

Planning Labour: Time and the Foundations of Industrial Socialism in Romania. By Alina-Sandra Cucu. *International Studies in Social History* 32. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2019. 266 pp.

The official political discourse of the Soviet Union celebrated workers as the engine of the communist locomotive. According to its leaders, the state and its representatives acted as guardians of the working class, guaranteeing workers' access to and the fair allocation of goods and services. *Planning Labour: Time and the Foundations of Industrial Socialism in Romania* tells a different, often contradictory story of a relationship between workers and the state. According to Cucu's narrative, to assure the rapid industrialization of post-war Romania, the state intentionally starved light industry and agriculture of labor, forcefully relocating workers to urban areas and thus turning them into the urban proletariat. To generate capital and bring the "hidden reserves" into the economic sphere as a way of boosting industrial economy, the state systematically sacrificed the living and working standards of its population by cutting wages and reducing consumption. In other words, before protecting the interests of the working class, socialist planners in Romania had to create it—a process that required plans, factories, and force.

Planning Labour draws attention to the transformation of the industrial city of Cluj in the early period of the communist takeover while appropriately placing its focus on the industrial factory as the terrain of molding not only the material foundation for the socialist economy but also workers' subjectivities to turn them into the "New Soviet Man" (see Stephen Kotkin's *Magnetic Mountain* [1995]). The historical material and analysis that Cucu has compiled into six chapters bring to the forefront the peculiar nature of the socialist industrialization and modernization of Romanian cities and the nation as whole. Romania underwent, between 1944 and 1955, brutal waves of collectivization, nationalization, proletarianization, and the corresponding transformation of the social fabric of the city and the countryside.

As Cucu observes, until 1945, the Communist party in Romania was feeble, but by 1947, its membership had skyrocketed. The political transformation underway further pushed for the centralization of the economic system, established new institutional and administrative branches, and reconfigured property and ownership rights. Moreover, after the communist takeover in 1948, the party initiated massive waves of nationalization which affected factories of national importance, extractive and mining industries, and the financial and transportation infrastructure (Chapter 1).

One of the central notions of the book is the primitive accumulation which characterized this stage in the evolution of industrial socialism. As the examples from the book illustrate, accumulation proceeded by dispossessing the agricultural sector on behalf of the growing state-owned industrial sector and systematically exploiting workers by setting low wages, imposing overtime labor regimes, and speeding up the rhythm of production. The drive for primitive accumulation turned socialist factories into the frontiers of extracting surplus-value from Romanian workers. Furthermore, the nationalization proved chaotic and uneven, leaving ample space for maneuvering by factory owners. Cucu recounts several stories of factories that managed to evade nationalization by deploying various strategies and networks. One of the cases she presents concerns a modest footwear manufacturer specializing in luxury shoes known as Guban Chemicals, which remained in private hands until 1951. Cucu's case study reveals how vague the boundaries between state, society, and market could be. The lack of experience and competence in running state institutions to manage industrial entities and informal networks of private owners and party-state representatives put the emerging governmental entities in challenging situations. As Cucu notes, "[t]he state investing in a privately owned factory and, on top of that, borrowing money from a private owner while controlling the banks, stretched the definition of what the 'socialist economy' was" (p.69).

The book posits working in early socialist Romania first and foremost as a question of wages and time. In the first years of socialist planning, the wages were so low that they hardly covered the basic necessities of workers who had left rural communities to resettle in urban centers and barely earned enough to survive in the industrial cities. This explains the escalating labor turnover rates during the period of the first five-year plan. According to Cucu, since the collective strikes and worker mobilization proved ineffective for raising wages and improving working conditions, frequent job hopping emerged as the central avenue of resistance for scattered workers (Chapter 2). Furthermore, the unsynchronized pace of industrialization and collectivization led to constant labor shortages in industrial production, as the agricultural reforms failed to free up and supply a large enough workforce for the new factories in the city.

Cucu convincingly demonstrates that the problems with industrial production were due to labor scarcity, shortages of raw materials, and broken tools and machinery. As she points out, "workers could see neither the logic of coming to work 'just to stare at the walls for days' nor the logic of working 16 hours a day at the end of the month for very low wages and no benefits" (p.92).

These troubles led to acute production crises and triggered the breakdown of labor regimes on the shopfloor, preventing the spread of skills and knowledge among inexperienced industrial workers and ultimately failing to deliver crucial increases in productivity.

As Cucu's findings show, 1950 was a period of "disastrous effects of rowdiness over production" (p.195), and this became the subject of a political struggle among various actors, including party representatives, factory managers, and ordinary workers. Cucu explores these ambivalent interactions from the bottom-up and illustrates that the actors who were collectively responsible for industrial modernization were, in fact, situated in a conflictual relationship with each other. While the party and state representatives were in search of better ways of guaranteeing the accomplishment of central plans, the cadres responsible for these tasks had no actual power over workers and failed to improve the production process.

At the same time, though the socialist system often sacrificed workers' living and social standards, workers still enjoyed more privileges than peasants, who toiled under constant physical self-exploitation. Party and state cadres, meanwhile, earned higher wages but lived under the constant threat of political destabilization and purges. Workers, in contrast, were relatively immune and resistant to external shocks. This position of relative security also meant that the state could not control workers' mobility, behavior, or general interests, which made it virtually impossible to plan labor.

If one wants to understand the complexities of planning practices within the working class of a socialist state, the particularity of centrally produced plans needs to be taken into consideration. This is the chief strength of Cucu's book. While writing at length about the myriad social and economic aspects of early socialism in Romania, she manages to zoom in with clarity and insight on the daily struggles of ordinary people, including emergent industrial workers, peasants, women, managers, and planners. She thus reconstructs the multivocal landscape of labor in a period of socialist transition. In her reading of centralized plans, they acquire a special kind of "authoritative" power to impose a new labor regime with new ways of managing time and enforcing discipline on the shopfloor. Such plans, however, required detailed, up-to-date ethnographic knowledge of specific factories, which the state did not always have. To theorize these and other main findings about the governance of a socialist state, Cucu draws on James Scott's theories concerning the standardization of schematized data and broadens Scott's theory of stateness as it applies to early socialist

Romania. In doing so, she emphasizes the importance of localized knowledge and contextualized practices when “seeing like a state” and deciding to plan labor productivity, production cycles, and the flow of knowledge and skills. As she concludes, the central fragility of socialist states lies in the inability of the factories “to become nodes of the state/labour/plan discipline logic” (p.178).

While including numerous theoretical approaches and grasping the main leitmotifs of socialist planning in the period between 1944 and 1955, *Planning Labour* offers a coherent narrative in which the topics and issues brought up in one chapter pave the way for an understanding of the complex issues discussed in the next one. Chapter 2, which discusses the chaotic displacement of labor forces and the impossibilities of socialist planning while also offering an impression of unpredictable and uncontrollable factory life is easily comprehensible in light of Chapter 1, which covers historical tensions and the inconsistencies in the process of turning Romania into an industrial socialist state and enforcing the politics of nationalization. Chapter 3 maps the Cluj workforce and attempts to grasp the diversity of the class backgrounds of people who belonged to it. In addition, the same chapter historicizes why it was impossible for early socialist cities to deal with the unprecedented population growth and why cities were unprepared to accommodate the workforce, which was in high demand.

The second part of the book pursues an epistemological analysis. The three chapters in the second part attempt to explain the knowledge infrastructure which existed in early socialist Romania and investigate emerging necessities for new types of knowledge that were required in order to “construct [...] new legibility structures,” turn labor “into an object of scientific and managerial knowledge,” and “transform [...] the state’s agents into skilful ethnographers” (p.148).

However, the book lacks a discussion of the authoritative aspects of socialist regime-formation and the methods and/or practices that they entailed. More specifically, when discussing the strategies that were used to discipline and control workers and the workers’ subsequent resistance to the state apparatus, Cucu seems to overlook the drives that energized people to consider themselves part of the “great causes.” In their exploration of the social bonding methods in Nazism and Stalinism, Sheila Fitzpatrick and Alf Lüdtke focus on the socially inclusive and exclusive practices that were so endemic for these regimes (“Energizing the Everyday” in *Beyond Totalitarianism* [2009]). *Planning Labour* dismisses this layer of social bonding, which also worked as a way of mobilizing workers, increasing their productivity, and enlisting them in the parade towards a better future.

Planning Labour is a thematically expansive book which should not be reduced to its findings, albeit engaging and valuable in their own right, about early socialist Romania. The book is a welcome addition to labor history, as it manages to compile and integrate disparate, narrow discussions, often scattered (as scholars in the field know all too well) across countless articles, books, and monographies. Refreshingly, in this work, socialist accumulation, labor coercion, workers' agency, 'Taylorist and Fordist systems of factory management, and central planning and rhythms of production are explored collectively and with tremendous lucidity. With its thick historical materials, far-reaching findings, and intriguing methodological approach, *Planning Labour* is a great read for students, scholars, and researchers curious to read a bottom-up exploration of workers' everyday histories, an ethnographic study of socialist realism, and an examination of the complex political program of Soviet rule.

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