second, it also shows characteristics of a 'brain drain,', as mentioned by Csaba in the quote at the beginning of this subchapter. One seemingly obvious difference between transnational migration and the re-professionalization to IT is the population that turns to these alternatives. While migrant workers primarily provide blue collar labor (Ailincăi 2016), the masses that change careers to IT are mostly highly educated (Buta 2017). However, there is a significant overlap. Just in my – limited-sized – subject group, four people out of twenty-one have worked in seasonal jobs abroad before starting their career in IT.

However, neither migration nor career reorientation are merely economic questions. One specific socio-cultural element prevalent in the post-socialist semi-periphery, shared by both of these processes, is an ideology of "catching up" (Böröcz 2012). This manifests in imagining the goals of both individual self-improvement and state governance in acquiring the values and life conditions attributed to the "West." This is a characteristic of what Chelcea and Druță coin 'zombie socialism.' Zombie socialism is the anti-communist ideology that post-socialist societies foster in favor of radical neoliberal doctrines (Chelcea and Druță 2016). More specifically, while disregarding social problems that would require the intervention of a welfare state under the premise of the risk of slipping back into "old communist habits", the ideology of zombie socialism favors the support of a few selected areas of development that are associated with "Europeanization" (Chelcea and Druță 2016). As I will show in this chapter, one, if not the most favored area in Romania is the IT sector.

Another aspect of post-socialist anti-communism can be observed on the level of subjectivities. Anca Simionca argues that in Romania, during the 1990s, references to the 'mentality' of people were omnipresent both in the media and in political discourses. In the context of work, 'mentality' is a vague concept, referring to "people's relationship 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." (Simionca 2012, 127). I would add to this remark that more than 30 years after the fall of state socialism, it is still a prevalent expression in everyday conversations. It is used most popularly together with the adjective 'communist,' referring to all the ways a person is conceived to be against capitalist values, particularly in showing authoritarian tendencies, not being productive, or not caring for progress. As one of my interlocutors said about his former boss:

> She is with this (ironic tone) good communist mentality […] she doesn't care – just do it, and don't talk back, don't you dare say something, if something's wrong.

> (Márk, developer, former actor, 29)

The positive hero of this imaginary becomes the character of the creative, ambitious, self-developing, self-disciplined subject (Zincă 2011; Petrovici 2012; Mihály 2015; Simionca 2016; Petrovici and Deneva-Faje 2020), who brings forwards the ethical project of capitalism (Szabó 2016; Troc 2019). This leads us to "the favorite subject" (Crăciun and Lipan 2020, 426) of neoliberalism, namely the 'middle class.'

The 'myth of the middle class' – without implying a Marxian understanding of 'class' – has been mobilized in post-socialist countries as "a benign category, free of implications of exploitation and social struggle." (Ost 2015, 614) As Crăciun and Lipan argue, such a notion of a middle class captures political potentials and turns them into consumption patterns. Aspirations of the middle class are presented as inherently ethical. The implicit, or sometimes even explicit, conclusion of this discourse is that the state should support and reward those doing well in the market, while it should punish those not fit to be successful (Crăciun and Lipan 2020). This shows the same logic of upwards redistribution with an ideological touch that Chelcea and Druță point out to be a characteristic of post-socialist neoliberal states (Chelcea and Druță 2016). Through this logic, the IT sector supposedly providing a means for masses to join the middle class makes it the poster child of the Romanian state.

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IT – myth and reality

Having discussed the issues of transnational migration, anti-communist sentiments, and the glorification of the middle class, we can now turn to the framing produced about the IT sector and see how these notions unfold in this context.

The concept of 'IT' and the derived 'IT sector' and 'IT worker' that circulate in the public discourse and even in the literature are fuzzy, making comparing data from different sources problematic. At the same time, this fuzziness enables marketing agents to handle and present statistics flexibly, creating an image that serves the corporations' interests. The 'IT sector' is commonly understood to signify software developers and their work. However, when newspaper articles refer to statistics such as 'hundreds of thousands working in IT', they usually include other facets of the field of information and communication technology as well. For this thesis, I am taking Guga and Spatari's (2021) definition of 'IT' as an umbrella term for the categories 'Information technology service activities' and 'IT service activities.' In the Romanian Nomenclature of Economic Activities classification (hereafter, NACE), these jobs fall under divisions 62 and 63. Alternatively, a slightly more precise definition can include software publishing activities (NACE group 582) as well. Considering the NACE 62-63 divisions, we can talk about 115.000 people working in IT in Romania as of 2019 (ibid, 17). The average net salary of an employee in these divisions reached 7750 RON in 2020 (Guga and Spatari 2021, 33), while for the 20 largest IT companies in Romania this sum reached 12,900 RON in 2019 (ibid, 31). In a country where the average monthly wage is 3698 RON, and most of the population is still struggling to achieve a decent minimum standard of living, these statistics do create wide public interest. Beyond the implications on the individual employee's side, a general fascination towards the sector grew since the late 2000s, when IT was one of the first and quickest sectors to recover after the 2008 crisis. It is widely presented as the leading sector of the country's economy, the only one thriving despite the Covid-19 pandemic. "IT was

the darling of the Romanian economy, and the triumphant sector in the pandemic […] IT activity has grown steadily in a period of widespread uncertainty" (Guga and Spatari 2021, 3). Romanian IT professionals are marketized both in the media and on international outsourcing platforms as young, highly skilled, and full of potential individuals (Herman 2011). The difference, however, between the two discourses is that in the international discussion, they are presented as cheap workers,[10] while on the national/local level they are considered high earners.

In 2001, a government ordinance came into force providing exemption from payment of income tax for individuals engaged in computer programming activities. Apart from minor alterations to the ordinance, it remained in force ever since and facilitated an almost continuous growth of salaries within the field. A symbolic event in this upwards tendency occured in 2011 when the average salary in IT exceeded the one in "financial intermediation and insurance," ranking it as one of the highest in the country (Guga and Spatari 2021, 32). While the public attitude toward the exemption slowly transformed from outrage to neutrality, employees of the sector started to perceive it as an "inalienable and vested right," justified by the moral and economic argumentation stating IT as the leading sector of the country (ibid, 35). This understanding is still prominent, despite the losses the exemption creates in the country's economy,[11] as highlighted by a recent report of the World Bank (Roman 2023). It should be pointed out that the future withdrawal of the tax exemption probably would not affect labor cost as much as it would affect workers' net salaries, so its preservation does not necessarily support the sector in a direct, economic sense. Rather, it provides an aura of exceptionality and makes IT work exceptionally desirable. I would argue that such favoritism can be understood as a manifestation of the tendency of post-socialist neoliberal states to endorse a couple of selected

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[10] The average hourly cost of a Romanian IT&C employee in 2019 was 14.3 euro. This is the second-lowest figure in the European Union (Guga and Spatari 2021, 35).
[11] Guga and Spatari (2021, 36) show that through the income tax exemption, between 2016 and 2020, the Romanian state indirectly subsidized the IT sector by no less than 3 billion RON (more than 600 million euros).

areas of development, associated with Europeanization, as outlined by Chelcea and Druță previously. As mayor Boc emphasized in a recent conference of the American Chamber of Commerce in Cluj: "Romanian authorities should not 'touch' the field of technology for 20 years" (Reștea 2022).

Guga and Spatari (2021) point out that the fascination with the IT sector, while to some extent being grounded on factual data, ultimately is an overstatement of its significance and is a result partially of self-delusion and partially of conscious PR activity. They argue that Romanian IT is, in fact, no different than the rest of the country's economy, being based on nearshore outsourcing and selling low value-added services, relying mainly on foreign capital.[12] The real source of its eye-catching growth is not inherent to the field, but rather stems, on one hand, from being a new and developing sector, and on the other hand, from the fact that other aspects of the Romanian economy suffered severe damages, first in the 1990s, then again around the 2008 crisis, and finally during the 2020 pandemic. This means that once it reaches a level of maturity, it will blend into the landscape and will not provide the salvation it is advertised to bring. Despite the facts however, the 'myth of IT' is very real and shapes people's lives.

Looking at the arguments in support of the tax exemption can give us an insight into how the status of the sector is created on the national level. Guga and Spatari point out that there are three main narratives used in arguing for the tax exemption, namely keeping foreign investors in the country, stimulating the local consumption of IT workers, and thus fueling other sectors, and finally, awarding IT professionals for their outstanding productivity (ibid 36.). While there is no room here for unpacking the faulty logic of all these assumptions,[13] I argue that these are important discursive tools for the creation of the image of IT. First, by attaching foreign capital

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[12] 62.9% of employees in the Romanian IT services sector are employed by foreign companies. In this regard Romania takes second place among EU countries (Guga and Spatari 2021, 14).
[13] For that, see (Guga and Spatari 2021, 36–38).

to the very idea of IT, the dependent development model is legitimized. Second, choosing the IT workers as engines of consumption reinforces their assumed middle-class position, giving them exceptional consumption power, as 'favored subjects.' Third, by framing IT professionals as exceptionally productive, they are created as the capitalist heroes that the rest of Romanian society needs to learn from. In addition to these three building blocks in the imaginary of IT, I would add a fourth one, not mentioned by the authors. Namely, the idea that the IT sector will provide enough jobs and wages for those motivated enough to learn, creating an alternative for transnational migration and a means of social mobility. As the mayor of Cluj stated: "The well-paying jobs are in this field [IT], we all know that through education we can have solutions to individual and societal problems – the way out of poverty, the way towards a better salary is through education." (Preda 2022). The general conception of working possibilities discussed in everyday conversations in the city under examination – Cluj – is, in fact, a reduced view of either leaving the country for seasonal work in the West or re-professionalizing to IT. As an IT worker with a graduate degree in translation studies voiced it poignantly in Mateescu's research, "I don't know what I would have done after graduation, if not for the IT corporations. Probably picking strawberries in Spain." (Mateescu 2022, 244).

The post-socialist Silicon Valley

> I have to thank you for bringing innovation and modernity to Cluj […] for the fact that you contributed to the creation of the unique *vibe* that this city has, based on innovation, based on a quality of life, based on a capacity to work and to be together and to construct a tolerant, European community.
>
> Emil Boc, Mayor of Cluj, addressed to the representatives of a large IT company on the tenth anniversary of their arrival to the city (Preda 2022)

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As addressed by companies offering outsourcing consultation services, Eastern European cities are a good choice for Western capital because of the cheap but well-trained workforce and a "closer time zone and a lack of a cultural barrier" (Andras 2017). While, in this discourse, both the geographic and the cultural closeness are presented as a given, it is also important to point out the ideological background of such assumptions. Post-socialist cities have a specific and central relationship to their past that is defining their vision of the future. They have a distinct imaginary of the 'West' and a desire to reduce their imagined distance from it in both time and space. Thus, post-socialist cities "are 'elsewhere' yet not so far, 'past' but not quite" (Ferenčuhová and Gentile 2016, 484). This ghost – or zombie (Chelcea and Druţă 2016) – of socialism is thus effectively exploited by the political elite in order to keep the self-imposed subordination and the neoliberal trajectory of the state and the city. Any claim for social security gets labeled as 'socialist', meaning backward, non-progressive, shameful. Hence, there is a labor force being created that is coerced to accept any cost of economic 'progress' (Ferenčuhová and Gentile 2016, 490). This ideology is what makes post-socialist cities perfect as outsourcing destinations.

After Bucharest, Cluj has the biggest population of IT specialists in Romania, meaning almost 18.000 workers, 4% of its inhabitants.[14] Compared to urban areas with similar demographics – Timișoara and Iași, both having around 5.000 IT workers – it is an outstanding number indeed (Guga and Spatari 2021, 20). With 2,400 IT companies present in the city ('Lista Firmelor Din România' 2021), there is constant demand for new employment, making freelancing less widespread than in other regions.

Every industry needs some kind of infrastructure. New information technologies need access to both conventional and new infrastructure: airports, rail lines, highways – but also new

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[14] While Petrovici and Mare count it as approximately 22 thousand people (Petrovici and Mare 2020, 51), according to Guga and Spatari the number is closer to 18 thousand, if we apply the strictest sense of 'IT' (NACE groups 5821, 5829, 6201, 6202).

office buildings (Sassen 2007). Being in an advantageous geographic location and having an international airport, a railway station and a highway nearby serves classical transportation needs (Corodescu-Roșca, Hamdouch, and Iațu 2023), while the constant reconstruction of the city serves newly emerging demands. At the same time, recycling redundant industrial spaces as business parks can be understood as an allegory to the way the city's labor force gets recycled as IT workers. "[L]abor becomes a form of social and urban belonging framed in the terms of a techno-moral governance that can refashion the entire city into a laboratory." (Mateescu 2022, 243).To serve this purpose, a couple of IT schools have appeared in the city, offering courses that in the duration of a few months promise to teach the fundamentals for getting a job in various fields within IT.[15]

To examine what kind of local political economy and social imaginary made this happen, on the following pages I will shortly outline the history of the construction of the urban ideal that has been shaping the city since the fall of state socialism, resulting in what Sheila Jasanoff coins a sociotechnical imaginary. Sociotechnical imaginaries are "collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology" (Jasanoff 2015, 4). The success of any sociotechnical imaginary relies on the context which it is applied to, the social structures and cultural norms, the political will and the infrastructural environment (Sadowski and Bendor 2019, 544). For

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[15] Paula Buta, in her thesis about one of the biggest IT schools present in the city, with programs running across Romania, provides an overview of the demographic data of students who enrolled in 2016. Out of the 2185 candidates that enrolled nation-wide, between 1st of May 2014 and 1st of May 2016, the biggest proportion was between 26–30 years old (850 persons), followed by the age group 31–35 (601 persons). 61,60% were males, 38,39% being female. At the moment of enrollment, 66,20% of students were employed, 11,20% were students in formal education, and 9,60% were self-employed, leaving the remaining 13,00% as unemployed. As of fields of origin, the most prominent (31,8%) group was coming from a technical field, followed by finance and banking (10,60%), and services, business/management, marketing/advertising/PR, construction, education and others, all being below 10% (Buta 2017, 19–22). I could not find information that is more up to date, other than a Women's Day podcast episode of the school stating that now more than 40% of their students are female (Popescu 2023). However, we can assume that the tendencies generally stayed similar in the last 7 years.

this, the anti-communist sentiments nurtured by zombie-socialism are a great discursive weapon, and we will see how.

The post-socialist original accumulation of the 1990s in the city happened during the reign of mayor Gheorghe Funar (Székely 2020). Because of Funar's ultra-conservative leadership, unlike other similar cities in the country, Cluj was not welcoming Western investors. Consequently, its economy evolved based on local entrepreneurship up until 2006. This meant mostly a budding banking sector and some small software companies – the roots of its current economic hegemonies (Corodescu-Roșca, Hamdouch, and Iațu 2023). After Cluj's new mayor Emil Boc got elected, the nationalist discourse faded out and a techno-developmentalist took its place. The new mayor has started actively encouraging multinational companies to invest in Cluj (Mihály 2015, 67), building an image of the "magnet city (Vincze, Harbula, et al. 2019). Just after its opening up to foreign direct investment, the 2008 crisis further pushed the city towards a dependent development model. The composition of the city's labor force dramatically changed after the crisis. It became a hub for business and information technology outsourcing and in the course of 10 years, the number of people working in these sectors has tripled. Although economists contend that Cluj "has succeeded in managing a transition from a predominantly manufacturing town to a city with a strong and balanced economic mix" (Ionescu-Heroiu et al. 2013, 122), my interlocutors looking for jobs during the last 10 years have experienced it as a "mono-industrial" city for IT (Csaba, tester, MA in Philosophy). "I didn't feel like I had many options", said Kinga a tech support worker with an MA in Humanities. The city's functions as a place for reproduction of life have also changed. The inner city became a place of consumption for the middle class and of offices (Petrovici and Faje 2019). Starting in 2012, and increasingly after 2015 when the city won the title of European Youth Capital, the city's rebranding through "festivalization" began, meaning a refashioning of public spaces in order to host and attract more and more commercial festivals. Companies and

politicians' interest in temporal outbursts of economic and social activities (festivals) were aligned with the local creatives – especially those working in IT (Țichindeleanu 2019). The city government became committed to creating an environment pleasing to the "creative classes" (Florida 2002). Growth and innovation-oriented buzzwords like "talent, technology, trust and tolerance" became central to the discourse of the municipality with regards to the IT sector (Boc 2019). At the same time, within IT circles, it got increasingly problematized that there is a lack of real innovation and local product development, since most of the companies present in the city provide outsourcing services to Western European clients (McGrath 2016; Vijoli 2018).

As mentioned in the introduction, like many other places worldwide, Cluj is said to be 'a' Silicon Valley, particularly that of Eastern Europe. However, it might be a case of trying to "turn round the fortunes of ailing or peripheral spaces through decidedly optimistic place marketing" (Graham and Marvin 2002, 335). The ambiguity surrounding whether Cluj is an actual hub for innovation or just an outsourcing heaven providing cheap labor can be better understood by taking a critical look at the 'smart city' paradigm it is engaged in.

Scholars, bureaucrats, and urban planners all struggle with trying to define what the smart city is. There is no set of standards or an agreed upon semantic content of 'smart cities' (Hosu and Hosu 2019, 12). It remains a fuzzy concept (Deakin 2013). According to Vincent Mosco, the smart city is just another step on the historical trajectory of the imaginary of the garden city, the Radiant City, the organic urban village and the creative city of Richard Florida (Mosco 2019, 22). There are technological and social attributes to it, which together produce the sociotechnical imaginary of the city. The six areas of smartness that are usually considered are: smart economy, smart governance, smart living smart mobility, smart environment, smart people. According to the European Smart Cities website powered by TUWIEN, as of 2015, Cluj is one of two cities in Romania on the road of becoming 'smart', since it performs slightly

above the average in two key components – smart governance and smart environment – due to the city's allegedly good public and social services as well as its air quality and ecological awareness (Giffinger et al. 2015). At the same time, while there are air pollution sensor displays placed in various central locations throughout the city, Roma families evicted by the municipality from Coastei street have been relocated into the toxic and inhumane environment of the city's landfill (Vincze, Petrovici, et al. 2019), showing that a city can be 'smart' according to the standards while nurturing huge social inequalities.

Besides these aspects, what contributes to the city's smartness is the creation of its IT cluster constituted of companies and universities, as well as the city's tourism, services and digitalization, which include its smart parking system, electric busses, apps for public transport and city administration and online tools for citizenship participation, namely a mobile app for filing complains, called 'My Cluj' (Hosu and Hosu 2019). Beyond the technological givens, the larger part of making Cluj a smart city is, in fact, the discursive construction of it as such, through published strategies of the municipality ('Strategia de Transformare Digitală a Municipiului Cluj-Napoca' 2021) and personal statements of the mayor (Boc 2017). As Sadowski and Bendor point out, the smart city exists "in a liminal space between marketing and materiality, imagination and implementation, and becoming and being" (Sadowski and Bendor 2019, 541). The smart city paradigm operates within an ideology of technological solutionism, that frames societal problems as solvable through technological means (Morozov 2013).

Technological solutionism goes well with the ideology of zombie socialism, because under the 'smart city' paradigm "technological progress is considered a form of justice in itself" (Zamfir 2022), so there is no need for social intervention. To further highlight the discrepancy of building the image of a smart city in the context of a highly unequal society, reinforcing anti-communist sentiments, George Zamfir calls Cluj a heterotopia, relying on Foucault's term that means "a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that

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can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 1986, 24). Cluj is a heterotopia in the sense of bearing the marks of a post-socialist city while embodying the techno-capitalist aspirations of the country, "our own Western world in a sea of post-communist decay" (Zamfir 2022).

Forming imagination

> Cluj is really supporting the IT sector. The city itself, supports it a lot.
>
> /But how?/
>
> I don't know [...] this is the consensus, that they are propping IT. But maybe it's just that everyone is telling themselves this, and that makes them feel better.
>
> (Szabolcs, developer, former seasonal worker, 32)

To summarize the argument presented in this chapter, what I call 'the myth of IT' is being created through converging some of the functions of migration with the ideology of zombie socialism and with the imaginary of the 'middle class', as well as the sociotechnical imaginary of the 'smart city'. While the IT sector has some real impact on the local society, providing jobs and high wages, changing the urban landscape and driving up the cost of living, it is also discursively constructed as a means for social mobility. The 'IT professional' stereotype fits into the broader image of the young, motivated, open minded emerging middle-class individual described by Chelcea and Druță, who is put in opposition to the post-socialist working classes (Chelcea and Druță 2016, 530).

While Cluj is only one in a series of places that claim to be the Silicon Valley of a certain region (Graham and Marvin 2002, 334) and its truly innovative potential is questionable, it does hold a distinguished place on outsourcing destination rankings. In addition to a body of workers marketized as such, the city itself gets mobilized for attracting multinational companies and foreign capital. It is telling that in the aforementioned blog post by Samuel Andras, comparing

outsourcing to Asia and Eastern Europe, a picture of Cluj's main square is shown, displaying iconic architecture – the city's brand has a synergic relationship with its IT workforce. The leading motif of the city's self-branding is that it is becoming a smart city, producing technological imaginaries and destroying social ones: fitting well into the creative destruction paradigm of neoliberalism (Harvey 2007).

Chapter Two: Work, career, and subjectivity

"I don't know, it was somehow in the air, no? That IT specialists earn well."

(Alpár, developer, musician, 30)

"Bezzeg the IT-ists…"

Figure 1: Instagram post of a Hungarian IT school based in Cluj.

Text of the post: "One of the best future-proof investments: learn how to code! Join our Cluj-based course held in Hungarian if you too seek knowledge and a profession that is marketable." On the picture: "Bezzeg the IT-ists…"

'Bezzeg' is an expression mostly used in spoken Hungarian that expresses an attitude towards a statement being made. Its closest translation could be "just look at…" but without the gesture of pointing, and instead referring to a more abstract, underlying feeling of envy combined with resentment and moral judgment. Voicing an opinion about the IT sector in an everyday conversation in Cluj so often starts with 'bezzeg,' that it became unnecessary to even

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end the sentence. It instantly evokes the high wages, the easy life, and the "pamperedness" (Mateescu 2022) of IT workers, as perceived by non-IT people.

IT schools, the institutions that feed off these exact emotions instrumentalize this already existing discourse for their marketing purposes, while, at the same time, they also reproduce it. With a playful illustration as a background, the message of this social media post is clear: if you re-professionalize – with our help – and start a career in IT, you can join the privileged group, the object of envy, and you will earn more than you do now. In addition, the caption of the post places this assumption in an investment language, emphasizing not just the possibility of quick ascension, but a promised long-term profitability and stability provided by skills that will stay relevant in the labor market – an understanding that my interlocutors also share. "There was a time when – I think I also felt this when I was thinking about starting – that I felt envy towards these people, because it's a very different sum, what they bring home every month." (Dániel, developer, MA in Music, 33). While desiring a higher wage might seem like a trivial motivation for career change, in some of my interlocutors' narratives, it also gained an attributed meaning, an expression of feeling of self-worth, a value that if followed, can bring like-minded people together.

> I met other people, who just like me said, *ok, I want more money*[16] (laughs) or something like that and I want to work someplace else. Or, I want to give value to my time, because, for me, it was important not to work 12 or 10 hours a day for an amount that others make in 8.
>
> (Ioana, tester/DevOps engineer, former accountant, BA in economics, n. a.)

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[16] In quotes from my interviews, writing in italics marks words, expressions or parts of sentences that the interviewees themselves said in English, in the context of a discussion otherwise held either in Hungarian or Romanian. I find the signaling of codeswitching relevant, since it usually bears meaning in itself, either gesturing an act of taking distance from the utterances expressed, or hinting towards ideas taken from the corporate discourse.

Career changes in the early phases of one's life can be generally understood as part of an 'exploratory period' described first by Form and Miller (1949), later modelled by Neal (1999). While Neal argues that workers usually switch occupations until they find a job that matches their skills and characteristics (Kalleberg and Mouw 2018, 290), I contend that simultaneously, the workers are also being created by their workplaces (Willis 1981) and thus the jobs that are available in the labor market. Through this chapter I will argue that indeed what attracts people to a career in IT is the promise of high wages and a lifestyle it can sustain. At the same time, in order to achieve that, a neoliberal subjectivity has to be formed. To show how this happens, I will look at how the workers contextualize their earnings, how they see growth in relation to that, and how that correlates with the ideals of technology and the "hacker ethic".

Nurturing a neoliberal subjectivity

Learning and self-development are central topoi of the images my interlocutors draw of their jobs. This means both a need for constant self-improvement in terms of staying up to date with technologies but also acquiring marketable skills that they can mobilize when they feel like moving forward from their current employment. In most of my interlocutors' understanding, IT is "one of the few sectors" requiring continuous learning. The job facilitates "*growth* of all kinds" (Răzvan, tech support, studied humanities, 29). From personal advice from colleagues, to friendly nudging from managers making one "want to continue and do even more and even better" (Maria, tester, former editor, 37). I observed that they would often talk about 'self-development' or 'growth' as a fuzzy concept, or even as a catachresis. Thinking back about his previous aspirations of becoming a teacher, Csanád uses the notion to euphemistically refer to salary raises – and a lack thereof. "I don't know how much a teacher earns now, but then I saw that even if you can make a living out of that, you can't develop

yourself." (Csanád, software developer, BA in Mathematics, 33). In this sense, 'self-development' can be understood as what Henrietta Moore coins a concept-metaphor, i. e. a metaphor without adequate referent. "Their exact meanings can never be specified in advance – although they can be defined in practice and in context – and there is a part of them that remains outside or exceeds representation." (Moore 2004, 73).

Such an idea of self-development is an attribute of the neoliberal subjectivity that converges personal and professional development. Subjectivity is a "specific cultural and historical consciousness" (Upadhya 2016, 21), an "ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, and fear that animate subjects" (Ortner 2006, 107). Under neoliberal governance, a specific kind of subjectivity is being produced, through which the self as a whole gets turned into a reflexive project that has to be worked upon, transformed and improved (Giddens 1991), finding a fertile ground in the corporate context. Just like Nikolas Rose (1998, 161) put it: "Expertise plays the role of relay between objectives that are economically desirable and those that are personally seductive, teaching the arts of self-realization that will enhance employees as individuals as well as workers. Economic success, career progress, and personal development intersect in this new expertise of autonomous subjectivity". 'Developing yourself' thus evokes an idea of the self as an entrepreneur of one's own life (McNay 2009, 62; Kasmir 2001), mediating between organizational goals and personal objectives (Chelcea 2014, 40).

This form of subjectivity becomes so hegemonic, that it is not a mere possibility or inspiration anymore – it becomes mandatory. Hadas Weiss draws a parallel between the macroeconomic process of financialization and the doctrine of constant learning, understood as investment into our 'human capital'. She argues that investment-driven self-determination is not a free choice, since "[a]s with financialized property, tireless reinvestment alone might keep us from falling behind" (Weiss 2019, 105). Maria, former editor who joined an IT company as front office assistant, felt a push towards upward movement coming from her manager. Despite

liking her non-technical job, she was nudged multiple times to enroll in courses in more technical segments. She eventually completed an internship and changed her position to be a tester.

> People are encouraging you to develop yourself, from a professional point of view. It took me, not three, it took me around five years to get from front office to testing, to QA testing, but I got here. [...] I felt... not necessarily pressured, but my manager kept asking me, ok, how are you doing? What do you want? Every year, what do you want from your job in the future, what would you like to do?
>
> (Maria, tester, former front office assistant, and editor, MA in Humanities, 37)

Even if she did not want to make the move, and is still feeling nostalgic about her previous position, she expressed deep gratitude towards her manager and colleagues who supported her in learning and re-professionalizing within the company. Her story can be interpreted as an example of the constant de-skilling and re-skilling of the workforce tackled by David Harvey. Harvey argues that in order to keep labor precarious and thus cheap, corporations constantly devaluate and then rebuild the skills of their workers (Harvey 1989, 229–30). But under a neoliberal labor regime this feature of precarization not only presents itself as something to be accepted, but also as a mindset that has to be acquired.

As Norbert Petrovici and Neda Deneva-Faje point it out, firms are no longer seen as a provider of a stable working position, but more as a place where the neoliberal subjects can develop themselves, enhancing their personal employability (Petrovici and Deneva-Faje 2020). This fits into the idea of the boundaryless career (Greenhaus, Callanan, and DiRenzo 2008), in which one's career does not unfold within one firm, but rather in a sequence of occupied positions in various companies, or even various professions (Joseph et al. 2012). To navigate this, self-governing subjects have to build their employability consciously, turning all experiences into learning opportunities in service of their career (Petrovici and Deneva-Faje

2020, 57). As expressed by Maria, "nothing you do in life *at some point,* is useless." (Maria, tester, former editor, front office assistant, 37).

On the other hand, however hegemonic this form of subjectivity is in our present, some forms of agency can manifest even within it. As Carol Upadhya points out, an anthropologically sensitive study of neoliberal subjectivities cannot leave out the ways worker-subjects mobilize culturally embedded responses to new work regimes, and how they navigate self-fashioning while making use of the opportunities their jobs provide (Upadhya 2016, 18). Nándor, a Humanities graduate, sees this urge to constantly progress in a cynical light, not being attracted by it. Under the pressures interpreted as part of the 'corporate culture', Nándor frames his disinterest almost as an act of resistance, a sign of the unchanged self.

> So, this is, for example, corporate culture, that there is a hierarchy, strongly defined hierarchy, different levels, I don't know, twelve levels. And then naturally you can move upwards. And then, if you put your life on this, then you always see the next step on the ladder. So, there is a structural arch to this, but if the question is, how much, to what extent did I embrace this going-upwards on the ladder – well, obviously, not at all.
>
> (Nándor, tech support, MA in Humanities, 26)

However, he still finds learning and acquiring skills through utilizing the company's resources a good opportunity, despite understanding that it is ultimately in his employer's interest to invest into him as human capital. He echoes David Harvey's remark that in the post-Fordist flexible accumulation regime "[k]nowledge itself becomes a key commodity, to be produced and sold to the highest bidder, under conditions that are themselves increasingly organized on a competitive basis." (Harvey 1989, 159–160).

> Obviously, it is in the company's interest to increase your knowledge level. Or to be able to say that my employee knows this and this and that, compulsorily. For example, when – we are outside contractors –, when my company is selling me as a service, it's

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in its interest for me to be as skilled as possible, so he can ask as much money from the other company, selling my services. So, this is why there are these trainings. Which is a good thing, I think.

<div align="right">(Nándor, tech support, MA in Humanities, 26)</div>

In fact, many of my interlocutors find this the most appealing about their jobs. Many of my interlocutors had it as the final argument for their struggles that one just has to progress, you cannot stagnate. This constant growth and learning that IT professionals supposedly perform infiltrates their whole life. On the one hand, as part of the "cognitariat" they "prepare their nervous system as an active receiving terminal for as much time as possible. The entire lived day becomes subject to a semiotic activation which becomes directly productive only when necessary."(Berardi 2009, 90)

On the other hand, it also bears an attributed prestige. Their intellectual skills are not only exploited, but glorified. Similarly to how 'smartness' is used to create an aura of the Wall Street, as described by the ethnography of Karen Ho (2009), passion, intellect, problem-solving skills, talent and hard work are topoi producing the high status of tech jobs. A manifestation of the institutionalization of this idea is the fact that HR departments now have "Talent Recruiters" looking for and attracting possible applicants for open positions. Klára, former secretary, after completing a course in testing, was approached through Linkedin by such a recruiter. Not having to look for a job, instead the job finding her gave a sense of accomplishment and reassurance. Especially, since her initial motive for changing her career was that her previous job as a secretary, while providing stability and financial safety, left her with a sense of "lacking... a lacking of using my brain, I didn't stimulate it." (Klára, tester, BSc in food engineering, 43). For Ioana, former accountant, similarly, changing to IT "wasn't a decision of financial nature. It was instead of intellectual nature."

The work is challenging, and for most, that is experienced as fun and exciting. It requires mobilizing already owned knowledge in combination with searching for new information and adapting skills to specific situations. Unlike Oana Mateescu's (2022) interlocutors, some of my interviewees who occupy tech support jobs do take satisfaction in their roles, be it highly educated individuals with a critical look on their positionality in the global value chain. Kinga, a graduate of Humanities has been working in the managed services field for more than 6 years. Even if she feels conflicted about working in a corporation and thus "complying with the whole capitalist, *unfair* corvee", she finds enjoyment and a feeling of fulfillment in her job. "And, turns out, I enjoy this very much. […] So, it was weird, getting there, but turns out, it's not bad. I mean, it's not bad, as an experience, on a very personal *level*" (Kinga, tech support, MA in Humanities, 33).

The contradiction she navigates here is between an ideological opposition against corporate capitalism and a sense of lack of alternatives. Her way out is to focus on her immediate surroundings, her colleagues and the enjoyment she finds in completeing her tasks. In this sense, a bubble within the bubble is created. The pleasant experience of personal interactions and a friendly working environment, enjoyable tasks and a sense of worth make her ethical dilemma less salient. Not necessarily meaning but pleasure is derived, when the worker experiences work as play that comes in package with status and a salary. Szabolcs compares coding to playing video games, stating that the only difference between the two is in terms the social acceptance and appreciation.

> Thinking non-stop, problem solving for hours on end, non-stop. It's like mental masturbation. Exactly like that. Your brain is spinning, spinning, and it feels good. It's like gaming, only you're not such a loser and you get paid for it.
>
> (Szabolcs, developer, former seasonal worker, 32)

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Working in tech in itself can be a source of prestige, being part of the 'coding elite' (Burrell and Fourcade 2021). For my interlocutors, this is especially true if they get to work with a specific company whose product they admire. Many interlocutors praised the feeling of having to work on a product they use in their everyday life, and for a few, wanting "to be a part" was even the idea that set their re-professionalizing process in motion. "And when I first held an iPhone in my hands, I realized that the apps are working on it. And that I want to be a part of this, rather, if I try out anything, I want to try out this." (Dániel, developer, MA in Music, 33). This is reminiscent of how upscale retail stores exploit young workers by rewarding them with identification with designer brands, and a status of having a "cool" job (Misra and Walters 2016).

The hegemony of having fun at work

Being passionate about technology is also part of the hegemonic subjectivity expected of IT workers. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the "hacker ethic," coined by Pekka Himanen, seemed like a romantic idea of creating new, better worlds through the power of coding (Himanen 2001). By being increasingly intertwined with a neoliberal subjectivity, it is now grounding ideas of self-transformation. Héctor Beltrán, in his ethnography of Mexican programmers, gives an account of the hacker ethic principles: "Give before you get", "Don't ask for permission", "Doing > Talking", "Excuses don't exist", "Solve problems", "Follow your curiosity", "Failing ==Growing", "Know your tools and communities", "Always learn", "Get involved", "Have fun in the process" (Beltrán 2020, 493). Through an understanding of writing code as intervening, it is turning into a metaphor for taking things into one's own hands and changing the world as well as changing one's life. This becomes evident when Márk, developer and former actor states that coding taught him that "There's no such thing as 'it's not possible'!"

The "hacker ethic" also takes the working conditions developed by flexible accumulation models and subjectivizes it. As Harvey noted in 1989, just-in-time production

necessitates the flexibilization of labor in many different ways. However one general feature is the reshuffling of the 40 hour average work week into more intense and less intense periods (Harvey 1989, 150). In IT jobs this means a work-intensive period right before the product's release. The overwork demanded in these periods is legitimized by the long periods of staying on the bench – waiting after the end of one project to get assigned to a new one, while getting the usual salary –, and what's more, glorified by a masculine heroism.

> When it's *release day*, and you're falling behind, and you have to do one week's work from 9 in the morning until 10 in the evening. You must. Not finishing is not an option. It's not. Last time I worked 13 hours, with one 10-minute break. I'm not kidding. And we got the *release* done. They couldn't believe it. [...] This is again like, you prove to the management that... 'Wow... If shit hits the fan, the boys will take care of it!'

> (Balázs, developer, musician, 30)

Another struggle my interviewees face ergarding liking their job is that it makes it hard to draw boundaries, even if one is conscious about being overworked. Sára gives an account that fits into Ashley Mears' argument, "[e]xploitation works best when it feels good." (Mears 2021, 154)

> It's great that what I have to focus on now, is that I don't work too much. Cause I can slip into being hyperfocused and then I overdo it. And they exploit it. Not in a bad sense, but the thing is, the guys own the company, and so they are very *invested*, and they basically work day and night.

> (Sára, developer, BA in Humanities, 26)

An emphasis on "having fun" is apparent in the ideology of the hacker. Alexandra, a graduate of international management, who started a course in coding but did not finish it and now works as project manager at one of the biggest IT companies in Cluj, makes a categoric statement about the relationship between passion and success in IT. "If you're not passionate

about the field, you won't sit and search to be up to date with the latest technologies. [...]
However promising it is, you have to like it" (Alexandra, project manager, MA in economics,
33).

The hacker ethic – outsourced

To move forward from the idealized image of a passionate coder, I will turn to discuss
the subjectivity of outsourcing. Many of my interlocutors share a feeling of uselessness due to
not having a sense of helping people, or being very distanced and detached from the users they
imagine working for. Having a sense of displacement, Csaba, tester, finds it hard to be motivated
to work on a product that he or his community will never use, not just because of geographical
location, but also due to economic and cultural differences.

> Most of the time you won't even see, you won't even use this app. This is another weird
> thing, that I was working on products that don't exist in Romania, in Hungary… they
> are exclusively for Germans or Dutch people […] You know, when you start working
> on something like this and you look up if there is something similar here. And there
> wasn't.
>
> (Csaba, tester, MA in Philosophy, 35)

Having worked as a tester for more than 10 years now, Csaba is cynical about the nature
of his job, viewing his outsourced labor as of second-class quality.

> For now, all the projects in Eastern Europe are those they don't do in the West. Because
> they are boring (laughs), because they don't bring big money, because no one would do
> it except us, and the Indians, maybe.
>
> (Csaba, tester, MA in Philosophy, 35)

My interlocutors did share an "experience of differential valuing of labor" (Vora 2015,
69) originating from their peripheral situation. As Nándor illustrates, with a pinch of self-irony
"This is a typical example of outsourcing, that we obviously do the work for less money […]

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for sure a Frenchman wouldn't be willing, for a salary like this" (Nándor, tech support, MA in Humanities, 26).

Alpár, developer, feeling alienated from the projects he is working on, tries to keep in sight that on the other end of all the code he writes, another person will be enjoying the benefits, wherever they might be. However, another inner conflict emerges from this approach: he doesn't have control over what the software he develops will be used for, putting him into a morally opaque position.

> I'm starting to focus on the perspective that after all, even if very indirectly, there's going to be a person using what you make […] I think about this a lot, about how it will be used what we work on, or what I work on. That's a shitty feeling you know, if you are working on something, and it will be used to fire 5 people. But I hope it won't! (Laughs.)
>
> (Alpár, developer, musician, 30)

Science and Technology scholars James Malazita and Korryn Resetar argue that computer science education produces anti-political subjects, through teaching them to separate their life experiences and moral dilemmas from their abstract coding work (Malazita and Resetar 2019). Upon asking, all of my interlocutor said they could theoretically decline a project if they disagreed with it or did not like it, without a fear of being fired. In praxis however, since they are in a learning phase, they just seek opportunities for developing their skills and gaining experience, not considering the product. With the urge of life-long learning and the pressure to ceaselessly increase employability, it is not clear if they will ever reach the point when they can start thinking about morality and preferences. In this regard as well, they are in a similarly precarious position as migrant workers who tend to accept jobs with a low socio-economic status, considering it to be part of the modus operandi, and having hopes of future advancement (Ailincăi 2016, 202).

To summarize the central contradiction outlined in this chapter, the self-development discourse and the hacker ethic comes into conflict with the experienced meaninglessness of their job, as it can be observed in the reasoning of Nándor, a self-proclaimed "comfortable man". He navigates multiple contradictory discourses at the same time, both arguing for and against self-development as an end in itself, as well as both agreeing and disagreeing that work can be a source of fulfilment.

I can't imagine a more comfortable job. […] But still, you have to progress. I feel this too, that one cannot just stay stagnant. […] It becomes boring. And if you are bored, you make mistakes. See me in the last month. And also, because it won't give me any sense of fulfilment after a while, to send a request to the IT team, the real IT team, that this guy needs a headset. So, this is pretty meh, really. [...]

/But do you look for... as you said, fulfilment in work?/

For sure. You won't find fulfilment here, nobody... I think, either way, work isn't for finding fulfilment, but to earn money.

(Nándor, tech support, MA in Humanities, 26)

Chapter Three: Towards the "good life"

Figure 2: Instagram post of one of the biggest IT schools in Romania.

Text of the post: "About this good! From Brașov, București, Cluj, Craiova, Iași, Sibiu and Timișoara, our mentors are cooking together, virtually. Yes, we take a bite from other passions too. Just like in a family." Text on the image: "There exists a line of code that can make the world a better place."

This Instagram post caters to two myths surrounding the IT sector at once. Through the writing on the wall, it reproduces the technological solutionist myth (Morozov 2013) that technology can solve the problems of the world, while through the image of a professional-looking plate of high-end food it hints at the idea that joining the field can also provide the means for individual ascension to a middle-class life with its specific patterns of consumption. Making one's *own* world a better place. The salary range, the flexibility of working hours, the possibility to work remotely and the non-monetary benefits[17] together enable my interlocutors to lead the modern middle-class lifestyle they always wanted. In this chapter I will discuss these

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[17] The benefits that my interlocutors mentioned range from always having fresh fruits in the office, through weekly massages to private healthcare.

facets of working in IT, to show what kind of lifestyle converts are seeking and how that is fueled by a middle-class imaginary, constructed by neoliberal ideology. In the first section I elaborate on the ideology of the middle class as generally present in neoliberal capitalisms, but prominently instrumentalized in post-socialist discourses in the context of 'catching up'. I provide my analysis's theoretical base and present the collected empirical material that underlines this tendency. Then I discuss my interlocutors' interpretation of the paradoxical effects that the sector's development brings to the city, and their value chain positionality. Finally, I end on a remark about the contradictory combination of stability and precarity associated with working in IT and the perspectives it forecasts.

The myth of the middle class

In her book "We Have Never Been Middle Class", Hadas Weiss argues that there, in fact, is no such thing as the middle class. Building on a broader understanding of recent scholarly work that "saying 'middle class' is almost like saying 'no class at all'" (Weiss 2019, 22) she makes the case that the 'middle class' is just an ideological tool of neoliberal governance. She argues that "middle-class" is constructed to mean "normal", and a category that is supposed to be open to be entered by anyone, since it is not coined in opposition to any other group (ibid.). Similarly, Márk Áron Éber in his book about the class structure of the Hungarian society argues that the middle class is an illusion, performatively constructing the myth that the ideal lifestyle can be achieved by anyone willing to work hard (Éber 2020).

However, it is increasingly hard to see how the social ascension that is promoted by this idea can be achieved. As discussed in recent literature on social mobility, education has lost its potential for facilitating it (Durst and Huszár 2022, 5). "If the credentials we get from school and university ever were entry tickets to gainful employment, they certainly no longer are." (Weiss 2019, 102). But social mobility is in itself a complex question. There is clear evidence, that while social mobility is glorified in the public discourse, it is in fact a marker of inequality.

High social mobility in a society means great inequalities to climb in the first place. Secondly, seeing social mobility as an individual effort is reinforcing the myth of meritocracy, which in return nurtures the acceptance of inequalities, suggesting that "whatever your social position at birth, society ought to offer enough opportunity and mobility for 'talent', when combined with 'effort', to 'rise to the top'"(Durst and Huszár 2022, 1).

In this regard, the 'myth of the middle class' is directly connected to the 'myth of meritocracy', and professional reconversion to IT is a way for these to manifest. While the phenomenon itself shows the failure of formal educational institutions to provide young people with professions that lead to decent jobs – to ascend or even stay in the so-called middle class – it is also reproducing the idea that achieving a decent livelihood is a matter of willingness to adapt, smartness to invest and thus, individual responsibility. This is why it is so effective in mobilizing it as a leeway for the ideology of the middle class. As previously cited from a speech of the mayor of Cluj: "The well-paying jobs are in this field [IT], we all know that through education we can have solutions to individual and societal problems – the way out of poverty, the way towards a better salary is through education." (Preda 2022).

Representing the strata of society that can afford a "good life" (Crăciun and Lipan 2020), the middle class has been produced and is being produced through the convergence of personal aspirations and national and transnational capital interest, "as part of regional and global processes associated with neoliberal politics." (Troc 2019, 89). In his analysis of the suburbanized middle class of Cluj, Troc argues that the global capital flow searching for opportunities of profit maximalization is creating "opportunities for certain strata of workers to live and define themselves as successful social groups." (ibid. 90.) Two main facets of this process is the transformation of the housing market for the construction of American style suburbs (ibid.), and the gentrification of the inner city, making space for centers of

consumption, ready to serve *and* generate the needs of the middle class (Petrovici and Faje 2019).

The consumption imaginary that is built around working in IT fits into the broader notion of the 'middle class' as a myth. The 'IT worker' is produced as "a rare (if not the only) profile that aligns with the socio-economic desires" of the general public (Guga and Spatari 2021, 3). In the public's eye, this turns IT into a bubble, that provides an alternative, detached, pampered way of living (Mateescu 2022). Just like how Zamfir (2022) coins Cluj a heterotopia, the IT office can also be interpreted as such.

> Well, the elite of the IT is not living in the real world. They don't know what kind of material difficulties a common Romanian citizen has. I saw this, I remember, when we were doing the catering business, that they receive a lot of free *shit*, you know, events, food, and so on and so on. And they are not aware, they don't value the services they get, that no one else in other fields get.

> (Viktor, tester, chef, 31)

A central aspect of the kind of life they want to lead that my interlocutors highlighted is that of homeownership. The fact that the minimum wage does not allow inhabitants of Cluj to pay for rent in decent living conditions has been at the center of the struggles of the city's housing movement for years now (Vincze and Liță 2021; Căși sociale ACUM! 2021). Connected to rents being disproportionately high and housing conditions being extremely precarious in the city is the fact that purchasing an apartment is considered to be a luxury that only the top high earners can afford. Viktor voices a discrepancy between expected life-trajectory and the reality of living in a present-day housing market, but frames it in an individualized way, a personal struggle.

> In my case, there is a big conflict between, you know, when you're a kid, you imagine where you will be when you're thirty, and where you are in fact. And Cluj is quite an

expensive city. And for you to progress, with your own little personal projects, I'm thinking about material things, to own a house and stuff…

<div align="right">(Viktor, tester, chef, 31)</div>

Social and economic remittances

Gabriel Troc contends that houseownership is also a part of the middle-class imaginary. While it is rooted in legitimate desires for stability, it is also exploited and inflated by Western capitalist investors in the city. He more generally argues that in post-socialist societies the myth of the middle-class gets framed less as a facet of social stratification, but a desired step towards materializing 'Western' ideas (Troc 2019). To tie back to the zombie socialism examined in the previous chapter, the 'West' is imagined as where the wages are high, and where the desires get produced.

What this means for Csaba, Philosophy graduate and tester, the lifestyle associated with working in a corporation is not simply a consequence of the material conditions provided by a high earning job, but a cultural coping mechanism learnt from the West to substitute having a meaningful job. While growing increasingly disenchanted by his job, he started picking up the hobbies he had previously associated with Westerners.

So, listen to me, while all this happened, I started swimming, I started reading, I started drinking, I started writing. Heavens! So, you know, in the late 90s we were watching TV and saw how many things Westerners do. They do jogging… Well, this is why!

<div align="right">(Csaba, tester, MA in Philosophy, 35)</div>

To understand this process, I again turn to the scholarship about transnational migration. Scholars who engaged with the notion of "social and economic remittances" (Kelly 2020; Levitt 1998) argue that by transferring money from the destination countries to their countries of origin, migrants are also sending home values and concepts, creating a flow of ideas with its direction opposite to the flow of labor. Krisztina Németh (2022) similarly makes the case that

returning migrants come home with a changed habitus, resulting in altered values and thus ways of consumption. This process is not free of ideological implications. Polina Manolova characterizes the socially mobile arriving to the middle class in Bulgaria as having acquired a feeling of entitlement for living a 'good life' due to their educational background, entrepreneurial spirit, European values and overall 'Western mentality'. However, she argues that many feel that to live a 'good life' constructed this way, they must migrate to a 'civilized' Western society (Manolova 2020). Relocation on the other hand comes with several detriments, among them is a loss of social capital accumulated in the original social context. But this is where working in outsourcing resolves a conflict that migration cannot. What it makes possible is to get the Western wages and ideas in the context of the work life, without actual physical mobility. Creating the IT sector's image as a bubble (Mateescu 2022) as well as producing Cluj as a heterotopia (Zamfir 2022) both serve the purpose of producing a place where 'Western' ideas can flourish and get implemented, enabling people to live the 'good life' while staying at home. This is what ultimately makes professional reconversion to IT a strong alternative for transnational migration to some people.

"Central-Eastern Europe is not ready for this"[18]

A final aspect of posing developed countries as something to aim for is voiced both by Csaba, tester, graduate of Philosophy and Dániel, developer, former musician. They both expressed an understanding of Romania not being ready for such a socio-cultural leap that the IT sector is providing. Csaba contends that "we are not culturally prepared" for an individualistic corporate lifestyle, referring to the 'mentality' discourse (Simionca 2012) unpacked in Chapter One, but twisting it with an ironical tone: "Those born in the late 80s, the parents of those people, they have never been capitalists, and they will never be. No problem,

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[18] Csaba, tester, MA in Philosophy, 35.

this is only natural. And then we should be the big capitalists? There could be a sort of transition towards capitalism, but no. Thrown in at the deep end." Dániel on the other hand points to a discrepancy on the level of management of state funds. Compared to other countries where the economy is more balanced and embedded, where social spending is more defined, he sees the Romanian governance faulty for supporting the IT sector but letting the cultural field struggle.

> What I feel like is that it's quite outrageous how there is no other field – and again, I'm mostly thinking about art – that is this well supported. In a lot of other countries where IT is working, it is already sorted out, cause they know that they have to spend on it, and what is happening here is that theatres and theatrical companies are closing up.
>
> (Dániel, developer, MA in Music, 33)

While he utilizes the 'catching up' framework, it means something very different to him than it does for the mayor of Cluj. Instead of innovation and technological progress, having a flourishing cultural scene would mean Europeanization for him. The situation that Dániel is referring to is exemplified by a symbolic event in the neoliberal transformation of the city. In March of 2022 the Paintbrush Factory, a well-established contemporary art space operating for 13 years, was shut down. This event was a culmination of a long process of degradation of the independent cultural scene of Cluj (Braniște 2022). What took over the space that became unaffordable to the cultural center – is offices of IT companies. This brings us back to the other side of the sector's ambiguous status, being part of the creative destruction of the urban milieu both on an infrastructural and on a population level, as a facilitator of a brain drain. Having gone through these processes personally, despite the status Dániel associates with working in tech and the benefits he draws from it, he also feels shame for being part of these transformations.

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We have [an office], and, well, for someone who's very close to art, it is a pretty big...

shame, to say it like that, that the [company's] Cluj headquarters is in the building of the

former Paintbrush Factory. Pfff. And I have to work here? And not as an artist?

(Dániel, developer, MA in music, 33)

Another effect the sector is believed to have on the city is an increase in housing prices. Here lies another contradiction voiced by a number of my interlocutors. While Viktor joined the IT sector hoping to achieve a desired livelihood, the city that takes his labor is making it hard for him to reproduce his life there.

The prices skyrocketed because of this, especially talking about housing. Both for rent,

and if you want to buy an apartment. There will be such a huge gap between, there is

already, but it will get even bigger I think, between the IT and the non-IT world, that

the non-IT world soon cannot afford to go out in the city […] At this point, I don't think

the city offers as much as it takes away.

(Viktor, tester, chef, 31)

Thus, Cluj as "an expensive city" for the public is being produced by the very same logic that is promised to make it livable for the individual, making it hard for even the IT professionals to achieve the life they seek. This is a point where my interlocutors face their specific positionality in the global value chain. A Romanian IT outsourcing salary enables one to buy a house, however it must either be "not very beautiful" (Csaba, developer, BA in Mathematics, 33) or acquired through a mortgage. To navigate this, some of my interlocutors foster long-term plans of working at one of the tech giants and accumulating what they consider a truly decent sum.

Yeah, this is one of my big plans […] to work for a year or half a year at Google,

Facebook, or one of these big companies. […] otherwise, I won't have a chance to buy

an apartment anywhere. House. I want a house. I mean, *obviously*, I can build a house, but I don't want to keep paying the bank until I turn 70, four times the amount.

<div align="right">(Balázs, developer, musician, 30)</div>

Flexible stability– and when will the "bubble burst"

One of the ways my interlocutors deal with this ambiguity of the city is changing to remote work and simply move out of the city, while keeping their jobs. Regarding flexibility in space, there is a double movement present. While some of my interlocutors decided changing to tech jobs to be able to move into the city, afford housing and an urban lifestyle, some of them chose IT to be able to move away from the city, making use of the normalization of remote work during the pandemic.

This leads us to another aspect of the modern middle-class lifestyle that IT is said to allow one to lead, namely a combination of flexibility and stability. Scholars of the post-socialist block argue that after the fall of state socialism, with the arrival of corporate capitalism, workers had to start developing new personas, interiorizing the "doctrines of flexibility" (Dunn 2004, 7; Chelcea 2014, 38). Most of my interlocutors being in their late 20s or early 30s are socialized with this post-Fordist idea of work, an "insecurity culture" (Pugh 2015) normalizing flexible working hours, project-based employment or external contracting, and a boundaryless perspective on their career (Greenhaus, Callanan, and DiRenzo 2008).

Like many platform workers (Vallas and Schor 2020), the digital workers I interviewed seek freedom and flexibility in work. As Csanád, 33, a developer said, "I have always been looking for freedom, freedom on the level of time, or money-wise, or I don't know, generally." Flexibility is so central, that it changes the way Balázs, 30, a developer and musician, even thinks about work. Having experience as a call center operator, he now resents the idea of a nine-to-five job, saying "I realized that the only way I can work is if I don't work." Márk, 29, developer and former actor, similarly framed the time-sheet at his previous workplace as a

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remnant of socialism, and welcomed the flexible working hours that his current company provides. Now he can work when feeling productive, or go home or make use of the PlayStation available at the office when feeling tired.

Unlike platform work however, being employed by one of the big IT companies of Cluj also means stability, predictability and reliability for my interlocutors. Under these circumstances, stability gets defined in relational terms. Compared to seasonal work abroad, working in IT means having a job throughout the year. Compared to taking translating gigs on a platform, it means social benefits and a reliable constant workload. Compared to a career in the entertainment industry, it means safety if a pandemic hits and communal gatherings are prohibited. Compared to being a lawyer, it means a clear career trajectory and an assurance of progress.

Szabolcs, 32, developer, who has worked abroad on and off for the last 10 years even frames starting a career in IT as "the new beginning of his life", providing the stability he never knew he needed. Unlike Szabolcs, Kinga felt a lacking of stability in her life, feeling like a looser for not being able to sustain herself, even with her parents providing an apartment for her.

> The stability, that really was missing before. From this point of view, especially back then, I felt like this *job* saved me, a bit, but at the same time probably any other *job* would have saved me, if it was stable.
>
> (Kinga, tech support, MA in Humanities, 33)

The stability she talks about can also be understood regarding social status reproduction. While her parents were able to afford granting her an apartment in the city, with her humanities degree she couldn't secure a job that would keep her in a middle-class position, economically speaking.

This sense of stability sounds surprising in the backdrop of a vast literature about the precarity of digital labor. The 'cybertariat' (Huws 2014) or cyber-proletariat (Dyer-Witheford 2015) is generally understood as the sufferer of the ultimate neoliberalization of labor conditions, its labor being 'footloose', its occupational identities being destroyed, forced to remain permanently flexible (Huws 2014). While my interlocutors do experience unexpected layoffs, being pushed around between projects and feeling an urge to change positions as well as employers frequently, they still consider working in IT a safe path. This could be tied back to an image of the sector entangled with the imaginary of the future, cultivated in the childhood of my interlocutors. As Csaba traces it back, "everyone's been told, right, in the late 80s, early 90s [...] that technology is the future, you should understand and process this, and choose your job or school according to this." (Csaba, software tester, MA in Philosophy, 35). These ideas are only being reinforce by the discourse fostered by the municipality of Cluj, as shown in Chapter One.

In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic was a significant trigger for re-professionalization, both in the more traumatic sense of losing one's job and having to find another, and in the sense of altering people's views about what is reliable, what is a sure source of income. As discussed in Chapter One, the IT sector in Romania stayed relatively stable throughout the economic crisis during the pandemic, buttressing the idea that tech jobs are reliable. Zalán, DJ and former project manager at a big regional company reconsidered his aspirations of becoming a full-time entrepreneur in entertainment services during the lockdown, and instead started learning to code. When asked if he sees IT as a firm field, he half-jokingly replied "Well, yes, for quite a few more years, until I retire for sure, yes. Then let's hope AI doesn't take over" (Zalán, developer, former project manager, 26).

Besides the ironical mentions of AI taking their jobs, their precarious value chain positionality is a more tangible threat for most of my interviewees. Mechanisms of what

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scholars described as capital's will to constantly relocate in search for cheap labor (e.g. Harvey 1975; Henderson 2004), or the 'footlooseness' of labor in a digital age (Huws 2014) are known to some of them. Csanád for example framed his observation and indirect worries about losing his job due to IT companies moving further away from Romania in a way that blames the flow of unskilled laborers joining the sector, 'watering down' the prestige of Cluj IT.

> There are places, where they hire people, cause there's money for it, but they don't put out quality work. And this is a problem, because sooner or later if the companies get saturated with people like these... if someone says, 'an IT company from Cluj', that won't mean high quality anymore. And then they will move away. Cause, I don't know, in Bulgaria it's cheaper.

(Csanád, developer, BA in Mathematics, 33)

While both scholars (Mateescu 2022; Guga and Spatari 2021) and IT bloggers (McGrath 2016; Vijoli 2018) contemplate the future of Cluj IT, expecting its bubble to burst, only time will tell when that will happen and what it will bring to my interlocutors.

In this chapter I argued that the 'myth of the middle class' is a constituting element of the 'myth of IT', adding a consumption imaginary and a normative lifestyle as a driving force to professional reconversion to IT. Having a synergic relationship with both technological solutionism and zombie socialism, the 'myth of the middle class' is effectively forming subjectivities and providing an ideological reasoning for joining the IT sector. While being aware of their semi-peripheral positionality, the workers of the sector do reproduce the ideological discourse of having to 'catch up' to the West by putting their own context in opposition to the countries where the products they develop are being sold.

Conclusion

The post-socialist cities are great targets for digital services outsourcing, since they can provide cheap labor without great cultural and geographical distance from Western European companies. The municipality of Cluj has been tapping into this fact, building an image of a European and 'smart' city, for the sake of being attractive for foreign direct investment. The IT sector is the poster child of both the country's and the city's government. On the one hand it is said to provide a supposedly sure way of social ascent or a way to remain within a decent socio-economic positionality for the individual, feeding the myth of the middle class. On the other hand, it symbolizes technological progress and economic and cultural connections with the West.

The transition towards a free-market economy being over, post-socialist societies are still keeping the state socialist past alive on a discursive and political level. Both the state and the city governance are withdrawing their welfare functions and instead are catering to transnational capital. On the micro level, it is still believed that 'communist mentalities' are to be eliminated. Both of these facets of zombie socialism idealize neoliberal doctrines. Drawing a parallel between labor migration and professional reconversion helps us see how ideas and ideologies get transferred alongside the wages coming from the West, and how the consumption imaginary of the workers of the sector is being shaped by the benefits they get as well as the lifestyle their corporate job allows them to have. Unpacking the myth of the middle class makes it visible that, because of their advantageous socio-economic situation, IT professionals are seen as the protagonists of the local society, setting the terms and the prices of urban life.

In Chapter One I argued that it is in the interest of IT companies, the city and the state governance to create an image of IT that is associated with socio-economic ascension to have an answer for questions about inequality, while in fact catering to the interest of transnational

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capital. Just like how Romania has been exporting its social contradictions through facilitating labor emigration, now outsourcing is another way to do that. Outsourcing also reinforces a dependent development model and reproduces the semi-peripheric positionality, which in turn fosters a specific kind of subjectivity that is always constituted in relation to the richer and more developed 'West'. The IT sector being a selected field for state support is most prominently exemplified by the tax exemption regarding income taxes of workers engaged in software creating activities. The arguments surrounding the tax exemption reinforce an idea of the sector that is legitimizing a dependent development model, while making IT workers 'favored subjects', engines of consumption. In addition, by coining IT professionals as exceptionally productive, they are created as the capitalist heroes bringing in Western values to the Romanian society.

In Chapter Two I introduce these ideas as, in fact, constituting elements of the neoliberal subjectivity, such as self-development, continuous reinvestment into one's human capital. What is special about the IT worker in this regard is that next to a neoliberal subjectivity, it also expected to bear the characteristics of the hacker ethic, meaning a hegemony of having fun while working, creative problem solving, and an idea of intervening on the world and on the self. What is special about converts to IT is a constant feeling of impostor syndrome, of lagging behind, thus an even stronger urge for continuous learning. On the other hand, continuous learning means continuous acceptance of conditions, resulting in an understanding of work as an enhancer of personal employability, not as a means for value creation.

In Chapter Three I contend that the myth of the middle class on the one hand implies an imaginary that sets standards for a "good life": eating out, going on vacations, going to festivals, owning a home. On the other hand, it implies a promise, that anyone who's working hard can achieve that. Both of these aspects are prevalent in the discourse surrounding IT, the professionals being one of the main targets of the city's rebranding as a caterer for the "creative

classes" and the myth of easy entry to the field and a straight trajectory to high earning jobs serves as a discursive tool for disregarding questions about social inequality. While the consumption imagery surrounding the middle class, such as houseownership have a legitimate basis but are instrumentalized by investment capitalism. There are contradictory effects of the sector on the city that my interlocutors experience. Cluj is becoming an expensive city due to the very same logic that is promised to make it livable for the individual.

My interlocutors share an understanding of their value chain positionality, completing tasks that Westerners would not, for the same wage. They are able to lead comfortable lives on their salaries in the local context, however if they are fostering ideas about owning their housing, outsourcing is not enough for that, they have to consider changing work at a tech giant, directly. Between stability and flexibility, working in IT means a possibility for moving into the city or moving out of it, of working whenever they feel the most productive but overworking when it is expected. They find stability in their employment contracts and a secured middle-class position. However, they fear their futures being hijacked by capital's moving nature and the very same technological evolvements they help to create.

Cluj is in many regards not special. Being an outsourcing heaven, a 'smart city', or even 'the Silicon Valley' of something are not unique to it. However, the combination of neoliberal governance with anti-communist ideological undertones, and the glorification of the middle class, in the backdrop of a nation-wide migration issue makes it an interesting case of, and scale for, studying neoliberal transformations framed as technological innovation and development. Understanding what makes a developing industry more than a provider of jobs and an attractor of foreign capital, and seeing how an imaginary is being created that has very materialistic consequences is, I think, useful for other contexts as well.

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To summarize my argument, through my thesis, I have shown that technological solutionism, zombie socialism and the myth of the middle class are together creating the 'myth of IT', which is forming neoliberal subjectivities and depoliticizes collective struggles.

While I do not want to create the impression that changing to IT was the 'one single' answer to all of my interlocutor's problems, it certainly has some characteristics that make it 'one possible' answer to them. Like Kinga said, this job saved her, while at the same time probably any other job would have saved her. Only there were no other options in her imaginary.

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