

Architectural and More: Contemporary Transformations of Labor

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Prologue

Nine o'clock in the morning on a cold day in January, at the entrance of a big hall inside the CUG precinct in Cluj-Napoca. At this time of the day, 40 years ago, everybody in the hall would be preparing for the first break, after hours of work, perhaps in shifts; now, an errant movement of people animates the entrance. A man and a woman are talking slowly over coffee and cigarettes, a small group of men, perhaps in their 30s, pass them by, throwing a neutral "good morning," someone is talking loudly on the phone a few steps away. These are some of the inhabitants of the hall, not the one in the worst state, but to which minimal reparations have been made, enough to make possible its renting by the square meter and for a monthly rate. Inside, partition walls mark separations between enterprises, social groups and types of work: plyboards are shelved in one place with indications of furniture being built; packages are stored in another; someone is cutting boards and painting them further away; bicycles are stacked alongside a wall behind a locked, improvised metal door. A sense of precarity and improvisation emanates from the layout of the hall, the activity is not intense, but certainly livelier than what comes through from the surrounding premises – a quiet décor of industrial ruins.

Introduction

The reality of small manufacturers inhabiting the big halls seems, at an intuitive level, paradoxical. In an abstract exercise, two realities can be distinguished here: first, a modern reality, implying modernization of industry, belief in the infinite progress and its infinite promises, the large-scale societal and economical plan represented by the socialist-era halls; second, a reality that can be looked at as pre-modern: it implies fragile small-scale endeavors, the look at the immediate future, the lack of big planning, the subjective interest towards a particular form of labor represented by the small businesses. Although it is obvious that this situation has many aspects (economical, practical or social ones), and can be understood within specific circumstances of workers forced by rental costs to move in sometimes inappropriate, even unsanitary spaces, the paper chooses to look at this phenomenon from a different angle. What is of interest here is the coexistence of these two realities — the epitome of modernity accommodating forms of labor uncharacteristic to modernity — in an apparently un-conflictual state — both practically and ideologically. To produce an analytical assessment of this phenomenon, the paper proposes to delve into the abstract exercise of separating the modern from the post/alter/pseudo or pre-modern¹ and reassess them as something that could be interpreted as a symptom of the

¹ Although there have been many paradigms that have been defined as opposed to "modern," or nuanced understandings of "modern," only some will be looked at here: post/alter/pseudo or pre-modern. For an easier navigation through the terminology and for efficiency reasons, but also as a gesture of playful reverence for the richness of the term "modern," we shall refer to them as "non-modern."

contemporary. Without the pretense to draw general conclusions, “small production units within big socialist-era halls,” presents itself as a pretext for an intellectual speculation on modern and non-modern features in contemporary realities. First, the paper will try to operate among the many nuances of “modern” and “non-modern,” a selection of features that can be of interest here. Second, these understandings of modern and non-modern will be used as instruments to interpret the phenomenon described above within alternative frameworks: as a modern or non-modern symptom of present-day realities. Non-modern is not understood as a negation of modernity ever taking place (as is the case in Bruno Latour’s *We Have Never Been Modern*), nor does it pretend to explore all or even the most important derivatives of “modern.” In an assumed exercise of heterogenous speculation, the paper rather invites to a reflection on today’s echoes of modernity and some of our evolving relationships with it.

Modern and Its Derivates

An obvious delimitation in the understanding of “modern” and modernity is their distinction from modernism as an architectural style (and other artistic modernist manifestations like the music of Schönberg, the writings of Scott Fitzgerald or the paintings of Matisse and Picasso). In its narrower understanding, “modern” and modernity are of interest here following three coordinates.

First, “modern” is based on the importance of reason in the way we acquire knowledge and understand reality. As Kant puts it, it is both an individual and a collective endeavor, the point where the two meet, eliminating the subjective to create an objective, complete *rule*:

“it is requisite to reason’s lawgiving that it should need to presuppose only *itself*, because a rule is objectively and universally valid only when it holds without the contingent, subjective conditions that distinguish one rational being from another.”²

“a faculty for judging that... takes account (a priori) of everyone else’s way of representing in thought, in order *as it were* to hold its judgment up to human reason as a whole and thereby avoid the illusion which, from subjective private conditions that could easily be held to be objective, would have a detrimental influence on the judgment.”³

The construction of reason as a collective achievement based on the elimination of subjective conditions has as a direct consequence the prioritization of the grand objective (reasonable) plan detrimental to small subjective (un-/less reasonable) plans. Not only does the grand narrative, in Lyotard’s terms (be it labor-related or not), characterize modernity, but it is both collectively assumed and adhered to. In describing the postmodern condition, Lyotard interprets the distrust towards the grand narrative as an obvious change of paradigm: what becomes intrinsically post-modern is the interest in the small narratives (*petits récits*): the plurality of dissonant subjective voices supersedes the legitimacy of the “universal truth.”⁴ The contrast with Kant’s belief in the legitimacy of the rule, established collectively, appears in its plenitude when, referring to the artist and writer (but with the possibility to be extended to other forms of authorship), Lyotard says:

“A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text.”⁵

2 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans./eds. P. Guyer & A. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 21.

3 *Ibid.*, 293.

4 Jean-François Lyotard, *Introduction: The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, transl. G. Bennington & B. Massumi, foreword by F. Jameson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press & Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1984).

5 *Ibid.*, 81.

Liotard has a positive look at this change of paradigm,⁶ a positivism that is however characteristic for the modern attitude, implying a level of certainty, the capacity to believe and find a communal basis of acceptance of the plurality of rules. The term “alter-modern” coined by Nicolas Bourriaud in 2009 may in fact mark the rupture from modernity and postmodernity through a nuance it introduces around the ideas of certainty and essentialism. Bringing together Bourriaud’s model with Ricouer’s work on translation, Michael Larson states that within the alter-modern paradigm, what can be looked at positively is the precariousness of all communication, based rather on chance than anything else. No essentialism or certainty remain available (the postmodern was still in search for a form of essentialism exalting the importance of small narratives):

“We do not meet in a pure presence and commune in a pure share of Truth. Yet, after we cross paths, we may not take ourselves for exactly who we were prior to our encounter. The sharing of existence implies risks and uncertainties. It is not a matter of taking in the other with respect to an orienting theme or identifying mark, but of opening to the fact that relationality is constitutively abandoned (without recourse to an essential truth) and exposed (opened to a world with others). There is no unity hiding behind our encounters, nor any script by which our communication should make sense. To live in a world after the death of grand narratives is not to languish in the void, but to take the precariousness and openness of existence as an opening of possibility. Let us not be strangled by our roots but lift them up in moving in a world that remains full of life.”⁷

In the alter-modern paradigm, thus spread into a random multiplicity of possibilities, rational thinking seems to have given up on any common basis for purpose, truth, goal. It is however the haunting of the grand narrative that returns in what Alan Kirby calls the pseudo-modern. The pseudo-modern no longer displays the ironic, playful, yet positive/hopeful attitude of the postmodern; he or she is rather grave and anxious. He or she, in Kirby’s words, is technologically super proficient, but lacks common knowledge: communication with the other side of the planet is easy, yet he or she needs to be told to eat vegetables to be healthy; directing the course of national television programs or the internet is also easy, but cooking a meal may become problematic. The pseudo-modern is the perfect “fusion of the childish and the advanced, the powerful and the helpless.”⁸ At the same time, the pseudo-modern is someone for whom “‘disbelief of Grand Narratives,’ which Lyotard argued typified postmodernists,”⁹ is no longer possible. The technologically proficient but intellectually shallow pseudo-modern needs the personalized meta-narrative to confront its anxieties towards society, identity loss, enemies from within and from afar, the complexity of knowledge that needs to be grasped. Empowered and powerless at the same time, the pseudo-modern faces a reality which is in fact dominated by “the ideology of globalized market economics raised to the level of the sole and over-powering regulator of all social activity – monopolistic, all-engulfing, all-explaining, all-structuring.”¹⁰ Pseudo-modernity is “consumerist and conformist, a matter of moving around the world as it is given or sold.”¹¹ The need for the grand narrative has returned, but it is out of anxiety; we lack any rational means of attaining any goals, of setting a grand purpose, of believing in some form of progress. Returning to the words of Kant, how can there be rationality at work when not only is subjectivity not eliminated, but rather encouraged and brought to a state of rule in itself?

The second interest in the term modern and its derivatives could present itself under its “measurable” aspects. Indeed, scale and quantity become its preferred dimensions: modern is expressed

6 C. Nouvet, Z. Stahuljak and J. Still (eds.), *Minima Moralia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), xii–iv.

7 Michael Larson, “Altermodernity and the Ethics of Translation,” *Peninsula* 1, No. 1 (2011), <https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/peninsula/article/view/683/1923>.

8 Alan Kirby, “The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond,” *Philosophy Now*. 58 (Nov/Dec 2006), https://philosophynow.org/issues/58/The_Death_of_Postmodernism_And_Beyond.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

by the grand scale and the unique, and marginalizes all that is small and comes in numbers. Uniqueness and scale are the palpable, almost prosaic dimensions of the modern, applicable to its narratives as well as to the spaces it produces. Therefore, its preferred aesthetic category is monumentality or grandeur, not devoid of its ethical connotations, the pure and the heroic. As an obvious consequence, the postmodern prefers the small scale and the big numbers, that can be summed up under the logic of a calm plurality; the heroic is abandoned and laughed at with serene, witty irony. The alter-modern is interested in the same dispersion but accepts that there is no necessary mathematical operation between elements (they may or may not be combined). It looks up to random equations and takes joy when one and one do add up (the result, not necessarily being two). The pseudo-modern, on the other hand is presented with a paradoxical further stage of delving into multiplicity: the joy of individualities is no longer disputed; for the pseudo-modern it comes as a violent shock that there is no adding up – when in fact, the quest is for the unique purpose, the grand goal. Hence, it prefers the pure and the heroic, but they become so subjective that they are perceived by the other as not trustworthy: suspicion towards anything that could be objective and common is in fact a condition for sustaining the belief in the individual big plan.

Thirdly, and as a direct consequence of the above, “modern” is of interest here because of its spatial-temporal implications. Two famous descriptions of modernity may come to mind, both characterized by their pictographic content (one of them is, in fact, the description of a painting). They both draw a glimpse of a present moment that encompasses the past and the future, and they both predict the postmodern, in their description of the modern anguish. One description is Nietzsche’s boat in the ocean:

“We have forsaken the land and gone to sea! We have destroyed the bridge behind us — more so, we have demolished the land behind us! Now, little ship, look out! Beside you is the ocean; it is true, it does not always roar, and at times it lies there like silk and gold and dreams of goodness. But there will be hours when you realize that it is infinite and that there is nothing more awesome than infinity. Oh, the poor bird that has felt free and now strikes against the walls of this cage! Woe, when homesickness for the land overcomes you, as if there had been more freedom there — and there is no more ‘land!’”¹²

The other is Walter Benjamin’s comment on Klee’s *Angelus Novus*:

“A Klee painting named ‘Angelus Novus’ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.”¹³

The modern is turning its back to the past and is blown into the future of progress. Both Nietzsche and Benjamin see this movement with anguish: infinity is a promise and a menace, it comes as a storm, establishing the relationship between the promising blisses of time (the future) and the dimensions of space (grand to the point where it becomes infinite). The postmodern, once the anguish has been lived and the storm has stopped, is looking back for lost land and the anchor of past times, which, debris or not, he finds comforting. But what comforts him most is the very loss of the burdening “radical past,” as Fredric Jameson puts it, a sort of commodification of history that translates into a form of space that is hyperspace: a

12 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 119.

13 Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, Create Space Independent Publishing Platform (August 11, 2009), 4.

space which integrates time, which is constituted by a historicized version of the past, but to which the human body has not adapted.¹⁴ But this is not a reason for despair, as it was in the images of Nietzsche, Benjamin, or Munch: the postmodern waning of affect¹⁵ makes possible the schizophrenia-like absorption of time into space. The postmodern does not give up, in this sense, on a form of essentialism: the end of time functions as a substitute for the promised better future of modernity. Reversely, the alter-modern's ambition is to give up on any form of idealism, which comprises nostalgia associated with the past, and hopes and anguish associated with the future.¹⁶ In the words of Nicolas Bourriaud, alter-modernity is "that moment when it became possible for us to produce something that made sense starting from an assumed heterochrony, that is, from a vision of human history as constituted from multiple temporalities, disdaining the nostalgia for the avant-garde and indeed for any era – a positive vision of chaos and complexity."¹⁷ Positivism is necessary however, because the affect has returned and, what is at stake, above all, is the possibility of the encounter and the joy the acknowledgment of the other may produce, especially as it is produced only by chance. Time and spatial chaos become relevant only considering the encounter, otherwise losing their sense. The pseudo-modern is, then, confined to the present. What Alan Kirby postulates regarding how today we read texts, take part in the production of media or get access to knowledge is that it all happens in the present time, with no possibility of repeating or becoming a reference to turn back to, under the pressure to consume it fast and pass to the next present moment.¹⁸ Spatiality is confined to the virtual and does not require our bodies. Under this constant pressure, the past is seen as a place for trauma that impedes us to enjoy the present and needs to be resolved, while the future is a futile projection, because the obsession with living the present does not allow any room for it. The only way in which the future is present is the sense of urgency of something meaningful and grand, that the present might ruminatingly build.

These aspects of "modern" and its derivatives can further be guides to interpreting the way small enterprises inhabit grand halls.

A Pre/Post/Alter/Pseudo-Modern Take

In fact, first and foremost, seeing some colossal socialist halls cluttered with provisional separations that accommodate small enterprises brings forth a rather *pre*-modern image, that of Roman amphitheatres transformed into Medieval settlements. Comparisons to the Middle Ages occur in other domains of urban phenomena, for instance when looking at contemporary closed communities particularly in the developing world, where the modern state was never strong enough to replace local sovereignties and identities.¹⁹ As Otto Gerhard Oexle argues in an article on the modern perception of the medieval era, this type of comparison can have both positive and negative implications: positive for those who see in the Middle Ages an era of flourishing communities, unity and wholeness (as opposed to the rise of individualism beginning with the Renaissance), negative for those who see it as an age of fragmentation, chaos and fear (as opposed to the fierce belief in progress and the reign of Reason).²⁰ Spatially, both interpretations can stand: enclosed by the walls of grandiose Roman infrastructures, medieval settlements were intimate communities, but they were so as a consequence of fear of invaders,

14 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 47.

15 *Ibid.*, 56.

16 Larson, "Altermodernity and the Ethics of Translation."

17 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Altermodern* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009).

18 Kirby, "The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond."

19 John Rapley, "The New Middle Ages," *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 3 (2006): 95-103. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20031970>.

20 Otto Gerhard Oexle, "The Middle Ages through Modern Eyes. A Historical Problem: The Prothero Lecture," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 9 (1999): 121-42. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3679395>.

guided by the immediate needs of safety and survival, fragmented in the territory and lacking a vision of the future. At first glance, the phenomenon discussed in the paper can be read in a similar way. Protected by the shelter of the grand hall, small enterprises are like families of specialized manufacturers or service providers (not unlike the blacksmith, the mason, the carpenter, the merchant of the medieval village), under the authoritarian figure of the renter-protector (that could, in a far-fetched way, stand for the nobleman). Their need for lodging brings them together by necessity, not by choice. But the comparison, in both positive and negative forms, stops here. First, there is no community to talk about: the co-dependency that tied the members of medieval settlements does not characterize the relationship between the occupants of these halls; they assume a temporary condition of their occupancy, dependent on personal status, the way they plan their business growth, the cost of the rent and so on — so their relationship with other occupants is arbitrary. If any deeper connections are established, they are rather dependent on chance. As one occupant said, “I get along well with my neighbor, but our businesses are different, we may stay friends if he moves, but that depends on how much time we have to keep in touch.” In this sense, the relationships built inside this kind of workspace are based on random associations — the type of encounters that Bourriaud talks about describing the alter-modern condition. A certain positivity in attitude surrounds such encounters, but also a sense of resignation and surprise when they occur. This may also come from a dissociation with feelings of nostalgia — or any other form of relating to the space of the grand hall as expression of the past — and from a dissociation with any idealism, when imagining the future. Space is experienced without a stake in itself: neither in its grand dimensions and overwhelming scale, nor in its fragmentation: what matters is the possibility of existing and working and, if possible, the surprise of meaningful encounters on this background. Space is simply a catalyst for possibilities.

A postmodern take on the phenomenon of inhabiting the hall by small enterprises is also possible. While a comparison with medieval appropriations of Roman colossi comes to mind, within different specters of contemporary views, it may also remind us of Aldo Rossi's own interpretation of such a transformation, notably, Diocletian's Palace in Split, transformed into a town.²¹ Following Rossi, the grand socialist hall's capacity of adaptation to a different form of labor, to different industrial processes, attests to the fall of the modern: one of its proverbial spatial inventions — one which, since Gropius, was supposed to express function above all — proves to be able to adapt and transform. What is permanent is the stability of type — not its function or its ideology — which attests less to a sort of affect (that Rossi talks about) and more to a sort of waning of affect (in the terms of Fredric Jameson). It is rather the renunciation to any form of grand narrative that makes possible such a move: there is no reverence towards the reign of Diocletian, nor any dismissal of the socialist era that disturbs the reinvestment of these spaces, produced under ideologically different circumstances from those of their present users.

The pseudo-modern view could also be imposed on the phenomenon at hand. What Alan Kirby describes as the pseudo-modern or, in a later text, the digi-modern paradigm, is related to the transformations of textuality: its onwardness, haphazardness, evanescence, shift in authorship and so on.²² But he also states that these characteristics can be applied to more than one aspect of the contemporary, at least in the cultural realm, and it can be interesting to see how these can be applied to the realm of work and labor. First, the enterprises that populate former socialist-era halls are, in some cases at least, under a state of interim: they assume evanescence and haphazardness — a sort of beginning but an uncertain *end* — both in the sense of an ending and in the sense of a purpose. Their sense of existing may rely, in some cases, on the natural needs of revenue of individuals, on economic laws and realities, but they are at the same time, perhaps, interpretable as forms of evading from a reality that is technologically transformed. In a world where digitization has overtaken so many aspects of our interactions, formation, rela-

21 Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1984), 128.

22 Alan Kirby, *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture* (London: A&C Black, 2009), 53-54.

tionships with the others, with ourselves — mind and body comprised — manufacturing could be a form of subconsciously superseding what is absent from the pseudo-modern world. Using our hands, manufacturing, producing — but at the small errant scale of individual entrepreneurs — is merely a residual phenomenon within the engulfing digitization of life.

An (Eastern European) Modern Take

Across post-communist Eastern Europe the ruins of the once-mighty socialist industries stand as monumental remnants of a failed utopian promise. These defunct sites — gigantesque in scale and ambition — are more than decaying skeletons of economic might; they are multi-layered palimpsests, at once political burdens, cultural touchstones, and contested economic frontiers. In Romania, Cluj-Napoca and Iași stand out as examples of this phenomenon: the sites of their respective CUG (“Combinatul de Utilaj Greu” [Heavy Machinery Factory]) and similar industrial complexes, along with their transition from centralized production to fragmented, entrepreneurial micro-enterprises, testify to an ongoing transformation of labor, space, and temporality. What is emerging is not a seamless transition from “communism” to “capitalism,” nor a straightforward narrative of modernization. Instead, we find uneven hybrids — what Ulrich Beck might call “second modernities” or what Eisenstadt terms as “multiple modernities”²³ — where pre-modern forms, socialist legacies, and neoliberal logics coexist in tension.

The reuse of socialist-era industrial spaces by small-scale enterprises exemplifies a spatial and social rearticulation of labor in post-communist societies. These micro-transformations reflect broader historical shifts: the decline of linear, teleological models of progress, the reassertion of locality in globalized systems, and the unresolved tensions between modernity and its Others. By situating these developments in theoretical debates on modernity and spatial transformation, we look at how these architectural relics of socialist industry illuminate the complexities of contemporary social and labor changes and how they can be read considering a renewed and contextual understanding of the “modern.”

The scale of socialist industrial infrastructure in Romania reflected a vision of Promethean modernity. Inspired by Marxist-Leninist ideologies and centrally planned economies, these structures embodied what Jowitt calls a blend of “charismatic ideology” and “bureaucratic hierarchy,” creating systems that retained premodern patrimonial dynamics within a supposedly modern framework.²⁴ As Voslensky has shown, the nomenklatura system blurred the lines between state function and personal appropriation, embedding quasi-feudal structures within ostensibly rational bureaucracies. These factories were not just sites of production, but instruments of social engineering, designed to forge the “new socialist man,”²⁵ a contextualized form of the modern man.

Following 1989, however, these sites became obsolete almost overnight. The collapse of communism was not just a political event, but the implosion of an entire civilizational project. As Kumar notes, the fall of communism may signal an “elective affinity” with the decline of modernity itself.²⁶ And yet, in post-communist Romania, these industrial ruins have not simply vanished. Instead, they have become the focal point for competing temporalities: nostalgic recollections by former workers, speculative interests of real estate developers, preservationist efforts by architects, and makeshift entrepreneurial activity. These overlapping claims mirror the “crisis of reconciliation” that post-communist politicians face, caught between competing narratives of development, heritage, and economic pragmatism, but are at the same time charged

23 Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, “Multiple Modernities,” *Daedalus* 129, no. 1 (2000), 1–29.

24 Kenneth Jowitt, *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

25 Michael S. Voslensky, *Nomenklatura: The Soviet Ruling Class* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984).

26 Krishan Kumar, *From Post-Industrial to Post-Modern Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 151–52.

with the need for the grand modern narrative. The fact that it has failed under the communist regime is also, perhaps, an invitation to rebuild it under new political and economic circumstances, that present themselves as possible ground zeroes of constructing modernity.

This transformation challenges conventional readings of post-communist transition. According to classic modernization theory, such societies were expected to evolve toward rationalized, large-scale, Western-style institutions. Yet, the re-emergence of micro-enterprises within the husks of industrial modernity resists this trajectory. Rather than progressing in a linear fashion, labor in post-communist Romania is reorganized through bricolage — a creative reappropriation of space and resources in the absence of stable economic or political guarantees. As Freitag observed, the post-communist transition involved a “forgetting of society,” as political reforms sidelined social cohesion and left individuals to navigate uncertain conditions.²⁷ They could be read, from this point, as a reignition of the zero point of modernization.

Here, Bauman’s distinction between “heavy” and “liquid” modernity proves useful. The communist period exemplified “heavy modernity” — rigid, centralized, and industrial — while the post-communist moment represents “liquid modernity” marked by fragmentation, flexibility, and precarity.²⁸ The occupation of grand industrial halls by small businesses exemplifies this liquefaction. The architectural form remains, but its social function is radically transformed.

These new uses of space suggest that post-communist modernity is not merely a belated arrival to Western norms, but an expression of multiple, intersecting temporalities. As Eisenstadt argues, modernity is not monolithic, but plural: different societies negotiate its principles through their own historical and cultural lenses.²⁹ The spatial reinvention within Romania’s industrial ruins exemplifies this dynamic. These are not simply cases of “catch-up” modernization, as Habermas’s “revolutions of recuperation” might suggest³⁰ but instances of locally embedded adaptation, where past, present, and future cohabit uneasily.

This heterogeneity is echoed by neo-modernization theorists like Beck, Giddens, and Lash, who emphasize the reflexivity of contemporary modernity.³¹ Reflexive modernization entails a heightened awareness of modernity’s consequences, particularly its unintended side effects — ecological risks, institutional collapse, or social atomization. The repurposing of the CUG’s factory spaces might be understood as a form of this reflexivity: a recognition of the failure of state-driven modernization, combined with a pragmatic engagement with the leftover material infrastructure of that project. These micro-entrepreneurs are not ideologues or revolutionaries; they are practical actors adapting to a landscape where both tradition and modernity are compromised.

The persistence of industrial architecture amidst a shift in labor organization raises a critical question: is this a case of modernization without modernity, or modernity without modernization? Scholars like Kurtz and Barnes suggest that political liberalization and economic transformation do not necessarily co-occur, nor do they guarantee democratization.³² The Romanian case supports this claim. The presence of small-scale economic dynamism within decrepit socialist structures suggests that modernization — defined narrowly as technological or economic change — can proceed in the absence of liberal institutional frameworks or coherent social policy.

27 Michel Freitag, *L’oubli de la société. Pour une théorie critique de la postmodernité* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2002).

28 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 28.

29 Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, (ed.), *Patterns of Modernity* (London: Pinter, 1987).

30 Jürgen Habermas, *The Past as Future* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1994).

31 Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

32 Marcus Kurtz and Andrew Barnes, “The political foundations of post-communist regimes: marketization, agrarian legacies, or international influences,” *Comparative Political Studies* 35, no. 5 (2002): 524-53. <https://journals.sagepub.com/toc/CPS/0/0>.

At the same time, these developments also indicate the failure of the teleological assumptions underpinning classical modernization theory. The notion that societies will naturally converge toward a Western liberal model is no longer tenable. As Blaney and Inayatullah have argued, this view overlooks the cultural heterogeneity of global transformations.³³ The reality on the ground in post-communist Romania is one of negotiated hybridity, where capitalist, socialist, and premodern forms overlap. The entrepreneurial use of industrial ruins is shaped not only by market logic but by institutional legacies, cultural memory, and the sheer availability of built space. Reading them within the “modern” paradigm, they could be both the expression of a point zero of an emerging modernity (shifting from a pre-modern state) and the expression of a reflexive, self-conscious modernity, one that has learned its lessons and is more aware of its dangers.

Conclusions

The repurposing of socialist factories is neither regression nor advancement, but a contingent adaptation. It resists easy classification: too improvised for high modernist planning, too material for postmodern irony, too individual for socialist collectivism, too hands on for the digital age. It reflects partially everything or, in Giddens terms, the “institutional reflexivity” of late modernity — where individuals and groups constantly reinterpret and reorganize their social contexts.³⁴

The informal reuse of socialist industrial space in Romania thus illuminates key tensions of the contemporary moment. It challenges the assumption that post-communist societies are simply moving along a linear path toward Western liberal modernity. Instead, it reveals a field of multiplicity, contingency, and negotiation — what Eisenstadt and others have theorized as “multiple modernities.” It also challenges the possibility to neatly align with shifts of paradigm affirmed in Western culture, as it can be read from multiple (any) paradigmatic angle.

The story of Romania’s industrial ruins is also a story of labor’s transformation, from centralized, ideologically charged collectives to atomized, entrepreneurial efforts. Yet these changes unfold within and against architectural forms designed for entirely different social arrangements. These forms persist, not only as material containers but as symbolic registers of competing visions of the good life: collectivist solidarity, capitalist freedom, artisanal self-reliance.

In this sense, the architectural realities of the post-communist city do more than reflect economic change; they make visible the contested terrain of modernity itself. As sites where utopia, nostalgia, and pragmatism converge, these reconfigured industrial platforms invite us to rethink the relationship between space, labor, and temporality. Far from being mere relics, they are active agents in the reconfiguration of post-communist life — monuments not to the end of history, but to its ongoing, uncertain unfolding.

In an exercise of intertwining discourses, the paper shows how the phenomenon of labor today — seen through the narrow lenses of small enterprises in big halls — can support in fact all kinds of interpretations attesting to what is perhaps a condition of the contemporary. Beyond modern, postmodern, alter-modern, pseudo-modern, and other paradigms we are in a perpetual search to make sense, to belong, to understand where we stand. At the same time, do these paradigms come in useful? Is the very definition of a new paradigm not the very demonstration of its own insufficiency? Is it not that “modern,” despite its transformations and derivations, has left an unfulfillable void that we schizophrenically try to fill? Devoid of the unique and the grand, we are left with its shells: make of them what you wish! Perhaps, what we firmly advance into is uncertainty, the incapacity and unwillingness to grasp the future.

33 David Blaney and Naeem Inayatullah, “Neo-modernization? IR and the inner life of modernization theory,” *European Journal of International Relations* 8 (2002): 103-37.

34 Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

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