

*Original Article*

Commuting of rural labor force in Socialist Romania. Spatial mismatch and mixed housing regime

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Abstract

Housing production in socialist Romania evolved through a continuous interaction between industrialization and urbanization, in which commuting played a key role. Accelerated industrialization required significantly more labor force than what urbanization rates were able to provide. In this context, commuting emerged as an institutionalized solution to reconciling accelerated industrial expansion with the slower pace of urbanization, enabling daily mobility between rural settlements and urban industrial centers. Commuting was not only a spatial practice, but a core economic development mechanism to sustain socialist production built upon two main elements: first, as a response to a spatial mismatch between workers' homes and workplaces and, second, on the mixed housing regime characterized by state-built urban housing, self-built rural dwellings, and controlled mobility.

In this paper I analyze commuting during socialism as a product of planned economic priorities and housing production strategy by taking into consideration the spatial mismatch between homes and workplaces and the mixed housing regime. Additionally, I seek to create a conceptual bridge with the practice of commuting in post-socialist Romania, in order to highlight that the temporary solution of the socialist economic model became a permanent tool to ensure workforce availability in the post-socialism era. While commuting persisted, the essence shifted: from a temporary state-mediated economic development strategy to an individualized response to capitalist development strategies. My study draws on sociological studies from socialist era, official statistical data and historical interpretations.

Keywords: *commuting; rural labor force; spatial mismatch; mixed housing regime; socialist Romania; post-socialism.*

1. Introduction

The socio-economic development of Romania in the twentieth century was marked by repeated structural transformations, influenced by the economic regimes in place (i.e. market economy and centrally-planned economy). At the beginning of the century, Romania was characterized by a predominantly rural social structure, with limited industrial development (Burlec, 2024) concentrated in a few urban centers such as

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Bucharest and Ploiești (Ronnås, 1982; Enyedi, 1996). The rural population was predominantly engaged in semi-feudal labor and social relations, described as “neo-serfdom,” reflecting a hybrid socio-economic order with both feudalism and capitalist elements (i.e. high dependency of feudal lords; variable number of mandatory days of work (in Romanian: *zile de clacă*) for the owner of the land; semi-developed market economy; etc.) (Dobrogeanu-Gherea, 1911). The interwar period was marked by territorial annexations from 1918 of regions comprised by neighboring countries (i.e. Austro-Hungary, Bulgaria, USSR) that fed uneven development across Romania’s regions, with more advanced industrial centers located in regions formerly under Austro-Hungarian administration, while the territory comprising the old Romanian Kingdom remained rather under-industrialized (Turnock, 1970). After the Second World War, during Romania’s socialist regime, an extensive process of industrialization started, which reshaped the economic structure of the country (Høivik, 1974). Industrial expansion was centrally planned and prioritized, leading to the development of new industrial centers (Ianoș et al., 2010) across the Romanian territory. However, this accelerated industrial growth was not mirrored by an equivalent pace of urbanization. Thus, a structural imbalance emerged between the demand for labor in urban-industrial centers and the labor force medium of residency, which in certain cases remained rural (Enyedi, 1996; Szelenyi, 1996; Petrovici, 2017).

In this context, commuting became a key practice in addressing two dissonant realities: rapid industrial development and slower urbanization rates. For the purpose of this paper, I understand commuting as the daily movement of workers between their place of residence and their place of employment (Lyons & Chatterjee, 2008), when the two are located in two different towns.

During socialism, commuting functioned as an institutionalized solution that facilitated the absorption of rural labor in industrial production without investing the funds required to accommodate the labor force in newly built urban-industrialized municipalities. This practice was the cost-efficient option for the Romanian socialist state (Chang and Brada, 2006; Zhang, 2008; Petrovici, 2013), and a key component of the mixed housing system in place during that time (Vincze, 2022).

In this article I discuss commuting under socialism as a structural mechanism inherent in the logic of planned economic development, at the intersection of industrialization, housing policy and spatial organization. Specifically, I analyze commuting in relation to two processes: a mixed housing regime characterized by the coexistence of state urban housing and privately owned and managed rural dwellings; and, a spatial mismatch between the location of workplaces and the residency of rural labor force from newly developed urban industrial centers. I look at how these two processes associated with commuting are integrated into the state socialist system which seeks to sustain high levels of industrialization while postponing the costs associated with housing of rural labor force newly integrated in the industrial processes. In the final part of this paper, I seek to understand transformations in commuting in post-socialist and capitalist Romania. While the economic system changed fundamentally after 1989, commuting did not disappear, but rather persisted and evolved in tandem with the capitalist economy. Thus, I argue that from a merely temporary solution springing from the economic priorities of the socialist regime, commuting became an embedded mechanism of the capitalist regime, as a practice that exploits geographical uneven development in order to produce greater private profits. I discuss the structural conditions that produced

commuting and its effects drawing on sociological studies from the socialist period, official statistical data from post-socialism and various historical interpretations.

2. Analytical Framework and Methods

Given the historical conditions outlined above, the next step is to discuss the processes that facilitated the emergence and perpetration of commuting. In this paper I approach commuting as an intrinsic component within socialism shaped and sustained by the mixed housing regime and the spatial mismatch present in socialist Romania.

First, the notion of a mixed housing regime proposed by Vincze (2022) represents a scheme of analysis that takes into account two different forms of housing provision: on one hand, state-provided housing within the main urban centers, and on the other hand, privately owned and managed dwellings, common especially in rural areas. This reality served as an element that produced, and later sustained, socialist Romania's commuting system through postponing the investment in state housing within industrialized centers. Secondly, the spatial mismatch between workplaces and dwellings (Wilson, 1987; 2009) of the rural labor force functions as an element that contributes to the creation and perpetration of commuting within the socialist regime, as I will later show. Thus, commuting under socialism can be best understood through the interaction of these two processes. In this study I discuss the structural conditions that generated and sustained commuting in socialist Romania from a qualitative perspective. Additionally, I discuss its echoes in post-socialism.

A central component of the study consists of the analysis of sociological research from the socialist period, which provides detailed empirical insights into labor mobility and housing organization. For this purpose, I selected academic articles published in the socialist era based on their reliability through their assumed academic standards which includes quality of both qualitative and quantitative data in terms of commuting during socialism. Second, I selected articles based on their diversity of the discussed examples of commuting in various industrial centers. Moreover, the articles availability through personal or public databases served as an indirect criterion in the selection of articles, as the options were limited to some personal and public databases that include articles discussing commuting during socialism.

Sociological studies during socialism were produced within the institutional and ideological framework of the socialist state, and concentrated on understanding and managing labor force dynamics, including issues such as workforce attraction, retention and fluctuation (Hillinger, 1953; Marcovici, 1954; Biji & Trebici, 1958; Mihiu, 1970; 1971). Rural labor force commuting in the urban industrial centers attracted the attention of sociologists and researchers in various municipalities and areas such as Pitești - with Pitești Wood Exploitation and Industrialization Plant (Chelcea, 1973), Slatina (Băcănar, Petre & Băcănar, 1978), Brașov (Viitorul Social, 1977) or at national level (Viitorul Social, 1977). These sources provide quantitative and qualitative data regarding commuting routes within certain areas, including the scale of commuting, distances traveled, transportation means, and the socio-demographic characteristics of commuters. For this paper I discuss data from various articles

In addition, I draw from several scholars to look at the structural imbalance between industrialization and urbanization (Enyedi, 1996; Ronnås, 1989; Szelenyi, 1996; Petrovici, 2017) and the lack of concentration of development in rural areas (Ronnås, 1989). In my analysis I consider these materials as reflections of empirical realities and economic priorities of the socialist state.

3. Mixed Housing Regime

The mixed housing regime during Romanian state socialism is described by Eniko Vincze in her article “The Mixed Housing Order in the Romanian State Socialism” as the method through which the “housing production, exchange, and consumption is organized and what are the roles, responsibilities, and activities of different actors in this structure” (Vincze, 2022, 52). The concept of “mixed housing order” describes a system shaped by a property regime that fostered state property along with personal property of dwellings), as well as a housing exchange and distribution regime coordinated either through state enterprises or through money exchange (Vincze, 2022). The concept used by Eniko Vincze (2022) is a robust concept that applies rather in the urban space, as the discussion around private housing that leads to accumulation and privileges seems relevant primarily in the urban context. Rural housing realities are only tangentially covered by the concept, as they are personal/private, and leading to accumulation and privileges only in isolated cases, generally in towns included in the process of suburbanization (Petrovici, Poenaru & Mare, 2023). Thus, I propose a theory extension that includes the rural housing realities that were conveniently structurally exploited by the socialist regime in order to postpone the production costs of the industrial sector that employed commuters (Chang and Brada, 2006; Zhang, 2008; Petrovici, 2013).

Housing in socialist Romania was shaped by specific conditions of each decade, yet socialism did not eliminate inequality (Szelenyi, 1996), instead it reorganized it (Soaita & Dewilde, 2020). During the first two decades of socialism (1950s-1960s), housing relied primarily on personal/private property in terms of housing stock, while in the 1970s and 1980s the state became the main provider, around 80% of new housing in the 1970s and 93% in the 1980s was state-built flats (Soaita & Dewilde, 2020).

The mode of production plays a significant role in shaping the process of urbanization (Szelenyi, 1996, 289), translating into an imbalance between fast rates of industrialization and the lack of accommodation availability for the labor force employed in urban areas. During socialism, housing production was predominantly concentrated in urban industrial centers (Szelenyi, 1996; Petrovici, 2017), where the state built apartment buildings for the new industrial workforce (Enyedi, 1996). At the same time, rural housing remained outside the state housing logic until the late 1980s (Ronnås, 1989). Dwellings in rural areas were privately managed, built and maintained at the household level, rather ignored by state housing policies (Ronnås, 1989). This differential housing reality was integrated into the socialist logic that sustained urbanization, even at slower rates, while the regime lost sight of rural systematization that was supposed to provide state housing with decent housing conditions for rural dwellers (Enyedi, 1996; Ronnås, 1989).

Housing distribution in urban centers was centrally planned and tightly controlled by the state, as part of its broader industrialization and urbanization plans (Vais, 2018). Thus, the housing production was concentrated in the main industrial centers (Szelenyi, 1996; Petrovici, 2017) in order to supply the required labor force. However, given the context of imbalance between industrialization and urbanization, a greater demand for housing appeared, which was influenced also by the integration of rural labor force in industrial processes of production (Vais, 2018) through commuting. The demand of housing was transposed in long waiting lists, overcrowding, and prioritization based on political, professional or demographic criteria (i.e. skilled industrial workers, state employees, or families deemed socially “productive”) (Vais, 2018). In other words, the ultimate goal for

a significant part of the rural labor force was to migrate to the industrialized centers and to become residents and receive/acquire housing within the same municipality as their workplace, as between 1966 and 1987 around 7% of rural dwellers migrated to the main urban centers (Turnock, 1991). The housing distribution was done through a distribution regime coordinated either through state enterprises or through money exchange (Vincze, 2022). Many commuters became residents of the cities in which they worked through the state enterprises path of housing distribution (Lascu & Opris, 1979; Troc, 2003; Szelenyi, 1996; Petrovici, 2017; Enyedi, 1996; Vais, 2018). In this context commuting remained an important mechanism of postponing housing production for a certain period, while still guaranteeing the availability of the required workplace for the industrial centers. However, the labor force fluctuated in order to fulfill their needs (i.e. housing, commuting, higher payment, etc.) and this represented an issue for the factories (Cernea, Popescu & Ene, 1971; Hillinger, 1953; Marcovici, 1954; Biji & Trebici, 1958; Mihiu, 1970; 1971) that sought to retain the workforce in a context when human resources were rather limited.

The mixed housing regime is essentially distinguishing between two types of housing based on the type of property, construction and distribution, state operated housing described above, and private/personal owned and managed dwellings which I will describe next. The private/personal managed dwellings were present both in rural and urban areas, yet in certain rural areas this was the only type of housing. Both during socialism and in post-socialism, in the case of rural dwellers, private housing does not mean superior per se, and it does not create accumulation and privileges (with the notable exception of suburban municipalities that were integrated partially in the urban dynamics, see Petrovici, Poenaru & Mare, 2023). It rather means precarious living conditions, lacking main facilities (running water, sewage system, gas, etc.) (Soaita, 2014), thus, a controlled form of social marginalization. This discrepancy of services and infrastructure between urban and rural settlements is indistinctly recognized by Romanian President of the Socialist Republic, Nicolae Ceaușescu, who promised to the rural dwellers “a dignified and civilized life” (Ronnås, 1989), to be achieved through the Communist Party’s plan for rural systematization (including building of flats, running water, sewage system, gas, electricity, etc.) However, the systematization of rural areas was postponed by the financial crisis faced in the 1980s by the socialist regime (Turnock, 1991), thus, the rural systematization that was supposed to provide decent housing conditions also for rural dwellers never came.

Vincze’s (2022) concept of mixed housing order assumes that private/personally owned and managed housing translates in post-socialism in privileges that leads to primitive accumulation. Yet, the mixed housing system produced disadvantages and inequalities in a manner rather unforeseen by the concept, as in the case of rural dwellers, private/personally managed housing are transposed in lack of basic infrastructure, such as running water, sewage or gas (Soaita, 2014) inherited in post-socialism, as the rural systematization never took place in most rural municipalities (Turnock, 1991). By contrast, the urban workforce was rather privileged, dwelling in flats produced by the socialist state which they managed to buy in post-socialism under preferential conditions (Marcuse, 1996). The mixed housing order did not imply a balance between different forms of property, but rather hid a structural inequality between urban and rural living conditions in the context when the socialist state only invested in housing mostly in urban areas, while the rural labor force was mostly left to self-manage their housing when they were not eligible for a flat in the urban industrial center. While urban residents benefited

from state investment and relatively improved standards of living, rural dwellers were subjected to forms of marginalization that were not formally recognized within the state policies of the socialist regime. In this context, private housing in rural areas did not represent accumulation or privilege during socialism and post-socialism (with the exception of sub-urban municipalities) but rather translated into an infrastructural deficit and social disadvantage.

4. Spatial Mismatch

The second element that shaped and sustained commuting during socialism in Romania is the spatial mismatch between workplaces and homes of the rural labor force. In this section I will discuss the spatial mismatch concept proposed by Wilson (1987; 2009) and the way it translated into the daily reality of rural workers in socialist Romania.

William Julius Willson discusses the spatial mismatch concept in “The Truly Disadvantaged. The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy” (1987) and in “More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City” (2009), describing it as “term that social scientists use to capture the relationship between inner-city residents and (suburban) jobs: the opportunities for employment are geographically disconnected from the people who need the jobs” (Wilson, 2009, 33). The concept also captures situations where “people who live in areas of concentrated poverty are both physically and socially isolated from jobs” (Wilson, 2009, 59). Thus, spatial mismatch appears in a context of economic restructuring, and involves residential segregation, transit barriers and social isolation (Wilson, 1987; 2009). Wilson proposed this concept in the capitalist American context, yet rural dwellers in socialist Romania were facing similar deprivations in terms of workplace access, marginalization and transit barriers.

The rapid industrialization pursued by the socialist regime generated a significant expansion of employment opportunities in urban industrial centers, while rural areas did not benefit from the same measures (Ronnås, 1989). As a result, a structural discrepancy emerged between the spatial distribution of workplaces and the labor market integration of rural dwellers. This climate becomes significantly exacerbated by transit barriers encountered by the rural labor force and described by Chelcea (1973), Băcănaru, Petre & Băcănaru (1978), or the general analysis of commuting at national level undertaken by the journal *Viitorul Social* (1977).

Working in urban industrial centers while living in rural areas has been described in the literature as incomplete urbanization, referring to situations in which industrial job creation exceeds the capacity of cities to absorb and accommodate the labor force (Petrovici, 2017). Another concept used for the same phenomenon is under-urbanization, which highlights the prioritization of industrial growth over urban development (Szelenyi, 1996). However, the essence of both concepts and also of spatial mismatch is that commuters are an unintegrated population.

In this context, Romania’s spatial mismatch produced and sustained commuting, which emerged as the primary tool to provide the required labor force, coming from rural areas, in the industrial sector. Daily commuting between rural settlements and urban workplaces thus became a means to access the rural labor force in a context when investments in production did not concentrate in rural areas. This arrangement contributed to the reproduction of spatial inequalities, as rural areas remained structurally underdeveloped, while urban centers continued to concentrate resources and investment.

I argue that the spatial mismatch between workplaces and homes of the labor force can be best understood through the lens of commuting. However, commuting was a rather marginal topic in the academic debate, while in terms of labor force integration in the economy it represented a key component.

A study conducted by the journal *Viitorul Social* during the socialist period classified commuting patterns according to the place of residence and the location of employment in four categories: commuting between rural municipalities; commuting from urban to rural areas; commuting between urban centers; and commuting from rural to urban areas (*Viitorul Social*, 1977).

Commuting between rural municipalities was quantitatively marginal, such commuting patterns were exceptional and did not constitute a central concern in socialist research. Notable exceptions existed, for instance, in Braşov County this form of daily mobility involved a very limited number of individuals, whereas in Timiş County it was relatively more pronounced (*Viitorul Social*, 1977). Those engaged in commuting between rural municipalities typically originated from predominantly agricultural villages and were employed in villages with a mixed agricultural-industrial profile (*Viitorul Social*, 1977).

Commuting from urban to rural areas involved a small proportion of the workforce, yet it attracted considerable attention from researchers. This form of mobility was generally associated with highly qualified professionals (i.e. doctors, teachers, and agricultural engineers) whose expertise was required in rural areas. A study conducted by Ghidu (1975) in Vaslui County in 1975 identified approximately 3,250 individuals commuting daily to rural municipalities, primarily employed in agriculture, education and healthcare, representing nearly one-third of the county's total population. Women accounted for around 30% of commuters in medicine and agriculture, while their share exceeded 60% in the education sector (Ghidu, 1975). Commuting from urban to rural areas was characterized by long travel times, often totaling around four hours per day, including delays (Ghidu, 1975).

Commuting between urban areas received minimal attention and remained underexplored in the sociological studies from socialist period.

Commuting from rural to urban areas was the most widespread path of commuting in socialist Romania and it is closely linked to the industrial development of the rural areas and their proximity to the urban industrial centers (Băcănar, Petre & Băcănar, 1978). Geographical factors such as topography, proximity, transportation infrastructure, and the occupational specialization of the rural population played a central role in shaping commuting flows (*Viitorul Social*, 1977). For example, approximately 36% of the workforce at the Piteşti Wood Exploitation and Industrialization Plant consisted of commuters (Chelcea, 1973). In Buzău County, around 50,000 individuals were engaged yearly in commuting activities in 1977 (Băcănar, Petre & Băcănar, 1978). More detailed data are available for Braşov County, where 26 rural settlements were functionally integrated with eight urban-industrial centers, generating the highest commuter volumes within a range of 30 kilometers. Among labor-supplying localities, commuters accounted for approximately 37% of the population in Sînpetru, 39% in Hărman, and 19% in Cristian (*Viitorul Social*, 1977).

An additional dimension of industrialization through the lens of commuting is related to the movement across county boundaries, referred to in the literature as “exodynamic flows” (in Romanian: *fluxuri exodinamice*) (Băcănar, Petre & Băcănar, 1978). This path of commuting was relatively uncommon and may be understood as a particular variant of

commuting from rural county border areas to the urban industrial centers, especially in areas with limited industrial development. As noted by Băcănu, Petre, and Băcănu (1978), exodynamic flows have the following characteristics: the place of residence generally offers few employment opportunities, while a more economically developed locality with a diversified labor market is accessible within a reasonable travel time, facilitated by favorable geographic conditions and transport infrastructure. Exodynamic flows were documented in a number of counties, including Bacău, Botoșani, Buzău, Dolj, Satu Mare, Teleorman, and Vâlcea (Viitorul Social, 1977). In Buzău County, for example, 17,232 individuals were commuting to workplaces located in other counties in 1977 (Viitorul Social, 1977). The primary destinations for these commuters were Bucharest (25.4%), Brașov (22%), Prahova (16.5%), and Brăila (9%) (Băcănu, Petre & Băcănu, 1978). With regard to the sectoral distribution of employment, approximately 40% of these commuters were employed in industry, while around 37% worked in construction, the remainder being distributed across other economic branches (Băcănu, Petre & Băcănu, 1978).

Commuting paths discussed above shows that workplaces were located mostly in urban areas, while rural areas were mostly providers of labor force for those urban centers. This context describes perfectly the spatial mismatch between workplaces and homes of the rural labor force in socialist Romania.

5. Commuting in Socialist Romania

Mixed housing regime and spatial mismatch shaped and sustained commuting in Romania during socialism. Rural labor force participation on the labor market was conditioned most of the time by daily commuting. The main paths of commuting were: private means of transportation (i.e. bikes, cars, walking, etc.); public railway means of transportation (i.e. train); public road transportation (i.e. public buses); employer road transportation (i.e. buses assured by the employer). For a more facile understanding of the share of each means of each means of transportation for the labor force and in the absence of clear national statistics, I will discuss the case of Pitești Wood Exploitation and Industrialization Plant in 1972 (Chelcea, 1973).

Commuting during socialism included a segment of the commuting population that relied on personal means of transportation. Bicycles and motorcycles were the most frequently used, with private automobiles remaining scarce. At the Pitești Wood Exploitation and Industrialization Plant, roughly 15% of workers commuted using privately owned vehicles (Chelcea, 1973).

Commuting by train was strongly influenced by the railway infrastructure in both the workplace and municipality of residency. At the Pitești Wood Exploitation and Industrialization Plant, around 11% of employees travelled by train, with an average commuting distance of approximately 45 kilometers (Chelcea, 1973).

Public road transport consisted of buses operating fixed routes and programs free to use publicly for a fee. These fixed routes were not formally tied to specific factories or enterprises but to municipalities. For instance, bus lines operating between one specific city and another town were collecting workers on the route for all the enterprises existent in the city. In the case of the Pitești Wood Exploitation and Industrialization Plant, approximately 28% of workers relied on local bus services provided by I.T.A (Auto Transportation Company), commuting an average distance of roughly 25 kilometers (Chelcea, 1973).

Some employers organized transportation for their work force through contractual arrangements with state-owned transport providers. These agreements, referred to as “conventions” (in Romanian: *convenții*), ensured regular and dedicated transport links between industrial sites and specific rural settlements with high concentrations of commuters (Chelcea, 1973). At the Pitești Wood Exploitation and Industrialization Plant, employer-arranged transportation was synchronized with shift schedules to ensure workers arrived before the start of shifts at 6:00, 14:00, and 22:00 and were returned home afterward. Such services connected the factory with five villages (Uda, Mărghia, Topoloveni, Valea Mărului, and Livezeni) and accounted for the daily commute of approximately 46% of the workforce in 1972 (Chelcea, 1973).

The above classification reflects only the primary mode of transportation used for commuting, in practice many workers combined multiple means of transportation (for example bus and bicycle). This plurality of means of transportation implies long commuting times, as there is additional transfer time.

Commuting was discussed mainly from a time perspective and on this topic I will cite multiple articles, focused on various regions. By the mid-1970s, commuting time was shaped by distance, the availability (and reliability) of transport services, the condition of infrastructure, and the efficiency of transport management (Chelcea, 1973; *Viitorul Social*, 1977). In some cases, waiting times reached up to an hour, significantly extending the overall duration of daily travel (Chelcea, 1973). Additionally, the topography of the region played a role, along with the aforementioned factors, in defining recruitment zones based on acceptable commuting times. The reported commuting time was between one hour of travel, while extreme cases involved daily commuting times of five to six hours when waiting, transfers being included (*Viitorul Social*, 1977; Băcănar, Petre & Băcănar, 1978).

At the Pitești Wood Exploitation and Industrialization Plant, around 60% of commuters required less than one hour to reach their workplace, whereas 18% travelled between one and two hours. Smaller shares experienced longer commutes: 9% between two and three hours, 6% between three and four hours, and 7% between four and six hours (Chelcea, 1973). By comparison, in Buzău County approximately 65% of commuters travelled under one hour, 15.5% between one and two hours, 7% between two and three hours, and nearly 12% more than three hours daily (Băcănar, Petre & Băcănar, 1978).

The commuting conditions described in the sociological articles from socialist period in various counties (Argeș, Brașov, Brăila, Buzău, Prahova, etc.) and overall, at the national level varied considerably depending on the means of transportation. Workers travelling by bicycle or motorcycle faced harsh conditions during cold seasons. Commuters that were using trains or buses faced mostly overcrowding. Insufficient transport capacity for morning shifts (i.e. 6 a.m. to 2 p.m.) leading to congestion in terms of transportation and workplace attendance was reported in two articles (Chelcea, 1973; Ghidu, 1975).

In terms of sectors of economy industrial production and construction absorbed the majority of commuters, while tertiary-sector employment accounted for only a marginal share of commuting workers during the socialist period (*Viitorul Social*, 1977; Chelcea, 1973).

The commuting workforce was relatively young, contributing to the aging of the labor force employed in the rural localities (Băcănar, Petre & Băcănar, 1978). The young commuter labor force sought permanent migration to urban-industrial centers (Chelcea, 1973). The commuting labor force was composed predominantly by male, while

women were more likely to remain engaged in agricultural labor in their hometowns (Chelcea, 1973). Consequently, rural agricultural labor became increasingly feminized and aged, whereas the commuting workforce in industry and construction remained young and male (Băcănar, Petre & Băcănar, 1978).

Commuters reported physical exhaustion and chronic fatigue as the most frequent consequences of commuting (*Viitorul Social*, 1977). Additionally, commuters often experienced weak integration in both their place of residence and their place of employment (Szelenyi, 1996; Petrovici, 2017). Long commuting hours, extended workweeks, and engagement in informal agricultural activities at home (i.e. cultivating vegetables or raising livestock) contributed to the limited participation in community life in both localities, highlighting a pattern of social marginality shaped by time constraints, mobility demands, and economic necessity (Petrovici, 2017).

6. Bridge Over Time. Commuting in Post-socialism

In the post-socialist period, Romania underwent a neoliberal process of economic reorganization, characterized by privatization, deindustrialization, and mass layoffs, processes which reshaped its economic profile. The Romanian economy faced various episodes of contraction with significant social costs (Țoc, 2018), yet along the way managed to attract global capital, dynamic that transformed it into a strongly dependent on foreign capital market economy (Nölke and Vliegenthart, 2009; Ban 2016; Georgescu, 2021). However, Romanian development model was a rather polarized model built around several “growth poles” (Benedek, Varvari & Litan, 2019), companies with global capital concentrates around eight main poles in which more than 50% of the country’s GDP was produced in 2017 (Cristea et al., 2017). Concentrating employment opportunities in several centers defines a type of uneven development (Harvey, 2005; Smith, 2008; Vincze, 2023), especially due to the fact that companies and, therefore, the jobs are concentrated in certain areas around big cities. In addition, spatial mismatch exacerbated in the capitalist context as rural low-skilled and unskilled workers are located in different localities than the ones in which companies and jobs concentrate. The spatial mismatch was translated into commuting for a significant part of the rural population unable to find jobs in their town/village of residency.

After the fall of socialism, a detailed picture on picture of commuting based on medium of residency or means of transportation is absent. Nevertheless, state operated commuting declined during the years of privatization, deindustrialization, and mass layoffs faced by the state-owned factories and companies. After privatization, commuting was rather individualized, implying self-managed commuting through personal or public means of transportation or provided collectively at the company level through private transportation companies (as part of the efforts of the newly set up companies in Romania to attract cheaper labor force). In terms of commuters, the numbers decreased from an estimated 1.25 million commuters in the early 1990s to 825,000 in 2002, followed by a modest increase to 961,000 by 2011 (Cristea et al., 2017). A blurry picture of commuting is penciled by the 2021 Romanian census.

The 2021 Romanian census does not explicitly measure commuting yet working in another town than the one of residency represents a category that includes commuting labor force (which can be divided into daily commuters or weekly commuters), work from home (when the workplace is located in a different city/town), additionally, it may include workers for involved in daily travelling for their work (such as drivers, sales

representatives, etc.). However, commuting is the main category contained by working in another towns than the one of residency, based on the evolution of commuting during post-socialism related to the creation of poles of development (Cristea et al., 2017).

In order to discuss the structural dynamic of labor force working in a different town than the one of residency I extract two tables from the 2021 Romanian census. Table 1 shows data on employed resident population by the geographical location of the workplace, by sex, and medium of residency. Table 2 shows data on employed resident population by the county of residency. Both tables attached contribute to the understanding of de facto state of commuting in capitalist Romania.

As Table 1 shows based on the Romanian census 2021 data, there were 7.69 million individuals active on the labor market, out of which 5.44 million worked in their locality of residence, while the remaining part, over 1.9 million people, work in a different town than the one of residency, over 313,000 individuals worked outside Romania (and left in the past 12 months), and 110,872 reported having no stable workplace. In terms of gender men slightly outnumber women in the labor force and are more likely to work outside their locality of residence, including abroad. The figures of people working in a different locality than the one of residency may include commuters, but also employees that are working from home.

Table 1. Employed resident population by the geographical location of the workplace, by sex, medium of residence as of December 1, 2021

Gender and Residency	Total employed population	Workplace located in:								Without a Job
		Town of residency	Different town than the one of residency			Different county than the one of residency			Other country	
			Total	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural		
ROMANIA										
Total Romania	7689171	5443548	1230778	970889	259889	590513	529060	61453	313460	110872
Men	4152713	2779761	703533	555513	148020	368583	330697	37886	208274	92562
Women	3536458	2663787	527245	415376	111869	221930	198363	23567	105186	18310
URBAN										

Total Urban	4453915	3779718	291641	173631	118010	250615	221479	29136	91234	40707
Men	2258322	1852418	163563	99844	63719	149758	131575	18183	59458	33125
Women	2195593	1927300	128078	73787	54291	100857	89904	10953	31776	7582
RURAL										
Total Rural	3235256	1663830	939137	797258	141879	339898	307581	32317	222226	70165
Men	1894391	927343	539970	455669	84301	218825	199122	19703	148816	59437
Women	1340865	736487	399167	341589	57578	121073	108459	12614	73410	10728

Source: Romanian Census, 2021 - Table 5.16.

According to the data presented in Table 1, the active population is slightly concentrated in urban areas, approximately 4.45 million people, while 3.24 million live in rural areas. Urban labor force tends to work more in their city of residence, contrary, rural labor force work in a different locality. Moreover, over 1.3 million people from both urban and rural areas work in a different locality, while 220,000 people work outside of Romania, indicating that labor mobility is a rural phenomenon, as Table 1 shows. Working in a different town (within the county, in a different county or in a divergent country) than the one of residency is rather characteristic for men from rural areas. Women tend to work primarily in their town of residency, yet women living in rural areas are relatively prone to work in a different town than the one of residency than women living in urban areas.

While women are overall less represented in rural employment, those residing in rural areas are relatively more mobile than their urban counterparts, although women in both settings tend to work primarily in their locality of residence. Moreover, women from urban areas are underrepresented in the jobless category.

The 2021 Romanian census indicates that working in a different town than residency is a practice more common for rural residents, especially for men. Additionally, men from rural areas are more likely to work in different towns from different counties than the one of residency, also, outside Romania and are less likely to be jobless. On the other hand, women tend to work more in the town of residency and are underrepresented in working in a different county than the one of residency and in the jobless category.

The pattern of commuting between towns of the same county exists in all counties, yet in counties that neighbor counties of the main cities (i.e. București, Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, Iași) an additional layer that consists of commuting in a different county. The

following table shows the figures of commuting in each county, highlighting the major role played by the main cities in terms of absorbing the labor force from neighboring counties.

Table 2. Employed resident population by the geographical location of the workplace, by county of residence as of December 1, 2021

County of residency	Total employed population	Workplace located in:								Without a Job
		Town of residency	Different town than the one of residency			Different county than the one of residency			Other country	
			Total	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural		
Alba	137135	93683	30420	26057	4363	7847	7058	789	3941	1244
Arad	173921	122767	38084	31781	6303	5707	4879	828	5404	1959
Arges	242400	149211	71053	54187	16866	14482	13222	1260	4988	2666
Bacau	208742	138775	34583	29274	5309	10533	9234	1299	20106	4745
Bihor	231771	153790	60792	46162	14630	4976	4377	599	9355	2858
Bistrita- Nasaud	121328	81626	20274	15360	4914	5880	5313	567	10140	3408
Botosani	134003	90708	13010	10307	2703	8239	7488	751	17821	4225
Braila	104375	82471	9431	7411	2020	7434	7024	410	3796	1243
Brasov	237591	177494	46474	37141	9333	7979	7195	784	3765	1879
Buzau	143359	97049	27515	22317	5198	12800	11766	1034	4618	1377
Calarasi	104570	65023	9120	6125	2995	25814	23614	2200	3882	731

Caras-Severin	87847	61184	12017	9141	2876	6196	5831	365	7408	1042
Cluj	318759	237342	66419	50578	15841	5891	5072	819	5054	4053
Constanta	276059	202374	48217	40232	7985	6196	5594	602	12532	6740
Covasna	76882	51567	12662	9735	2927	7569	6341	1228	4024	1060
Dambovita	191220	95394	45637	35195	10442	39662	35130	4532	7621	2906
Dolj	216087	165634	33458	27047	6411	8199	7473	726	6480	2316
Galati	182083	142114	17750	14317	3433	7626	7140	486	11602	2991
Giurgiu	104513	59523	6044	3289	2755	34774	30364	4410	1899	2273
Gorj	119686	77089	26558	21980	4578	10193	9565	628	4158	1688
Harghita	115701	78702	22606	17573	5033	3985	3576	409	8312	2096
Hunedoara	139873	97232	28454	24287	4167	7547	7013	534	4990	1650
Ialomita	90916	54200	11643	8663	2980	21180	15978	5202	3250	643
Iasi	288883	218331	46134	39675	6459	7878	7107	771	12468	4072
Ilfov	284353	139352	20432	10824	9608	119606	118128	1478	1809	3154
Maramures	174089	120611	33919	28116	5803	5399	4760	639	9667	4493
Mehedinti	77982	59503	9035	7146	1889	5605	5178	427	3101	738
Mures	201135	136138	44145	34489	9656	8585	7349	1236	9432	2835

Neamt	155322	104441	27670	19410	8260	8472	7573	899	10936	3803
Olt	135459	90752	23906	19945	3961	13975	12870	1105	5201	1625
Prahova	290236	160573	83202	61464	21738	34512	31277	3235	7020	4929
Salaj	81302	54832	15309	10872	4437	5798	4615	1183	3684	1679
Satu Mare	133935	91869	20698	16565	4133	4024	3348	676	14361	2983
Sibiu	167590	125667	33629	29567	4062	4330	3837	493	2737	1227
Suceava	212132	140809	35845	27188	8657	6509	5813	696	21329	7640
Teleorman	110951	68868	12505	9452	3053	25015	23197	1818	3505	1058
Timis	300585	217228	67408	55376	12032	4309	3842	467	8928	2712
Tulcea	76958	58922	7486	5759	1727	4556	4306	250	5055	939
Valcea	126898	85013	24220	19395	4825	10468	9655	813	5464	1733
Vaslui	125620	90468	11417	8857	2560	8736	8271	465	12218	2781
Vrancea	107541	73133	20753	17786	2967	5337	4828	509	6000	2318
Bucuresti	879379	832086	844	844	-	36690	22859	13831	5399	4360

Source: Romanian Census, 2021 - Table 5.16.

Table 2 shows that counties that include main growth cities show higher numbers of employees working in a different locality than the one of residency. Additionally, counties bordering the main growth cities, such as Prahova, Dâmbovița, Argeș, and Teleorman that borders Bucharest, show substantial figures of labor force working in a different county. This dynamic can be explained by the strong labor force demand in the growth cities, by geography and by the means of transportation, in addition to the lack potential of labor force absorption in the local economy or in the local center in the county.

The main geographical inequalities in Romania are within regions, between main urban centers and rural areas (Fina, Heider and Raț, 2021). Development is concentrated

in eight poles of growth (Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, Iași, Constața, Brașov, Craiova and Ploiești) that attract development, investment and labor force (Cristea et al., 2017; ESPON, 2020), while small towns and rural areas remain providers of labor force for the growth poles. Census data reveals the systemic disparities in the distribution of capital, infrastructure, and employment opportunities. Commuting is a practice inherited from socialist period to overcome the spatial mismatch, yet transformed in order to serve capital accumulation under uneven development. Overall, census data shows that regional centers primarily draw workers from within their own counties and, where geographic and infrastructural conditions permit, from neighboring ones. Employment in a different town than the one of residence is a widespread practice that involves over 1.9 million individuals working either within the same county, in another county. Moreover, this practice is mostly rural, involving primarily men, while women are employed primarily in the town of residency.

7. Conclusions

Commuting, understood as the daily movement between place of residence and place of employment (Lyons & Chatterjee, 2008), lays at the intersection of industrialization, housing policy and spatial organization. In the Romanian context two processes produced and sustained commuting during the socialist period. On one hand, a mixed housing regime that combined private/personally provided and managed housing systems, existing mainly in rural areas. On the other hand, the spatial mismatch between industrial centers and the residence area of the rural labor force.

During socialism, commuting was institutionalized in order to soften the imbalance between industrialization, which was fast-paced, and urbanization, which was significantly slower. Thus, commuting allowed the socialist state to integrate a predominantly rural workforce into newly built and expanding urban industrial centers. Commuting was the cost-efficient tool to ensure the availability of required labor force in the newly built industrial centers throughout mixed housing regime and spatial mismatch (Chang and Brada, 2006; Zhang, 2008; Petrovici, 2013). The mixed housing regime allowed the state to postpone the investment in housing, as the rural labor force dwell in private/personal housing, outside of the socialist state logic of investment at the time. While spatial mismatch ensured the availability of the rural labor force in the industrial urban centers while no other available option in the geographical proximity of their towns existed. In this sense, commuting served as a “release valve” in economic terms for the socialist regime that integrated the rural labor force in state enterprises directly under the auspices of the mixed housing regime and spatial mismatch.

After the fall of the socialist regime Romania switched to a market economy and capitalist mode of production and in this new economical setup commuting persisted. It evolved in tandem with the economy following an initial contraction and later a revival. However, the new economic framework radically changed several elements in relation to commuting, it was no longer centrally organized, the property regime changed and the mixed housing regime reshaped under private rules, thus, commuting remained in a symbiotic relationship only with the spatial mismatch created by the uneven development under the restructuring labor markets. Working in a different locality than residency is a daily reality for over 1.9 million workers, mostly from rural areas, predominantly male, similar to what commuting looks like in socialism. Yet, commuting is currently related to

the main urban centers as they managed to attract commuters from rural areas within the county or from neighboring counties.

During socialism commuting emerged as a temporary solution that was produced and sustained by the mixed housing regime and the spatial mismatch. It persisted over time and the market economy embraced and transformed it in a means that facilitated capital accumulation through exploiting the spatial mismatch inherent to the Romanian economy.

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