

The Subject of the Underground

Bruce O'Neill

Romania's 2007 accession into the European Union initiated a surge in foreign direct investment into its capital, Bucharest. New middle classes quickly took shape that pressed against the limits of the city's socialist-era infrastructure. To accommodate the new middle classes, city planners and private developers have invested billions of euros to redesign and expand subterranean transportation, commercial, and residential spaces. This essay takes these subterranean developments as an opportunity to consider what I call the "subject of the underground." This is the person imagined and acted on by the call to move underground. While the subject pressed underground has long been characterized by extreme marginalization, the ethnographic argument here is that projects of middle-class formation drive the assembling of underground urbanism in Bucharest. The imperative for rethinking the subject of the underground is to bring analytical attention to the sagging "place" of the new middle classes, where "place" refers both to a location in space and to a rank in a social order.

In January 2008 the then mayor of Romania's capital, Adriean Videanu, held a large press conference to announce ambitious plans to modernize Bucharest by developing the underground.¹ Only a year after Romania's accession into the European Union (EU), Videanu sat behind a bank of microphones and laid out his plans to dramatically expand Bucharest's metro system. Touted as the biggest urban development project in the history of Romania, the €8.5 billion metro extension would double the number of stations, triple the length of track, and connect the airport to the city center.² More than a public transit initiative, the project was billed by the mayor as a solution to the broader limitations of the city's socialist-era infrastructure.³ As the mayor's multibillion-euro infrastructure project progressed in fits and starts, private developers began investing millions of additional euros to recycle the city center's metro stations, basements, and cellars into stores, bars and restaurants, and apart-

ments (Racu 2011).⁴ The target audience for these public and private underground developments was Bucharest's new middle classes.

Analytically, "middle class" has proven to be a "fuzzy" (Wacquant 1991:57) if not "breathtakingly vague" (Ost 2015: 614) concept. This is true in Romania, where efforts at defining the middle class by income have produced starkly disparate images, ranging from modest pensioners to elite earners.⁵ In contrast to such efforts, this essay follows an anthropological sensibility that approaches the new middle classes not as a pregiven category but rather in terms of the beliefs, material environments, and institutional and interpersonal relationships through which middle-classness becomes a lived experience (Patino 2016:19). In Bucharest, the middle classes are "new" in that they took shape after the end of socialism in 1989 and amid a global neoliberal turn as Western industrialized nations "off-shored" back-office work to cheaper labor markets, such as Romania (see Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty 2012:14). In this context, as illustrated below, Bucharestians

1. This essay draws on 12 months of fieldwork on the production of underground urbanism in Bucharest, Romania, which took place between 2014 and 2019. Informant quotes are taken from transcribed audio recordings and detailed field notes. To protect the anonymity of informants, pseudonyms are used. Certain biographical details that are immaterial to the analysis have also been obscured. All translations are my own. Accompanying photographs were taken by me. Underground images were taken at off-peak hours to minimize the complications of low-light photography, particularly the blurring of bodies in motion.

2. The initial press release estimated the cost of the project to be €7 billion (Serviciul pentru Relația cu Mass-Media 2008). The cost was later revised to €8.5 billion (Ignat 2012).

3. The exact quote, "pentru că fără metrou toate aceste măsuri sunt pe jumătate," would most literally be translated as "because without the metro all of these other measures would be half" (Serviciul pentru Relația cu Mass-Media 2008). The quote follows a list of proposed interventions into the city's roadway network and underscores the importance of expanding the metro to alleviate traffic on the city's surface.

4. Amid accusations of mismanagement, Bucharest's multibillion-euro, multidecade initiative to develop new metro lines is years behind schedule (see News.ro 2020b). Although delayed, construction on new stations and track for the new M5 line is ongoing. New stations situated along the M4 line have also been completed. Delays to beginning the M6 line, however, have drawn into question its funding (see News.ro 2020a).

5. Using data collected from the 2011 Living Conditions Survey, statisticians arranged annual gross incomes in ascending order, showing that the middle third of the distribution has an annual income of L6,121–L13,360, or approximately €1,495–€3,260. By this definition, roughly a quarter of the middle class is made up of pensioners (Ioniță and Vasile 2015:916–917). The same study used an alternative definition of the middle class as those whose incomes fall in the middle third of the gross annual income distribution, providing an annual income range of L43,481–L86,960 (€10,610–€21,220), a range that only 1.3% of the population fell within (Ioniță and Vasile 2015:919).

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used “middle class” to refer to a diverse assemblage of entry- and midlevel office workers, the creative class, educated urbanites, and university students (see also Chelcea and Druță 2016:529). With an eye on their neighbors next door as well as on their counterparts elsewhere in the EU (Savu, Lipan, and Crăciun 2020:487), Bucharest’s new middle classes pursued “the good life” in ways that placed ever greater demands on what was already one of the EU’s densest capital cities (Misachi 2017). High-rise office and residential construction boomed, and personal car ownership spiked, jamming traffic, crowding sidewalks, and polluting the air (Synergetics et al. 2010:39). Bucharest’s city planners openly worried that stalled traffic could stall the economy, threatening to choke the very foreign direct investment (FDI) that had made the middle classes possible in the first place (Patron et al. 2010:173, 181). Thus, Videanu’s proposition seemed simple enough: move the middle classes underground.

In response to this mayoral proposal, with all of its insights and impositions, this essay takes Videanu’s initiatives as an opportunity to consider the underground: its material depths, to be sure, but also the social life that such depth makes possible. Of particular interest here is something that (or, better yet, someone whom) I call the “subject of the underground” (see Foucault 2005; Miller and Rose 1997:1). This is the person imagined and acted on by the call in Bucharest to move underground. It is a strikingly new kind of figure in Europe, for the subject pressed underground has long been characterized by extreme marginalization, from the so-called madmen “prowling beneath the city walls” of medieval Europe (Foucault 2001:10–11) to early industrial capitalism’s most exploited workers who lived in “breeding places of disease, the infamous holes and cellars” of Manchester, England (Engels 2016:99). By extension, scholars of twentieth-century urbanism readily referred to the city’s most vulnerable as “the underclass” (Myrdal 1965; see also Wacquant 1993; Wilson 1990). Yet such consistently Dickensian (1866) representations are out of step with how the urban underground and the people who inhabit it are imagined in this moment of advanced global capitalism. They also fail to reflect how and to what effect a wide array of Bucharestians have responded to the call to go underground. Simply put, Bucharest’s city planners and private developers are not investing billions of euros into underground urbanism to stash the downtrodden. Aggressive police actions, in fact, evicted Bucharest’s most vulnerable from longstanding underground encampments proximate to the city’s metro stations (Lancione 2020).⁶ And the middle classes have

not been driven underground by brute force or manipulation. As city planners and private investors aesthetically repurpose the city’s subterranean depths, the middle classes have productively turned toward the underground to style their own middle-class subjectivities as entrepreneurial, respectable, or leisured, for example (see Deleuze 1988:103; Miller and Rose 1997:3).

The central argument of this essay, then, is that projects of middle-class formation drive the assembling of underground urbanism in Bucharest. This essay begins by examining the developmental pressures behind the mayoral call to move the middle classes underground. It then explores in ethnographic detail a collection of examples in which the new middle classes manage the limitations and constraints imposed by intensified development by moving underground to work, live, and play in an otherwise inaccessible city center. Reading these examples together opens a window in to how and to what effect this moment of spiraling global inequality presses down on the new middle classes in ways that leave them buried (literally) beneath the city. The imperative for rethinking the subject of the underground, ultimately, is to bring analytical attention to the sagging “place” of the middle classes, where “place” refers both to a location in space and to a rank in a social order (see Ferguson 2006:6). This historical and ethnographic line of inquiry builds on critical scholarship that has charted the precarious formation of the new middle classes alongside the liberalizing reforms of the 1980s (Davis 2004; Fernandes 2006; Freeman 2014) and the consumption of media (Liechty 2003; Mazzarella 2013), home decor (Fehérvári 2013; Pow 2009), and psychotherapeutic practices (Matza 2018; Raikhel 2016) in an effort to manage a shifting terrain of hopes and anxieties (Heiman 2015; Patico 2008). This intervention, taken from Bucharest, has clear implications for cities around the world that also find themselves investing in the underground to accommodate the middle classes, from Montreal (Durmisevic 1999) to Mexico City (Aiello 2013; Heinonen and Minkinen 2016:11), Singapore (Amir 2015; McNeill 2019), and Shanghai (Cui et al. 2012).

From Postsocialist Bucharest to Post-EU-Accession Bucharest

After the abrupt end to socialism in December 1989, the already-crippled Romanian economy crumbled. The introduction of globally competitive market forces shuttered Romania’s noncompetitive factories, pressing a quarter of the industrial workforce out of industrial employment, dropping real incomes by more than 40%, and drastically diminishing the value of pensions (Harris 1994:2861). General economic hardship persisted until the turn of the millennium, when Romania’s accession into the EU became imminent. Romania’s incorporation into the European market prompted Western corporations to reevaluate Bucharest’s workforce with an eye to business services. The population’s fluency in languages, science, and technology and the capital’s comparatively low cost of living and proximity to Western Europe prompted the likes of

6. The management and policing practices of metro stations reinforces the exclusion of the very poor from the metro system. Commuting by metro, e.g., costs more than the buses and trams that run aboveground. Entering a metro station also requires a valid ticket, a policy that is enforced by turnstiles overseen by a combination of ticketing agents, police officers, and private security guards. While Bucharest’s elite opt out of the metro, the very poor are filtered out, producing a distinctly middle-class ridership beneath the surface of the city.

Microsoft, IBM, and Oracle, among others, to near-shore their back offices to Bucharest rather than off-shoring them to India (Perrin 2012:17–18). FDI into Romania spiked tenfold from \$7 billion in 2000 to \$70 billion in 2010 (Estrin and Uvalic 2013:15), with roughly half of those investments pouring directly into Bucharest (Danciu and Gruiescu 2013:101). As other global corporations followed suit, the business-service sector ballooned to 70% of Bucharest's economy (Pen and Hoogerbrugge 2012:14). Rising FDI sparked a boom in construction that doubled Bucharest's stock of modern office space from 1.52 million m² in 2012 (Colliers International 2012:6) to 2.85 million m² by 2018 (Alexe 2018; CBRE 2018). FDI fueled growth in business services and construction propelled Romania to be one of Europe's fastest-growing economies (Ellyatt 2013; see also Timu and Vilcu 2016).⁷

With the new economy came new middle classes. The upwardly mobile marked their rising trajectory in part through automobility. Private car ownership in Bucharest jumped sevenfold, sending an estimated 1.2 million cars to circulate through a socialist-era roadway system designed for 180,000 (Synergetics et al. 2010:39). The material effects of the expanding middle classes bottlenecked roadways and created interminable traffic. In 2017 the Dutch navigation company TomTom International (2017) named Bucharest the most congested city in Europe and the fifth-most congested city in the world, with daily commutes worse than the storied highways of Los Angeles, Beijing, and Istanbul. Bucharest's air quality deteriorated under the smog of prolonged daily commutes, becoming the only city in Europe to exceed EU limits for nitrogen dioxide concentrations. An absence of parking in Bucharest transformed sidewalks into de facto parking lots when cars were not idling on clogged roadways, frustrating the mobility of pedestrians (Synergetics et al. 2010:6). City planners pointed to the entangled problems of building density, overwhelmed roads and sidewalks, and polluted airways as signs of Bucharest's growing "dysfunction" and worried openly that these problems would ultimately "contribute to the declining prestige of Bucharest . . . and stagnate and regress the economy" (Patron et al. 2010:173).

In response to these problems, city planners and private developers proposed to move the middle classes underground. In addition to the €8.5-billion extension to the city's socialist-era metro system (Ignat 2012), administrators also called for aesthetic improvements to the constellation of commercial kiosks and cafés that operate inside metro stations (Enache 2014). To clear sidewalks and squares of illicitly parked cars, the municipality earmarked an additional €311 million to develop 15 underground parking garages in the city center (PMB

2008:49). With infrastructural investments pouring into central Bucharest, private entrepreneurs began capitalizing on the zone's underutilized basements and cellars, converting them from storage units into the foundation for a nighttime economy that features more than 200 bars, clubs, and restaurants (Bürkner and Totelecan 2018; O'Neill 2021). As the cost of living rose, homeowners in central Bucharest renovated their storage basements into apartment and office rentals as a means of generating additional household incomes. Once unheard of during communism, "basement level" (*subsol/demisol*) quickly became a search filter for Romania's primary online real estate listing sites (e.g., <https://www.imobiliare.ro>). While the density of development congested the city surface and threatened to stall mobility, city planners and developers opened up the underground to get the new middle classes back on the move.

Placing the Underground

The underground is a material place in the world, one that modern engineering has increasingly opened for inhabitation (Mumford 2010). Yet at the same time, the underground is more than a physical locality. "The underground" is also a kind of imagined place within an ideational field (Simmel 1969). The domains of philosophy and literature provide insight into the place of the underground within Central and Eastern European thought. Pointing to deeply rooted Christian cosmologies, the Romanian philosopher Mircea Eliade (1959) noted that downward positionality is readily associated with the inferior and the profane and exists in opposition to the good, which is associated upward toward the heavens. Applying as much to the bowels of the Earth as to the depths of the body, Mikhail Bakhtin elaborated (1984), the "downward turn" (370) signals a move toward the grotesque and the obscene, the consequences of which can be socially destabilizing. Perhaps predictably, as the physically subterranean became entangled with cultural notions of low social status, the respectable classes have largely avoided the underground. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the cellar level (*pivniță, beci*) of Bucharest was, at its most optimistic, a servant space utilized for food preparation and storage (see Ciortan 1916; Smarandescu 1916:55). It also contained unspeakable forms of immiseration (Rudnev 1950; see Vintila 2006:45), debauchery (Caragiale 2013; Céline 2006; Crutzescu 2014), and torture (O'Neill 2012; Saveanu 1973:15) beneath public view.

Marxist political thought took certain inspiration in the underground's capacity to revolt. Marx took up the metaphor of the underground as a countercultural space and likened exploited workers to an "old mole," one that patiently strategizes underground for the moment to surface in open class conflict (Marx 2008:121). In Romania and across Eastern Europe, insurgent communist parties arose in the early twentieth century out of such an "underground" political space (Tismaneanu 2003:37–41). As communist parties rose to power, the underground retained a countercultural character even as its politics shifted. In the countryside, subsistence farmers buried their

7. The 2014 A.T. Kearney index ranked Romania fifth among the most attractive outsourcing destinations in Europe. The 2012 *Times* outsourcing business supplement ranked Romania sixth globally in the top 10 emerging outsourcing destinations. Also, a 2014 study by KPMG ranked Romania as the fastest-growing market in the EU in terms of information technology outsourcing services (see Vigroux 2015).

valuables rather than have them collectivized by the communist state (Rogers 2015:229), while anticommunist dissidents in the city, in an effort to evade detection, buried the typewriters on which they wrote their subversions (Bugar 2012). Furthermore, the unforgiving conditions of Romania's coal mines generated a durable class politics that at times struck threateningly against the directives of central planners in the capital (Kideckel 2008:41–42).

For those who sought to flee rather than fight political currents, the underground served as a site of escape. In the fiction of Mircea Eliade (1979), dusty basements and cellars opened up fantastic spaces of imaginative release from communism's stifling bureaucratic power. In the same vein, well-educated youths in the Soviet Union seeking freedom of thought and time eschewed professional ambitions in state bureaucracy and angled instead for low-paid, low-prestige jobs in the quiet solitude of boiler rooms (Yurchak 2006:151–155). And ever aware that the Communist Party's grip on power was less than ironclad, high-ranking officials in Bucharest maintained secret underground tunnels to secure their own egress from the capital in the event of a populist uprising (Alexandrescu 1990; Cărea 1993).⁸ Whether grotesque, oppositional, or evasive, those who utilized the underground found themselves physically, as much as socially, beneath those who remained on top of the city.

The rise of modern architecture, however, made possible a substantive rethinking of what the underground could be. The Romanian Dadaist Marcel Iancu recast the underground as a site of public transportation, absorbing traffic so that the surface of Bucharest could be transformed into a garden city (Iancu 1935:15–16; see also Machedon and Scoffham 1999). From Moscow to Bucharest and from London to New York, the introduction of underground public transportation systems marked the first moment that the majority of the population spent any significant time beneath the surface of the earth (Pike 2005:30). To mobilize the respectable classes underground, architects and planners drew dramatically on art and aesthetics. Stations for the Moscow metro, for example, took on a museum-like elegance (Kuznetsov et al. 2016), while architects of the Bucharest metro leveraged scale and volume “to bring the feel of the main square underground” (Beznila 1980:19). In the capitalist West, planners staged the initial stations of the London tube to evoke domestic comfort (Pike 2005:35–36), while the flagship station of the New York City subway system took on the appearance of an underground chapel, complete with Guastavino arches, leaded glass skylights, and chandeliers (Hood 2004:93). The elaborate staging of materiality inside early metro stations enabled the general public to

imagine the underground as something other than profane, a lived extension of the city.⁹

In post-EU-accession Bucharest, where construction boomed and space in the city center was at a premium, the underground has grown ever more dynamic as a lived space. Commercial kiosks, fast-food restaurants and cafés, a grocery store, and a travel company operate within underground metro stations to cater to the hundreds of thousands of people coursing beneath the city. Bars, apartments, and restaurants catering to the new middle classes, but also international tourists, have also taken shape in the city center's basements and cellars. Commercially viable and well trafficked as these recent underground developments may be, however, they very much rank within social imaginaries below the status of the main squares and penthouses that tower above them. Even despite the convenience of the Bucharest metro, survey data indicate that city residents with the means to do so would rather sit in traffic in the comforts of their car than commute by metro (Synergetics et al. 2010:54). Overlooked by the well-to-do who prefer to hover above the city (O'Neill and Fogarty-Valenzuela 2013), municipal and market actors have opened up the underground to serve as a point of entry for the emergent middle classes to work, live, and play in the capital's most oversubscribed neighborhoods. Rather than profane, the underground in this moment might best be understood as strategic (de Certeau 2002; Foucault 2001).

Station Kiosks

“We didn't start in the metro, but it's where our business is growing,” Ion explained. Originally from the Republic of Moldova, Ion held a distribution deal with the Moldovan chocolatier Bucuria. Ion sold Bucuria-branded chocolates and to-go espresso drinks out of seven metro kiosks located in and around central Bucharest. Its underground contained the most highly trafficked metro stations, while the public squares above were some of the wealthiest in the city, servicing office towers, government buildings, and high-end shopping and residences. “We first tried to get set up with street-level storefronts, but there was no way we could afford it—their rents were extraordinary,” Ion continued. Multinational corporations, such as Starbucks, Paul's Bakery, and McDonald's, occupied the critical real estate just above these central stations. There, customers pay twice as much for their lattes, in part, to utilize the carefully staged atmospheres that these multinational corporations provide. The scale and consumer expectations for how space should be materially staged vastly surpassed the margins of local entrepreneurs such as Ion.

8. The Communist Party's development of secret escape tunnels beneath Bucharest was not unprecedented. For accounts of the extensive network of secret tunnels crisscrossing beneath historic Bucharest, see Dragomir (2008:95–97) and Saveanu (1973:18–19).

9. “Staged materiality” is a term used by Gernot Böhme (1993:114) to theorize the social and affective relationship between environmental qualities and human states. Through the careful composition of light, sound, smell, and order, designers can generate an “atmosphere” that communicates a desired feeling to participating subjects (Böhme 2013:2).



Figure 1. Bucuria candy kiosk, Union Station. Photograph by B. O'Neill.

The metro, by contrast, provided Bucuria with a strategic point of entry into the city center (fig. 1). In comparison to street-level retail, station kiosks were materially and economically easier to operate. Kiosks averaged in size between 3 and 5 m² and could be staffed by a single employee. Their leases were, by all accounts, inexpensive, and they were renegotiated annually, giving Ion the ability to quickly disinvest in underperforming zones. Even as metro officials made efforts to replace existing low-gloss vendor stalls indicative of the penny capitalism of the 1990s with more polished storefronts (O'Neill 2020), the tight quarters of kiosks made them comparatively cheaper to design than aboveground real estate. Ion, for his part, designed each of his kiosks with a red-and-white candy cane-striped exterior capped by a white awning, the net effect of which was intended to evoke a sense of cheer (*Bucuria*, after all, means “joy”). The comparatively low cost of operating underground enabled Ion to carve out a sufficient profit margin from the metro ridership profile to enable his business to grow.

“The profile of the metro is the middle class—they are people without a car, or if they have one, they don’t want to burn the gas money sitting in traffic,” explained Augustin, an upper-level manager at Sindomet, the private company that leases the roughly 330 commercial spaces operating inside Bucharest’s metro stations. In the absence of any collected information about the metro’s ridership, developers and businesses alike were left to feel out the underground’s demographics. “These commuters want to arrive at the office ready to work,” Augustin continued. “They pick up a coffee, eat a snack, or get their sandwich for later in the day while passing through the station. Metro riders don’t have large salaries, and they have little time to waste. But there are hundreds of thousands of them rushing through the metro every day, and they’re collectively spending millions each year.”

Augustin was not overselling the viability of these subterranean commercial spaces. Some of the very national and

global brands that operated along the city’s main squares and boulevards sought to tap into the customers flowing through the metro. The spatial specificity of the underground, however, prevented multinationals from monopolizing the underground’s commercial spaces as they had aboveground.¹⁰ “No one factored commercial projects into the original metro stations,” Augustin explained back in his offices at Sindomet. “Of course, there were stores during communism. But they were on the surface in blocs and in malls but never in the metro.” When Sindomet opened stations for business in 1992, the company carved slivers of space for kiosks along the walls of already-crowded metro passages and tucked them tightly into the corners of busy ticketing areas. The available dimensions, lucrative as they may be, however, did not fit the business model of multinational chains. “Ten square meters of floor space would be a big size for the metro,” Augustin explained. “But the business models of multinationals require 100 or 200 m² of floor space.” Augustin rattled off a string of multinational brands, including the grocers Carrefour and Auchan and the pharmacy DM, that had expressed interest in operating inside metro stations but that could not be accommodated by the constraints of the metro’s dimensions. “To bring multinational brands to the metro,” Augustin continued, “would require a fundamental renovation of the stations because multinational corporations want bigger spaces. In the meantime,” Augustin added, “locally owned kiosks are thriving.”

10. Edward Soja (2000) uses the term “spatial specificity” to foreground the intrinsic entanglement of the historical and the spatial. “Urban spatial specificity,” Soja writes, “refers to the particular configurations of social relations, built forms, and human activity in a city and its geographical sphere of influence” (8). The notion of spatial specificity is used here to highlight the divergent spatial development between the streetscape and its underground within a given historical moment.



Figure 2. Upmarket neighborhood, central Bucharest. Photograph by B. O'Neill.

The underground's tight dimensions and short leasing structure discouraged multinationals from taking over the lucrative commercial opportunities located below the street, as has happened with the space above it. The spatial constraints of the underground work to open up the most lucrative neighborhoods of central Bucharest to an alternative array of actors. For local entrepreneurs pressed underground, like Ion, metro kiosks provided a foothold into the city center, bringing its wealth and opportunity in reach of small businesses that would otherwise have been pushed out of the city center. "Business is growing underground," Ion noted while touring his kiosks. "Because of the metro, we were able to identify a viable commercial space in the city center and then a second, a third, and so on." While his business model ran flat on the city surface, the underground gave his business new depth, allowing Ion to capitalize on office workers' needs for cheap bursts of caffeine and sugar to power them through the morning and into the afternoon.

Basement Apartments

"We live in a really nice place," Liviu boasted. "I mean compared with my friends and colleagues, it's very nice." Rich in cultural capital, Liviu and his wife hold advanced degrees from prestigious universities in the United States. They now work for cultural institutions in the city that pay, by Romanian standards, solidly middle-income salaries. After years of savings, they bought the second floor of a villa in a desirable residential neighborhood of central Bucharest. This part of town was free of the highly functional and densely constructed communist-era housing blocs that dominated much of Bucharest's streetscape. Instead, the historic neighborhoods near Aviatorilor, Dorobanți, and Victoriei Squares, for example, were comprised of ornately designed two- and three-story houses with private gardens (fig. 2). Set behind wrought iron gates and tree-lined sidewalks, these neighborhoods were where embassies, prominent fami-

lies, and elite professionals chose to locate. But these neighborhoods also quietly catered to an aspirational middle class. Behind the heavy-handed presence of boutique cafés and conspicuous displays of luxury sedans, some residents in these neighborhoods had only a tenuous grip on their properties. "But I have to admit," Liviu continued, his voice losing its bounce, "the costs of living here are killing us. By the time we add up all of our bills and expenses at the end of the month, our income just disappears." Rather than getting priced out of central Bucharest and relocating to more affordable construction in a less prestigious zone, Liviu and his partner turned toward their basement to buttress their finances. They followed a growing trend in central Bucharest and other cities with similarly hot real estate markets to capitalize on their building's basement level by converting it into livable space.¹¹

"Ceaușescu didn't make basement apartments," Radu, a real estate agent working in central Bucharest, quipped in reference to Romania's former Communist dictator. "I mean back then (during communism), basements were just used for storage or for running utilities, pipes, and so on," Radu contextualized, "but since about 2005, the basement level is exploding in the city center." While these neighborhoods were desirable, in part, because they projected money, their historic housing stock absorbed it. "As nice as it is to live here, it's still an old building," Liviu explained. "Nothing is energy efficient about it, so the heating bills are awful." Old windows, high ceilings, and thin layers of insulation caused Liviu to hemorrhage money on utilities on top of the property's high regular maintenance demands. Flipping the basement provided Liviu with an additional revenue stream to stabilize his household's finances.

11. Rising real estate prices have pressed new immigrants in Beijing (Huang and Yi 2015) as well as the middle and professional classes in New York (Chen 2018), Vancouver (Mendez and Quastel 2016), and Toronto (Suttor 2017) to buy into basement-level apartments and condominiums.



Figure 3. Basement apartment conversion. Photograph by B. O'Neill.

"We have this really tight real estate market," continued Liviu, "and places in the center are really in demand. And we had this big basement that we weren't using." The neighborhood's cavernous basements and cellars had their origins in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when architects designed them into villas to facilitate winter food storage (Vintila 2006). During communism, households would also use their basements to distill bottles of plum brandy (*țuică*) to offer as bribes to administrators. "But today people just go to the grocery store for those kinds of things," Liviu observed. "So to really use the basement, we decided to convert it into an apartment to bring in some extra money each month. It's what keeps our heads above water."

"These apartments are a new market, and they appeal only to a narrow range of young renters," Radu, the real estate agent, explained. "Older Romanians would never live in a basement unless they were desperate. But younger Romanians who are just starting their careers and who don't yet have children are open to them." Radu estimated that the rent on converted basement apartments runs approximately 30% lower than aboveground units.¹² With the basement rental market skewed toward the young and not-yet established, property owners like Liviu could convert their basement into a rentable unit with only a minimal investment (fig. 3). "Our basement is about 35 m², and it was in rough shape," Liviu recalled. "The stucco was falling down, it had dirt floors, and the air was damp." Liviu invested €5,500 in savings and covered the rest of the conversion in sweat equity, plastering and painting the walls and laying down an inexpensive floor himself while working with a contractor to install the plumbing for the kitchen and the bathroom. To set the proposed rent, Liviu estimated the

yearly utility and maintenance costs for his entire property and divided the number by 12. Within the first month of advertising, two university students took over the lease. "It's good for me and it's good for them," Liviu reasoned. "We all get to live in what is the finest area of Bucharest! The metro is close by, and they can easily walk to the universities and to the bars in Old Town at night."

For property owners like Liviu, the underground was foundational to their ability to move to and maintain a centrally located address. Straightforward conversions of basement storage cellars into rentable apartments secured, for those living in the house above as much as for those renting the converted cellar below, their otherwise precarious claims to live in one of the city's most centrally located and prestigious neighborhoods. These basements quietly enabled middle-class earners with high cultural capital to close the pecuniary divide with the elite professionals and historically prominent families with whom they imagined a horizontal comradeship (Anderson 2006). "It's a common story around here," Liviu insisted, "but no one will admit it."

Underground Clubs

"When I started working here in 2006, the neighborhood was something else," Mihai recalled. He was the manager of Club A, Bucharest's most storied nightclub (fig. 4). It opened in an otherwise abandoned cellar in the city's historic Old Town (*Centrul Vechi*) neighborhood in 1969. Club A now served as a cultural point of reference, if not outright model, for dozens of other physically underground bars, clubs, and cafés operating in the area. We chatted atop Club A's entry stairwell about the changing character of the neighborhood before us. "I mean 10 years ago most of this area was abandoned. There were some 'gypsy' (*țigani*) families squatting around here, but otherwise" Mihai gave an introspective chortle before sucking down the rest of his mojito through a thick plastic straw. The muffled

12. A nuance of the basement rental market is a distinction between basements that are half underground (*demisol*) and ones that are fully underground (*subsol*). Half-underground units have larger windows, which allows them to rent closer to the rate of aboveground units.



Figure 4. Club A, Old Town, Bucharest. Photograph by B. O'Neill.

sounds of revelry reverberated from below but also out of other street-level clubs located around us. “I mean this place being called Old Town is only like five years old.”

The historic central district had been left in a state of disrepair since the 1977 earthquake knocked it off-kilter. Long home to artisans and craftsman, communist-era officials would rather have seen the neighborhood’s nineteenth-century architecture leveled than preserved (O’Neill 2009). After the end of communism and in anticipation of EU accession, the largely pre-twentieth-century building stock caught the attention of investors interested in developing a nightlife district in Bucharest (Igloo 2005). Within a few years, Old Town quickly transformed from derelict to chic, organizing not only Bucharest’s nights and weekends but also attracting thousands of foreign tourists looking to let loose (Baker 2013). The neighborhood’s transformation took shape from the underground up.

The initial wave of club owners described Old Town as “completely destroyed,” “abandoned,” and “falling apart.” The neighborhood’s historic building stock nevertheless suggested a future potential that made Old Town a more intuitive place to invest than other zones. “In every capital in Europe, the historic center is a place to go,” noted Nicu, who opened an underground club in Old Town in 2007. “You’ll find bars and clubs, cafés, restaurants there. We knew one day this area would take off in the same way. So when we opened our club, we were investing in the neighborhood’s future potential.” Although regularly playing on the double meaning of “underground” as both “subterranean” and “countercultural,” club owners were clear that Old Town’s underground roots were not about affecting a sense of style. “Back when we opened in 1999,” explained Cristian, one of the first club owners in the district, “there were only a few in Old Town, and they were all underground. And it wasn’t a cult of the underground,” Cristian emphasized. Like Mihai and Nicu, Cristian trafficked in a late-night lifestyle. But behind the ruffled hair and graphic

T-shirts, Cristian and other club owners understood themselves to be business professionals, and they operated as such. They discussed Old Town’s nighttime economy in terms of “entertainment products,” market niches, and target audiences. They also regularly emphasized the need to move enough drinks each weekend to make payroll and to clear their bank loans at the end of the month. While a multitude of Romanian students, professionals, and foreign tourists headed to Old Town looking to let loose, those invested in the party organized it strategically. “I mean a space is a space,” Cristian continued with a kind of geometric sensibility. “If you play the right music and get the right lighting, you can make anywhere feel ‘underground’ (counterculturally speaking). The clubs went underground (physically) because it was good for managing business.”

While the historic superstructures of Old Town captured the imagination of investors, their materiality did not conform to the demands of a twenty-first-century nighttime economy. Constructed in the nineteenth century, Old Town’s villas served as private homes and shops for wealthy merchants who preferred small rooms for hosting intimate gatherings (Vintila 2006). “A quick tour made it clear that when these buildings were built, no one ever thought they would be used for a café, much less a club,” Nicu explained. “The space was just too divided.” The neighborhood’s substructures, however, expressed an entirely different spatiality. Rather than compartmentalized into a series of intimate rooms, the floor plans of storage basements and cellars were not only open but voluminous. “Most of your money is made on the weekend,” observed Mihai, “and you can’t bet on enough people passing through those small spaces above to turn a profit in just two nights. But these large basements can hold 200 or 300 people. You can make the business work down there.” In addition to providing a workable scale, Old Town’s substructures also proved easier to flip than its superstructures. By focusing underground, club owners could delay



Figure 5. Converted cellar bar, Old Town, Bucharest. Photograph by B. O'Neill.

costly overhauls to the neighborhood's ground and upper floors, which required basic stabilization before the aesthetic work of renovation could begin, and instead start generating revenues in the building stock's ready-to-use basement cellars. "It's a lot of exposed brick and vaulted ceilings," noted Cristian (fig. 5). "They're solid, stable spaces, and they already have a specific beauty to them." As Catalin put it, "This isn't a fancy club where people come to be seen. I cleaned the place up and otherwise slapped together a bar and some bathrooms. We didn't have much else to invest."¹³

Once located underground, owners found that basement cellars opened up new temporal rhythms conducive to the club economy.¹⁴ Vaulted cellars proved exceptional at keeping sunlight out and the thumping sound of dance music in. The net effect enabled club owners to elongate the highly profitable window of time between Friday night and Sunday morning. "This is critical," Cristian explained, "because we make a lot of money down here after the street-level clubs close. We can stay open until the last customer leaves at 6:00, 7:00, even 8:00 in the morning." It is not uncommon, in fact, to see the young emerge from underground clubs at the end of their Saturday night only to cross paths with the old on their way to Sunday morning church services. "No one looks to develop their business under-

ground," Mihai affirmed as our conversation drew to a close, "but when investors were searching for places to squeeze clubs into Old Town, that's where they found them."

Pressed Underground

In a capital city characterized by density, an FDI-fueled boom in business services and in construction placed an ever greater premium on space in the city center. As the growing pains of development pressed against the infrastructural limits of the capital, city planners and private developers repurposed and began building out Bucharest's underground for the middle classes. The government's renewed attention on the metro system sought to draw the new middle classes out of their cars and onto public transit, but this large-scale infrastructural project also created the backdrop for individualized projects oriented toward social mobility. The underground enabled local entrepreneurs to tap into central zones otherwise dominated by global brands and upmarket consumption. Conversions of household basements into apartment rentals moved the culturally, but not financially, endowed into prestigious neighborhoods to further their own pursuit of respectability. And the transformation of Old Town's basements and cellars into nightclubs through a mix of foreign and local loans brought to Bucharest's young and professional the nighttime economy imagined to be a normal feature of the middle classes living in other EU capital cities. Taken together, the ethnographic record makes clear that the literal urban underground is not a repository for the poor, as the metaphor of "the underground" readily suggests. And the subject inhabiting these underground developments is not "abject," a term used by anthropologists to describe the degrading social processes for casting undesirable social categories outside of full consideration (see Ferguson 1999:253). The underground is instead a lived element of the city that municipal planners and private

13. On the night of October 30, 2015, a grisly fire inside the Bucharest nightclub Colectiv left 64 dead and more than 100 injured. The accident brought about additional safety regulations and closer scrutiny to Old Town's underground club scene (O'Neill 2018).

14. Michel Foucault (1986) spoke of the late twentieth century as an "epoch of simultaneity" in which "we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, or the dispersed. We are at a moment . . . when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein" (22). This section extends Foucault's horizontal perspective to explore the vertical dimensions of simultaneity.

developers have repurposed and expanded for the new middle classes. Down there, Bucharest's aspirational and entrepreneurial strategically utilize the underground to further their own projects of working, living, and playing in an otherwise unaffordable city center.

The emergence of this new kind of underground subject in Bucharest points all too literally to the sagging place of the new middle classes compared with those whom David Harvey (2007) calls the "traditional middle classes" (62), which took shape a century ago in Europe and North America.¹⁵ In the seminal essay "Americanism and Fordism," Antonio Gramsci (2010) charted the formation of one such "traditional" middle class within a distinctly American mode of industrialization fueled by rising wages and lowered consumer prices. The growing profit margins of the factory, and of the nation as a whole, were tied in this moment of Americanism to investing in the rising quality of life of ordinary workers (Gramsci 2010:285). Underwriting the formation of such a middle class, Gramsci argued (2010:293), required a particular social and material environment as well as a certain type of state. The American government's production of commuter rail lines and highways, its underwriting of home loans, and its rising levels of defense spending ultimately subsidized the American middle class's orderly move to the suburbs.¹⁶ Once moved outward by state initiatives from overcrowded cities, the American middle class stared on a suburban expanse primed to absorb the mass construction of single-family homes and the tremendous personal consumption needed to fill and maintain them. By the mid-twentieth century, middle-class suburbanization served as the foundation for profit accumulation in American cities (Smith 1996a:84). While never questioning the exploitive dimensions of Americanism and Fordism, the arrangement created, for Gramsci (2010:312), the intriguing possibility of offering workers an "adequate" standard of living.

The new middle classes in Bucharest, by contrast, have taken shape in a different place entirely. Whereas Americanism and the suburb were an effect of initiatives to generate economic growth by expanding wages and benefits for ordinary workers, Bucharest's new middle classes emerge within a neoliberal context where corporations secure profits through globally oriented strategies for suppressing wages (Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty 2012:14; Thrift 2006). International companies eager to achieve more for less have rushed to develop

back-office operations in Bucharest, where the average net income for its well-educated labor force is €657 per month (Romania Insider 2016), a fraction of that found in Germany (€2,550), the United Kingdom (€2,404), and France (€2,225), for example (Dreger et al. 2015:27).¹⁷ As wage suppression, rather than expansion, sets the condition of possibility for the formation of the new middle classes, its foundation is not a suburban periphery with all of the expectations of growing wages and expanded consumerism that it assumed. The foundation of the new middle classes is instead the underground. This is a segment of the city constituted by an archipelago of tightly contained subterranean spaces that fall beneath the reach of the elite professionals and multinational corporations that otherwise dominate the city center's main squares.

To be sure, the frenetic intensity with which international companies have built back offices in Bucharest has also driven development farther outward from the city center, leading to speculative developments around the planned extensions to the metro system (Colliers International 2019:1). It has also brought about the hasty and uncoordinated development of new suburban neighborhoods (Patron et al. 2010:136, 140; see also Pen and Hoogerbrugge 2012:11). This makes sense given that, as Neil Smith (1996a:37) has shown, suburbanization and gentrification are interconnected processes. In sharp contrast to the time of Americanism and Fordism, however, officials in Bucharest are not promoting suburban sprawl but instead are directing their investments underground to sustainably connect Bucharest's suburban outposts to offices located in the city center (Rom Engineering and AVENSA Consulting 2015:32). From Bolintin to Mogosoaia and Berceni to Buftea, the slow, plodding construction of Bucharest's new metro lines seeks to durably link middle-class housing to new office parks by way of an aesthetically repurposed underground (Ignat 2012; Rotariu 2007). Once pressed underground, Bucharest's middle classes do not comfortably ride a rising tide that lifts all boats. Instead, they are left to anxiously pursue individualized strategies to move up in the city, literally as much as figuratively. It is a mode of incorporation by way of the basement door that ultimately fuels contemporary urbanism's turn toward unchecked inequality rather than alleviates it.

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15. As others rightly note (López-Pedrerros and Weinstein 2012:5), the experience of these so-called traditional middle classes serves neither as a model nor as an ideal type. I refer to the category here as a productive point for historical contrast.

16. The electric streetcar opened up the suburbs for the common man by expanding the outer limits of convenient commuting by 1.5 miles per decade (Jackson 1985:118). The Federal Highway Act of 1916 and the Interstate Highway Act of 1956 moved the government toward a transportation policy emphasizing automobility and stimulating suburbanization (Jackson 1985:191).

17. This income disparity is also reflected in minimum wage workers. The minimum wage in Luxembourg, e.g., is €1,923 per month, while it is only €218 per month in Romania, the lowest in the EU next to Macedonia (€214) and Albania (€157; Eurostat 2015).

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Comments

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The paper written by O'Neill examines different forms of subterranean existence, such as running underground kiosks, renting out basement apartments, and visiting basement bars. These elements are not analyzed in isolation but taken together as representative of a larger phenomenon: the emergence of the "subject of the underground," as the author calls it. Finally, this phenomenon is observed in the context of postsocialist Romania and in connection with the emergence of the new middle classes.

The central framing here is the following: while the subject pressed underground has long been characterized by extreme marginalization, the instances analyzed in this paper point to the contrary. The implication is that the ones who are underground in this ethnographic case are not the poor and the needy but rather the ones with a certain level of class prestige and income. This is a very interesting argument that makes the reader instantly wonder, What makes the middle classes suddenly begin to inhabit dark, damp places that have historically been reserved for the lowest strata of society? What kind of strange social forces are at work there?

However, soon it becomes clear that this framing is somewhat misleading. Do the members of the new middle classes really live in dump basement apartments? No, they rent out their basements to students. Do aspiring middle classes really do their shopping in the dark, unpleasant, small subway shops? No, they do not. In fact, the subway shops target the consumers who cannot afford to buy food even in Starbucks or McDonald's, which are themselves hardly high-end shops. (The owners of these shops, surely, may be middle class, but here again, the argument appears overblown. So what if the entrepreneurs are developing their businesses in subterranean spaces? Was it not the same at the eve of capitalism with, say, historical mine owners?) As a result, what in the beginning looked as a surprising, counterintuitive argument boils down to a rather predictable finding.

This is, I believe, related to the temporal and geographic framing of the main argument. The author claims that consistently Dickensian representations of the subterranean spaces, as explained above, are out of step with how the urban underground and the people who inhabit it are imagined and affected

in this moment of "advanced global capitalism." He places this in the context of "spiraling global inequality," looking at how it "presses down on the new middle classes in ways that leave them buried (literally) beneath the city." All this postulates a historical break and implies that there is a geographic specificity related to the emergence of the "subject of the underground." But this framing is not convincing: the phenomena under scrutiny in this paper do not seem at all to be such a novel thing.

Are people in the period of an expanding real estate market more likely to rent out spaces that until yesterday would not cause interest? Sure, in the period of high demand, tenants have less choice in what space to rent and thus are ready to opt for lower-quality apartments (especially if they are not well-off, which leads us back to the previous point). But this is not context specific, and it is not a historical novelty. Urban dwellers have for decades (or even centuries) lived in basement flats, shopped in underground kiosks, or gone out to basement bars—and keep doing so—in Bucharest and elsewhere.

The key of this confusion may be related to the way in which the author uses the concept of class. As noted above, the argument laid out in this paper is essentially about the emergence of the middle class in the context of Romanian EU accession and economic growth. However, from the analysis it is difficult to grasp what is in fact meant by the term "middle class," as it seems to denote groups characterized by extremely different levels of income, status, and social power. This is to some extent solved by attributing this definition to the people that the author encountered in the field: the Bucharestians themselves, we learn, are in fact the ones who use the notion of middle class "to refer to a diverse assemblages of entry- and midlevel office workers, the creative class, educated urbanites, and university students." However, only to an extent. Given that the notion of "middle class" represents an analytical concept that exists even beyond the emic horizon of the language users, I believe that it would have been beneficial if the author himself explained how he used the concept.

Surely, the concept of "middle class" is notoriously broad and ambiguous, which the author acknowledges. However, I am not certain whether the disclaimer that the essay follows "anthropological sensibility" and approaches the new middle classes "not as a pre-given category" solves the problem. The analytical concepts either make useful tools or they do not. And if the latter is the case, then we need new and better tools. It is true that the category of the middle class can denote any social group ranging from low-level-status occupations, such as clerks and assistants, to medical doctors and bank managers. But that is precisely the reason that in most contemporary class scholarship it has become common to distinguish between lower-middle-class and upper-middle-class groups. The article by O'Neill would have, in my view, made a more significant contribution if these differences were acknowledged and elaborated with more nuance and analytical precision.

My last remark concerns the differentiation between the middle class from the classes below and above. According to the paper, FDI gives shape to the new middle class—which is

true, of course. But FDI can also generate the growth of the working class! For instance, skilled workers in the auto industry in some countries of the Central and Eastern European region are relatively well paid, which can erase the boundaries between the middle class and the working class. What is the situation in Romania? What kind of industry grew as part of FDI, what was the structure of employment, how big are the incomes of the blue-collar workers? These are crucial aspects, but we do not learn much about them. And we do not get much assurance (in terms of evidence, secondary data, or simply conceptual precision) that the working class has in fact not been represented in some of the consumption patterns attributed to the middle class. (Similar conceptual problem exists with regard to classes above the middle class—the upper classes, the elite, etc.)

In sum, even though I welcome O'Neill's contribution to the field of postsocialist class research, I wish that the link between subterranean activities and middle-classness was conceptually and empirically more fully elaborated.

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A Dark Anthropology of Class Formation or a Story of Structural Violence?

Bruce O'Neill wrote an ethnographically rich and conceptually generative article about the relationship between the capital flows, middle classes, and the spatial dimensions of contemporary urbanism. Although the underground has been a "theory machine" (Helmreich 2011) in social sciences and a powerful signifier in the humanities, it has often been the space of political and mythical imagination rather than an object of ethnographic scrutiny. By approaching the underground ethnographically, O'Neill shows it to be a space of accumulation of financial and cultural capital, as well as a technology of governing social power by city planners and private developers alike. Piecing together different uses of the underground—retail, housing, and leisure—O'Neill outlines an urban dynamic in which economic growth, middle-class expansion, and increased reliance of the underground are intimately connected. Whereas middle-class formation and spatial expansion at the height of postwar economic prosperity in the United States have been imagined largely in horizontal terms of suburban sprawl, O'Neill shows expansion in Bucharest to be articulated vertically (up and down) as well as horizontally. Unlike other cases, where the poor and the destitute are pushed underground, the landlords, retail space owners, and urban planners assemble the underground for middle-class usage. This text

should be of interest not only to ethnographers but also to geographers and sociologists interested in class, urban, and cultural transformations.

My comment is about the politics of the middle classes and, by extension, of those studying the "middle," as I think that they carry some methodological implications for ethnographic practice. As it is well known, historically, anthropologists have often studied down. When "studying up" in their (usually Global North) home societies, they explored a range of positioning, ethical, methodological, epistemological, and writing challenges. In her initial conceptualization, Laura Nader (2018) lumps the middle together with the rich and uses them interchangeably. O'Neill, however, distinguishes ethnographically between the middle and the upper classes (see O'Neill 2022b). The middle class is somehow better off than the destitute and somehow worse off than the truly privileged. As O'Neill himself notes, the "middle" of the middle classes is a tricky way to frame the subject of the underground in Bucharest. Avoiding number-crunching traps to define the middle class, which often produce contradictory findings, O'Neill uses a loosely lifestyle definition ("beliefs, material environments, . . . relationships, . . . lived experience").

While his working definition skillfully helps direct the ethnographic gaze to new belowground sites of middle-class formation, I felt that, methodologically, the politics of middle-class formation raises some challenges about how to approach the ethical complexities of writing about that process. At times, O'Neill seems to ask the reader to feel some compassion for the new middle-class subjects of the underground. For instance, he writes that "this moment of spiraling global inequality presses down on the new middle classes in ways that leave them buried (literally) beneath the city" and refers to the underground as providing "a mode of incorporation by way of the basement door that ultimately fuels contemporary urbanism's turn toward unchecked inequality rather than alleviates it." Yet one may ask how ethnographers can capture the middle classes' politics and their own contribution to the reproduction of inequality? Should the subject of the underground enjoy readers' compassion and social solidarity? I would suggest not.

To elaborate, next to the symbolic 1%, there are groups that describe themselves as "the middle" but who are in fact composed of educated, affluent groups compared with large sections of Romania's population. As O'Neill notes, their eyes are "on their neighbors next door as well as on their counterparts elsewhere in the EU," but they always have an eye on (and a vote for whoever can shrink the power, visibility, and life chances of) less fortunate citizens. Often, the subject of the underground is viciously antiredistribution, statephobic, revanchist, and actively seeking not only to exclude others but to further reduce the very power of the "state's left arm" that might help others and even themselves. A recent survey indicates that support for universal health care, subsidized housing, help for financially disadvantaged students, and a decent standard of living for the unemployed and the elderly is overwhelming in Romanian society, ranging from more than 70%

to close to 100% for certain policies. Yet the opposition to those policies “is the strongest among the middle classes. High . . . income persons . . . and college . . . graduates . . . tend to display a significantly higher opposition to state’s involvement, compared to lower income and very poor persons” (Bădescu et al. 2022:10–11). The politicians who represent the middle classes are some of the most vicious antipoor voices, such as the austerity czar and former Prime Minister Emil Boc (the current mayor of Cluj), the mayor of District 3 in Bucharest, and the right-wing hipster and yuppies party (Save Romania Union). Such politicians express the desire of the new subjects of the underground to remove the poor to create “cultured” public spaces and to direct public spending exclusively to their benefit. The soft violence exerted on the emerging middle is collected, amplified, and redirected not at its source of origin but toward the poor, as O’Neill has masterfully described in his previous work on Bucharest’s homeless and infrastructural violence and as he alludes to in this study when he notes the aggressive eviction of the poor by the police from the underground (one may think of many other examples as well). Therefore, is this wonderful ethnography a story of dark anthropology of class formation? Or is there another related story of structural violence exerted by the middle class to be told?

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Bruce O’Neill proposes a novel angle from which to observe the fragility of the middle class. Thus, he brings his contribution to the second wave in the anthropology of the middle class (Donner 2017), which explores the contradictions between expectation and experience and, in O’Neill’s words, “the sagging ‘place’ of the middle classes” in the contemporary world. In his study based on research conducted in the Romanian capital city, the new middle classes become the subject of the underground. The claim put forward in this study is that city planners and developers press the new middle classes to go beneath the ground. They have invested in the expansion, repurposing, and redesigning of underground transportation and subterranean commercial and residential spaces for the new middle classes. In their turn, O’Neill notes, the new middle classes have strategically embraced these spaces for their own projects of social positioning. The affordable commercial spaces located inside the underground stations enable local entrepreneurs to operate their businesses in otherwise out-of-reach central locations, the conversion of basements into rentable flats allow both owners and renters to live in the expensive central districts, and the new middle classes enjoy nightlife, something they imagined to be a “normal” feature of middle-class life, in the basements and cellars that were turned into nightclubs in the historical center.

The emergence of this new type of subject of the underground amplifies already-noted tendencies. With the construction of the underground public transportation system, the subterranean space had ceased to be seen as the place of the marginal, precarious, or rebellious members of a society and was integrated in the mundane life of the respectable classes. In Bucharest, O’Neill observes a more intense integration, the new middle classes using various subterranean spaces to commute to and work, live, and party in the city’s expensive central neighbors. Moreover, the author takes this move toward the underground to be the indicator of another already-documented phenomenon (e.g., Savu, Lipan, and Crăciun 2020), namely, the shaky positioning of the new middle classes. They struggle to attain and maintain their place in the social order, and this is in sharp contrast to the situation of the “traditional” middle classes that flourished in Europe and North America in the past century.

This portrayal of the new middle classes becomes possible by highlighting some aspects and shadowing other facets of the ethnographic realities. The new middle classes are not just pressed underground. For O’Neill, the strategic usage of the underground demonstrates their agency. Nonetheless, no other details are offered about this process of subjectification. Does this strategic usage also mean that the new middle classes consider the underground an appropriate location for them? In other words, do they regard the underground as being true to who they are and could be given their limited conditions of possibility? Liviu, one of the middle-class interviewees, insists that turning basements into rentable flats is a widespread, but unrecounted (because unrecountable?), practice. This suggests that the answer might be negative. Moreover, O’Neill mentions *en passant*, in the concluding section, the development of new suburban neighborhoods. However, he does not consider this development analytically. The new middle classes are not only “pressed underground” but also moved and move to the constantly sprouting suburban neighborhoods. They buy flats in residential complexes, build their own detached houses, and put pressure, with notable results, on the authorities to develop better overground connections to the city’s center. Furthermore, the author uses a particular framework of comparison. The new middle classes on which the author focuses are “new” in the sense that they have formed in the postsocialist period and under the impact of global neoliberalism and its search for cheaper labor markets, Romania being one of them. To underline the limited conditions of possibility that they face in the neoliberal world order, O’Neill compares them with the “traditional” middle classes of the Global North. Yet nothing is said about the local “traditional” middle classes or the similarities and differences between the situation of the new middle classes in the big urban centers and those in small, provincial towns. In all cases, programmatic opportunities and constraints have marked their socialist and postsocialist histories. Patico (2008), Fehérváry (2013), and Scarboro, Mincyté, and Gille (2020), to give a few examples, offer much-earlier insights into the formation and state of the middle classes in relatively

comparable contexts. More to the point, Fehérváry (2013) wrote that “the dream of a universal middle class, one that came with the national objective to extend modern prosperity to all citizens, died with state socialism” (22). Together, such details could help compose a more nuanced picture of “the sagging ‘place’ of the middle classes” in this region (the very choice of words—the word “sagging” in the expression “the sagging ‘place’” might suggest a better previous position in the social order—indicates a less nuanced consideration of the local and regional history of the middle classes, “traditional” and “new” middle classes alike). In brief, however thought-provoking, O’Neill’s contribution to the anthropology of the middle class would have benefited from a more detailed reading of the ethnographic realities.

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The subterranean life of Bucharest, Romania’s capital, has long been a subject for both documentary filmmakers and journalists seeking poignant social material. Most of this work centers on Bruce Lee, the self-proclaimed “King of the Sewers” in Bucharest, and the group of people who live with him underground. By night, they get high on Aurolac, a noxious silver paint with intoxicating fumes. By day, they emerge to beg for cash on the city streets of metro tunnels (Belzberg 2001).¹⁸

The association between underground space and a social “underclass” has roots going back to the Victorian era in Western Europe. Henry Mayhew (2010 [1861]:184), in the book *London Labour and the London Poor*, describes the toshers, or “sewer-hunters,” as people who entered the sewers to explore them to considerable distance in the search for “tosh”—anything made of copper. They did not do so without risk; a £5 reward was offered to anyone who informed on trespassers entering the sewers without permission. As Robert Macfarlane (2019) writes in his book *Underland*, “A densely stacked modern cityscape leads, inevitably, to a new geography of inequality that requires reading in vertical terms. Broadly speaking, wealth levitates and poverty sinks” (148).

However, changing perceptions of the underground have muddled this narrative. As the cultural historian Rosalind Williams (2008) writes, “The central evolution in the aesthetic of the underworld between 1700 and 1900 is from ugliness to sublimity to magical beauty” (83), as people became enraptured by the sheer feat of human excavation and the new (vertical) spaces made available by that work. With deep excavation

ever more common, the spaces we create variegate across class boundaries.

Returning to London today, we find the flip side of inequality underground. Between 2001 and 2014, planning applications for “megabasement” developments in the boroughs of Kensington and Chelsea rose from 46 to 450 (Graham 2016b). Many of these projects contained cinemas, bowling alleys, day spas, wine cellars, tennis courts, weapon vaults, and panic rooms for security. Between 2008 and 2017, across all of London 4,650 basements were approved, which included 1,000 gyms, 380 pools, 460 cinemas, 380 wine cellars, and 120 rooms for working staff, reaching a combined depth of almost 50,000 feet (Burrows 2018). Since the subterranean capacity of these excavations can exceed the size of the street-level houses by several times, this has been branded a kind of “iceberg architecture” (Wainwright 2012).

How then do we reconcile these seemingly competing visions of “vertical geography”? Bruce O’Neill makes clear in this contribution that the underground of Bucharest is a space in between, a place where the middle classes run coffee shops, bars, restaurants, and nightclubs—where people build lives and livings not sustainable at surface level but also avoid the stigma of the suburban. Although the class components have not disappeared, what we see in Bucharest is a bridging space: “a window in to how and to what effect this moment of spiraling global inequality presses down on the new middle classes” of Bucharest. In other words, O’Neill complements Rosalind Williams’s (2008) suggestion that “the subterranean environment is a technological one—but it is also a mental landscape, a social terrain, and an ideological map” (21).

In recent decades, geographers have been working overtime to try to come to terms with how space is being technically, socially, culturally, and politically produced. Stephen Graham and Lucy Hewitt’s (2012) work on (particularly urban) undergrounds is a way of undermining a “flattening of discourses and imaginaries [that] tends still to dominate critical urban research in the Anglophone world” (72–73).

There are stories playing out across the world in dense urban environments where obsolete subterranean infrastructure (much of it from the Cold War) is being rehabilitated. New infrastructure, like metro lines, is no longer seen as *sub terra nullius* but rather as space in which social and cultural histories and practices are intertwined with geological time (Melo Zurita 2020). This network of space underground produced by human engineering is precisely the “archipelago of tightly contained subterranean spaces” that O’Neill envisions. They are the archetypal spaces of the Anthropocene, being both geologic layers in themselves and sanctuaries from a deteriorating climate at ground level.

Human relationships to the underground are changing rapidly. There are still many stories to tell of suffering, violence, and despair underground, stories that have been repeated time and again in Bucharest. Yet, to return to Macfarlane (2019), “to read such a place only for its dark histories is to disallow its possibilities for future life, to deny reparation or

18. See the *Nightline* news segment from 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=piDnvbjKbE8>.

hope—and this is another kind of oppression” (228). Anthropologists, sociologists, geographers, and urbanists are now joining geologists and archaeologists in making sense of the ever more complicated world beneath our feet. Bruce O'Neill's essay is a beautiful contribution to that end.

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Dreams and the Underworld

In days gone by, the urban underground was largely the province of the dead, peopling cemeteries, crypts, and catacombs with lively company from underground streams, bugs, fungi, microbes, moles, and mice. Increasingly over time, one could find mass storage and, occasionally, tunnels, with later additions of sewers, boilers, pipes, bunkers, people transport (metros), document transport (pneumatic tubes), and shops for the harried traveler. Most of it was also, decidedly, public space.

In this wonderfully written essay, Bruce O'Neill walks us through a rather different set of newly private spheres. In modern-day Bucharest, he suggests, where the underground person was once a denizen of the counterworlds of Dostoyevsky, Eliade, and Bakhtin, the underground is now the frequent destination for a downwardly mobile and “sagging” middle class that is, nonetheless, eager to remain at home in the city and facing increasingly limited upward trajectories. Class balance has been thrown off as new middle classes find themselves in the cellar.

In the framing of this article, the dreams for a more just Romania rest largely on the period from 1989 through EU accession. Yet something tells me that, however briefly, we would gain from a deeper purchase on twentieth-century hopes for a more just Romania: first, in the post-Ottoman period with the instantiation of the monarchy and, later, after World War II when the former kingdom was plunged into communist programs for a classless future. Flagging the inequalities that dogged “those in the middle” from those decades in active memory—from a monarchy that was hierarchy manifest and from the socialist Leviathan that came next, offering cold comfort—could take us further in understanding the current government's master plans.

O'Neill entirely persuades in this compelling portrait of an unchecked inequality that is, literally, deepening. Yet it also seems to me that this spatialized story of class disenchantment is only part of the story. We should want to know equally about the dreamworlds that sustain those who try to make their new basement homes work or who head belowground for the mystery of the dark and for the possibility of the company of non-human neighbors. What happened, for example, in Montreal, Mexico City, Singapore, and Shanghai when earlier efforts to

make way for an expanding middle shifted downward? The brave new world may not look bright, but we still want to know its narratives, since the underground's new residents are joining so many humous and posthumous others along the way.

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Bruce O'Neill shines a light on class formation at a complex moment of Romania's still-unfolding transition to capitalism. Following the nation's accession into the EU, the gentrification of its capital city was part of the remaking of a postsocialist state into a beacon for investment by Western countries and their businesspeople. The crux of O'Neill's argument is that contrary to twentieth-century debates that imagined those squeezed underground as the most impoverished, marginalized, subjugated, or perhaps revolutionary of the lower classes, the social actors drawn into Bucharest's expanding undercroft were primarily an emerging local “middle class.” As their aspirations to comfortable lifestyles were channeled belowground, the implicit limits to their socioeconomic mobility were dramatized by the liminality of these spaces.

The value of such an ethnographic approach to class processes is well illustrated in this case study, for these actors both embody and entrench the orientations to capitalist individualism needed to sustain the incorporation of Romania into the “New Europe.” From a Foucauldian perspective, governmentality requires cultivating neoliberal subjectivities precisely in order to regulate the economy and civil life. O'Neill gives us intriguing glimpses into the concerns and constraints of a few small entrepreneurs and landowners. Yet there is little information about their life trajectories before and throughout the transition. We do not know how income-generating activities fit into a changing pattern of family economic strategies or sociopolitical orientations. And where are the voices of women? The neoliberal context is broadly apparent, but many aspects of this “middle-class” subjectivity remain veiled. What does come through in this account is how these businessmen perceive their clientele as a host of aspiring but constrained local subjects. It is their social imaginary of who constitutes the fabled “middle class” that is interesting here, precisely because it is an artifact of longing for economic security and privilege largely denied to Eastern Europeans. After the Great Recession, Romania implemented harsh austerity measures that would have rendered this dream tenuous for many.

What bears further emphasis is the hidden violence inherent to urban development and renewal in the capitalist nation-state. Neil Smith (1996a), in his classic work on the urban frontier, demonstrated that areas of systematic disinvestment were continually creeping across the American city, followed by city planning that brought surges of revitalization. Cycles of

investment were geographically clustered and entailed systematic dispossession and displacement of poor and marginalized groups. Smith compared examples of three European cities to find the production of similar urban gentrification frontiers despite distinct historical contexts. Reviewing Zoltan Kovács' (1994) study of Budapest in the 1990s, where privatization coincided with flows of foreign investment to enable a turbulent modernization of the postsocialist urban landscape, Smith (1996a) assessed, "Gentrification is integral to this changing social, economic and political geography of Budapest occurring at the behest of globalization" (174). In his own case study, O'Neill contends that much of Bucharest's basement levels in the city center were newly opened to inhabitation and thus entailed little residential displacement. The author systematically avoids the term "gentrification" in the discussion of an "aesthetically repurposed underground." Yet O'Neill recognizes that the government actively invested in the potential of the middle class by expanding the metro system and attempting to make it more attractive. This would have included clearing out the dangerous and the destitute from the metro and adjacent tunnels—in a word, expulsions. Ignoring the debate on gentrification means disregarding an ugly process.¹⁹

Neil Smith's (1996a) most provocative insight involved the racist aspects of the class war played out on the urban frontier of New York City. He argued that the violence of gentrification was implicitly directed in a neoconservative backlash against the social groups thought to have benefitted from America's civil rights movement. Thus, the revitalization of New York neighborhoods that so appealed to an aspiring middle class also meant that waves of dispossession affected those whom the city planners might most wish to erase from view, those who do not easily fit into the local cultural ideology of an upwardly mobile middle class. Smith's "revanchist city" solidly favored white public space. Do we know whether Bucharest's underground urban development implicitly furthered ideologies of ethnic/racialized social difference? Recent case studies have pointed to social inequalities in development and modernization of Romania's urban centers over the past two decades (Arpagian and Aitken 2018; Bădiță and Vincze 2019; Liviu 2018; Marcińczak et al. 2014; Zamfirescu and Chelcea 2021). With the arrival of refugees and migrants from a number of other countries, there are many struggles for social inclusion ongoing in the heart of Bucharest.

The challenge of focusing on an ethnography of the "middle class" is that we risk reproducing the oblivions—the deliberate forgettings and half-conscious insensitivities—that are the ongoing cultural work of our own class production, for the transit network is a space of privilege (however modest) carved out amid suffering others, a gated community where access to mobility both empowers and celebrates class aspirations. As

O'Neill explains, "The management and policing practices of metro stations reinforce the exclusion of the very poor from the metro system." The ethnic innocence of Bucharest's "aesthetic improvements" to the metro must be in doubt. In particular, any Roma beggars or squatters would have been removed, their troubling presences erased or banished to neglected corners. Michele Lancione (2019a, 2019b) has recently discussed the inhabitation of Bucharest's extensive tunnel network as well as the housing struggles of the Roma in the city. Such provocative looks at another kind of "underground" offer a counterpoint to O'Neill's ethnography. Together, they suggest a pattern of gentrification, brutal in its evictions and exclusions.

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In Bruce O'Neill's "The Subject of the Underground," metro station kiosk entrepreneurs, basement apartment landlords, underground club owners—or "the subjects of the underground"—are representative of the new middle classes borne out of the recent neoliberal turn when Bucharest became a favorite destination of international companies seeking a cheap, quality office workforce. The government's renewed investment in Bucharest's metro system also fostered the environment for individual city dwellers to create their own projects aimed at upward social mobility. People use their ingenuity and wits to utilize the space beneath the streets to sustain a lifestyle of living, working, and playing in the city center, which is otherwise unaffordable. Yet the emergence of this kind of underground subject is all too clearly a spatial manifestation of the falling status of the new middle classes in the city's economy.

The uses of subterranean spaces discussed in his article are not billion-dollar flagship projects of placemaking, such as the Oculus in New York City, the Docklands in London, or Les Halles station in Paris. The "subjects of the underground" are ordinary citizens cashing in on the new and precarious position of Bucharest in the global economic order. How can the author's insight be applied to understanding the subject formation in metro-led urban development cross-culturally? In the different political economic context of Taiwan, the "subject of the underground" of the Taipei Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) System is more a political subject than an economic one. This is by no means to downplay the effect of placemaking or the impact of metro-led underground development in urban Taiwan. In fact, the expansion of capital accumulation into the subterranean has been closely related to the building of the MRT in recent decades. Joint Development—a public-private partnership to develop the land for routes, depots, stations, and land adjunct to the MRT, particularly for commercial activities—is an official policy of the Taipei Rapid Transit

19. See Albet and Bennach (2018) for critical debate on the legacy of Smith's work and ideas of "gentrification."

Corporation (TRTC). Yet the beneficiaries of MRT Joint Development programs are not necessarily individual citizens—or even the landowners—as the government is known to acquire the land in the name of eminent domain and then seek private investors to finance the real estate (re)development. The particular pattern of urban governance in Taipei has not created the kind of the underground subject observed in Bucharest.

A different kind of underground subject has emerged, however (Lee 2021). From the outset, the TRTC waged a series of campaigns to educate the public and shape riders' behavior. MRT passengers were disciplined into following certain rules (e.g., not eating or drinking inside the MRT, standing in line when waiting on the platform and when entering the MRT cars, and yielding MRT seats to people in need). While compulsory and involuntary at the beginning, MRT passengers quickly habitually and voluntarily act in accordance with the rules. Observing the same code of conduct and being civil to other passengers signify the possibility that people are associating with one another as fellow citizens with common rights and responsibilities. Over time, the Taipei MRT has become a space of cultural intimacy wherein metropolitan Taipei residents (re)shape their collective identity and, further, develop a renewed political subjectivity, with which the Taiwanese establish themselves as autonomous, law-abiding citizens vis-à-vis a historically repressive state.

The knowledge derived from the shared sentiment of cultural intimacy among fellow passengers has helped people in Taipei to construct a self that is civilized and enlightened, separating themselves from their politically repressive and unruly past. It also reflects a shift of reference in self-identification to an increasingly globalized world within which the Taiwanese economy is embedded. If the Taipei MRT as a sleek, modern transportation system is seen as attesting to Taiwan's technological know-how—thereby pairing Taiwan with its capitalist advanced counterparts—the passengers' law-abiding and orderly behavior is taken to elucidate Taiwan's moral high ground, which puts the country in the world's league of urban civilizations. Whether conscious or intentional, Taipei MRT riders are performing daily for a global audience with a largely westward-looking orientation. Given the rapidly expanding and increasingly fragmented global mediascape, the global gaze is not entirely imagined by the Taiwanese. From time to time the Taipei MRT indeed receives favorable reporting from international mainstream media, freelance reporters, global trekkers and visitors, and social media influencers.

If the rescaling of the world economy from one characterized by nationally configured frameworks to one with an increasingly globalized configuration of global-national-urban interactions has propelled Bucharest's new middle classes to find economic opportunities underground, the same process has opened up new possibilities for the Taiwanese in their pursuit of global membership. The parallel development among major cities around the world—though a result of interurban competition—has helped to create a single imaginary space

with which metropolitan Taipei residents can now appraise their city and themselves on a global scale through omnipresent urban infrastructure such as the MRT. More critically, such a process allows the possibility of scale jumping (Smith 1996b) for the city of Taipei to stand in for the nation of Taiwan, thus granting the Taiwanese the eagerly sought international visibility that is not given to Taiwan as a political polity. Taiwan is not a member of the United Nations and is thus excluded from United Nations–related intergovernmental organizations. Taiwan also faces constant objections or interventions from the Beijing government in its participation in international nongovernmental organizations or activities. Under these circumstances, the civility displayed by MRT passengers takes on the significance of an act of performativity. It has come to signify Taiwanese's belonging, in the dual sense of both “be-ing” in a social complex with fellow citizens and “longing” for an identification of oneself in a particular historical present.

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Placing Middle-Classness

Analyzing the middle class is always a challenge because nobody seems to quite know what the middle class is. Bruce O'Neill's approach of examining how “middle-classness” becomes a lived experience through engagement with the underground has great value. O'Neill's goal is not to define the category of “middle class”; rather, he explores how the space of the underground is interconnected with the production of middle-class subjectivities. Chocolate shops in underground metro stations, basement rental apartments, and subterranean nightclubs all support middle-class identities. Class is fundamentally about relationships. As O'Neill delves deeper into the underground, as well as other urban spaces and surfaces, I encourage him to keep these relationships at the center of his analysis.

Class-based relationships are lived in part through consumption. Home ownership in central Bucharest signals that one is part of the middle class, and renting out a basement apartment makes this ownership possible. Middle-class consumption is always relative, a way to define oneself in relation to others (Liechty 2003). How does home ownership distinguish one from elites and the poor? How does shopping underground or renting out one's basement apartment signify one's place in the middle?

Relations of production are also important. The off-shoring of back-office work to cheap labor markets like Romania has created a boom in middle-class jobs in Bucharest. Who benefits from this labor? Who profits from the labor of the middle

class? An exploration of the buying and selling of middle-class labor would complement O'Neill's study of the underground.

Perhaps more important than middle-class labor, given O'Neill's interest in space, the middle class needs to be situated in relation to urban development. The middle class who clogs the roads with their cars, patronizes underground shops, and buys up homes in the city center is driving a real estate boom. As property values increase, wealth may be invested elsewhere, creating further speculation and economic growth. O'Neill hints at this process, noting that private developers are investing billions in underground urbanism. Who are these developers? What is their relationship to the middle class, both symbolically and economically? In buying homes in the city center, the middle class gets a taste of the value produced through growth and speculation. But the equity accessed by middle-class homeowners is nothing compared with the accumulation of wealth experienced through the development of the underground. It seems that their relationship to financial capital is fundamental to the production of the middle class in Bucharest. Further exploring this relationship is a key step toward fully articulating the subject of the underground.

The history of capitalism tells us that the state plays an important role in subsidizing and incentivizing economic growth. The state does not simply add fuel to the fire of economic growth, it channels and directs growth. O'Neill usefully draws on the comparative case of suburban sprawl in the United States, where the middle class moved out from the city center rather than under it. As O'Neill notes, in the United States, state investment in highways made suburban life possible for the middle class. He might also have noted government investment in water lines, lift stations, and sewage treatment plants. This publicly funded infrastructure not only enables middle-class life in the suburbs but also greatly increases profits for real estate developers. Without connections to roads, water, and sewage, new houses would have had little value. If developers were forced to cover the true cost of this infrastructure, it is possible that suburban homes would have been too expensive for the US middle class during the mid-twentieth century.

Growth, both spatial and economic, depends on state intervention. Where is this intervention occurring in Bucharest? How does the state pull capital underground? Beyond metro lines, how are state investments in infrastructure supporting underground development? To understand how the middle class becomes a subject of the underground, we need to know how private developers and the state collaborate. State subsidies for development are not often won without a fight. In my research in cities in Ethiopia and Oklahoma, I have observed developers using their financial power to influence local government. Their goals are to remove regulations, decrease fees and taxes, change zoning laws, access needed infrastructure, and essentially do whatever is necessary to ease urban growth. Urban residents, particularly the middle class, sometimes push back on this process, demanding that their taxes not be used to line developers' pockets. How does this process play out in

Bucharest? If, as O'Neill suggests, middle-class formation is driving underground urbanism, this is occurring not in isolation but through the relationships between the middle class, city government, and urban developers.

Finally, given O'Neill's affiliation with Saint Louis University, I cannot help but think of the networks of caves beneath the Lemp Brewery, which was the largest in St. Louis during the nineteenth century. The Lemp family immigrated from Germany and used the cool and stable temperature of the underground caves to brew a lager beer that was consumed in large quantities by the urban middle class. In that case the underground ecology was essential to the production of a commodity closely linked with middle-class identity. Just as Bucharest's substructures are ideal for nightclubs, St. Louis's caves were perfect for fermenting lager. I expect O'Neill's work will inspire scholars to consider other connections between the peculiar spaces of the underground and middle-class lifestyles.

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Bruce O'Neill provides a fascinating account of how the socioeconomic reshaping of post-1989 Bucharest manifests in the redevelopment of its underground spaces. This aligns with a growing interest across a range of disciplines that perceive the underground to be, both literally and metaphorically, neglected terrain. From civil engineers to architects, geographers to anthropologists, we can see a wide range of approaches to understand the phenomenology of the subterranean. The paper connects with and contributes to debates about the nature of verticality and volume in cities, a theme of significance for human geographers (e.g. Harris 2015; McNeill 2020).

This paper takes us through a series of these spaces through some carefully observed research interventions, ranging from kiosks in underground metro stations to basements in private apartments to the entrepreneurial countercultural ambience of Old Town nightclubs. These sites are strikingly different in their ambience, ownership, and politics, which can make them difficult to align conceptually, but as an overall heuristic, they situate the concept of an underground subject in a meaningful and productive way.

There are several cities around the world that have received sustained focus on the nature of their underground terrains, such as London, Paris, and New York, so it is striking—to me—that Bucharest is the focus of the paper. The cities of post-communist Central and Eastern Europe are not always at the center of urban theoretical innovation. There has been something of a geographical blind spot of this "Global East," as Müller and Trubina (2020) argue, and compared with Mumbai, Cape Town, and Rio de Janeiro, there is a paucity of critical

literature on the urban materiality of postcommunist European cities. The cultural economic transformation that EU accession has brought to cities as diverse as Lisbon and Bucharest is an important historical moment, and O'Neill traces this out delicately.

The core interest of this paper is class and the materiality of its sociospatial expression. The "subject of the underground" is "a strikingly new kind of figure in Europe." O'Neill's claim is bold: "projects of middle-class formation drive the assembling of underground urbanism in Bucharest." I enjoyed how this was evoked at the level of artifact, at the microscale of the nightclub interior, the shape of the kiosk, and the configuration of the apartment basement. The presentation of the voices of these middle classes is notable too in their sense of insecurity; combined with Lancione's (2020) study of the marginalized groups who also have made home and care networks in the city's underground tunnels, we have a fascinating and unexpected archive of Romanian urban life.

The use of the verb "pressing" is of note. Deployed at various points in the paper, it conjures a sense of the materiality of city life that is not gravitational but rather one of steady and fairly even structural force, be it EU neoliberal economic policy or local urban governance measures. In some contexts, in many cities the less affluent are elevated into high-density housing towers. The middle-class engagement with central Bucharest is, then, a clash between classical "gravity models" of urban rent and the revalorization of centrality that many cities have gone through in recent decades. Some of the topics remind me of Hammett and Hammett's (2007) collection *The Suburbanization of New York*, a similarly fine-grained set of observations on how changing class forces and tastes shape the surface intensity of urban cultural life. Within this material landscape, there is an important set of observations about transport. I learned that Bucharest, a city that was thrown open to private car ownership in the postcommunist transition, was at one point identified as the most congested city in Europe. That this tells us much about what surface life must be like is a hermeneutic key to understanding the significance of underground subjectivities. O'Neill notes in a footnote that underground public transport is more expensive than the surface routes of trams and buses.

There is a growing literature on burial as a constituent element of the underground, and again, O'Neill is sharp to point out the artifacts that were buried: valuables, typewriters, the experience of the coal miner, the educated seeking escape from the communist state bureaucracies in the peace of the boiler room. This narrative thread reminded me of Steven Graham's (2016a) fine essay, "City Ground," in which he sketches the postwar history of Berlin's *Teufelsberg*, in the city's *Grunewald*. This hill, a high point in a relatively flat city, is not a geological feature but the accreted remnants and rubble of prewar Berlin, smashed to pieces during the aerial bombardments of World War II. Bucharest suffered significant loss of life during these campaigns, and it would be an interesting sequence to this story to understand how the geopolitical landscape of the city

might also include the folding of rubble and artifact into the city's underground.

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As Bruce O'Neill shows, the Bucharest underground is a promise and a problem. Or we might say, its subject, the middle class, is the promise and the problem, and the underground is where promise and problem are being displaced to and spatialized as such. "Projects of middle-class formation drive the assembling of underground urbanism in Bucharest," O'Neill writes. I would like to reframe this metaphor slightly: for me, what is driving this assembling is neoliberal "near-shoring"; projects of middle-class formation seem more the necessary engine of that motion. It is a project, O'Neill notes, that dates back to the mining and transportation technologies that opened up the world's subterra to industrial development and inhabitation. But the emergence of the middle class rather than the laboring classes as the subject of this development and inhabitation is more recent. As I argue in *Subterranean Cities* (2005), this emergence dates to the first underground railways in London, Budapest, New York, Paris, and elsewhere, the technological networks from which Bucharest's metro is directly descended, both as a material infrastructure and as what O'Neill terms "an imagined place within an ideational field."

The promise of the Bucharest metro, as of its predecessors, is a mobility that is both literal and figurative. And as befits a space driven by neoliberal values, this mobility is not only local but also global. Protestors against a similar metro project in Mumbai argued, for instance, that "elevated tracks and high-speed rail are signs of arrival on the 'world-class' stage and tend to delineate privileged from less privileged urban areas" (Ranganathan, Pike, and Doshi 2023:161). Similar arguments have been made about Bogotá's long-delayed (because far more expensive and less efficient than the dedicated bus lanes of its already-existent TransMilenio) 7th Avenue subway (Gilbert 2008). The middle classes that are the subject of the underground are not only a public whose place is "sagging" in economies across the globe but also the neoliberal public required for full entry into those economies. O'Neill's ethnography of a compromised middle-class life lived underground at local chain store outposts, basement apartments, and below-code nightclubs rightly regards this descent as a problem. What his research also documents are the broader forces that necessitate the accompanying promises to which the underground reality is unable to live up.

The traditional association of undergrounds with marginalized populations, ranging from what used to be called the laboring and dangerous classes (Chevalier 1973) to bohemians, anarchists, and revolutionaries, is one obstacle to this

promise. However, as O'Neill documents here and elsewhere, it is relatively easy for developers, engineers, and local authorities to displace or disregard marginalized populations actually using or sheltering in underground spaces. And it is relatively easy to install microkiosks on subway platforms, low-grade middle-class apartments beneath overpriced homes in desirable neighborhoods, or "a bar and some bathrooms" in the atmospheric unfinished basements of "Old Town's substructures." But it is more difficult to measure from O'Neill's article just how satisfied or dissatisfied Bucharest's newly imagined middle classes are with what he terms their backdoor entry in the new economy.

What is clear is that this is a very different kind of membership than was promised to earlier metro publics. Writing about the new tube trains that had eliminated different carriage classes, an early-twentieth-century London journalist quipped that "the office boy has sat down in great content beside the City magnate, and still the sky has not fallen" (Pike 2005:44). The underground not only lay literal and figurative tracks over the marginalized spaces it ostensibly replaced but also worked to subsume the displaced populations into its capaciously "neutral" carriages. The imagination of underground transport nearly always invokes a quotidian and more or less middle-class public with anyone not meeting the norms of this imagined range of middle classes—from office boy to magnate—cast outside as disruptive, inappropriate, or simply absent. As metros become more and more automated, regulated, and streamlined, their middle-class subjects have become more and more homogeneously neoliberal in their identity, no matter the range and variety of their actual lives.

Although it seldom happens, there is evidence that transport infrastructure can also work to remediate inequality and foster a sense of belonging that would extend even to traditionally marginalized populations—the highly subsidized mountain-side cable car and valley-traversing metro in Medellín, Colombia, are an oft-cited example (Heinrichs and Bernet 2014; Zapata Cordoba, Stanley, and Stanley 2014). As a powerful vehicle of social imaginaries, metros are equally adaptable to spatializing socialist ideals, as evident in the monumental aspirations, ornate detail, and vast scale of the Soviet-era Moscow and Bucharest metros. It is just as clear from O'Neill, however, that infrastructural development in post-EU-accession Bucharest is not doing anything like this kind of work, either in concept or in practice.

But while it is tempting to view these different subterraneans as of a piece in the ways they document a sagging middle class, I would argue that the unified identity described by O'Neill does not derive from their underground location *per se*. Rather, they participate in a broader devaluing of quotidian middle-class life that would be equally evident in many other urban spaces, from the sprawling peripheries to the anonymous inner suburbs, but that is most visible, paradoxically, underground. Still, buried parking garages do not resonate with public values any more than basement nightclubs figure in the quality of quotidian life. Because its transport infrastructure binds the

periphery to the center, because its spaces assemble, sort, and carry thousands daily in ways no other urban spaces do, because its construction drives prices and speculation across the city, and because its existence has worked to brand cities as "world class" for well over a century—for all these reasons—the metro is a prime vehicle for visualizing the problems and promise of the middle classes even when, more often than not, the former far outweigh the latter.

Reply

As the great metropolises of the twentieth century took shape, Lewis Mumford (1938) observed that "beneath the visible city an invisible city grows apace . . . a city of ramifying subways and ominous tunnels in which the entire population spends no inconsiderable part of the day" (239). Despite the growing size and complexity of the urban underground, scholars have not given it much thought. They have written at length about what it means to be in the city's center, along its periphery, or atop its soaring skyline; however, the significance of being below the twenty-first-century city is unsettled terrain, in theory as much as materially, which is precisely why I find the underground so exciting to think about.

In the above essay, I argue that state and private actors are developing underground Bucharest to place the new middle classes. Across the commentaries, there is near-unanimous consensus that the aestheticized underground in Bucharest and elsewhere is an emergent site of important social changes. For David Pike, the underground is no longer the domain of the laboring classes (much less the down and out). For Bruce Grant, this iteration of the underground is notably private in character. Donald McNeil argues that the scale and intensity of the underground's development in major cities outpaces the predictions of rent models and points to the renewed primacy of city centers. Anru Lee, meanwhile, looks to Taiwan to note that the properly developed underground has become a claim to attaining the status of "world-class city." Bradley Garrett productively contrasts the case of Bucharest with that of London, where the underground has become a playground for the ultrawealthy, with billionaires excavating pools, cinemas, and recreational rooms beneath their homes. Finally, Dražen Čepić stands apart by taking the empirically unsupportable position that the urban underground of today is no different than that of the nineteenth century.

Read together, these commentaries converge along three themes that pose important questions about the essay as well as the broader fieldwork it draws on: gentrification, the middle classes, and dreams and degradations. Although these themes necessarily interrelate, I will try to address them each in turn for the sake of clarity.

Gentrification

I was surprised to read some commentaries raise the concern that the topic of gentrification had not been addressed by this essay. Tracey Heatherington in particular argued that by focusing on the middle classes, the essay risks failing to adequately hear more vulnerable voices.

As I understand it, the above essay is fundamentally about gentrification. It is even framed with direct reference to the very scholarship Heatherington points to in her commentary as a counterpoint. This particular impasse between authorial intent and the reader's reception might be shaped by the fact that in the vignettes that animate the essay, the usual actors are not cast in the roles they typically occupy in stories of gentrification. Over the course of this project, I came to understand the aesthetic repurposing of the Bucharest underground as a process of gentrification that does not benefit the middle classes, as gentrification is readily assumed to do, but rather as one that targets the middle classes in ways that deepen the privilege of the very elite (see O'Neill 2022b).

To explain, the initial idea for this project took hold in 2010 while I was completing the fieldwork for my first book on homelessness in Bucharest (see O'Neill 2017). At that time, I became aware of a long-standing homeless encampment that, amid city-wide gentrification, had formed in the tunnels and canals beneath the Gara de Nord railway station. I also learned that homeless people were squatting in the basements of otherwise abandoned homes nearby. I began tracking how these homeless communities relied on nearby metro stations, where they would hang out and earn money by working odd jobs for station kiosks. Years later, during the summer when I turned my full attention toward this articulation of the underground as a potential book project, a police action forcibly cleared the homeless encampment to make way for the neighborhood's redevelopment. The close contacts who had been squatting in abandoned basements nearby had also been moved along. These vulnerable actors had been cleared out of the city center by the very social forces of gentrification that my previous work had charted (O'Neill 2010).

To be sure, the clearing of the underground in the mid-2010s was accompanied by a buzz about beautification and expansion that was familiar to those who had paid attention to Bucharest's earlier rounds of gentrification: columnists and market and municipal actors talked about creating new metro lines and updating old metro stations, the rise of a new nightlife district in Old Town's cellars, and the emergence of low-cost basement apartments and office rentals in the city's central neighborhoods, for example. What I did not expect to find, and what came to direct my attention, was that this steady buzz was coupled with editorials, mayoral addresses, and city planning documents problematizing the presence of the middle classes in the city: the middle classes' appetite for new cars and apartments clogged roads and crowded city blocks, polluted the air, and deteriorated the quality and character of public spaces. Officials voiced concern that the middle classes were making

Bucharest an unattractive place for future foreign investments, drawing into question the very revenue streams that had made middle-class growth possible in the first place.

What became clear to me as the fieldwork evolved was that the middle classes were fast becoming objects of the same process of gentrification as the very poor in ways that were both familiar and novel. As I have argued elsewhere, while gentrification cleared the most vulnerable out of the city center, it was also working to move the middle classes beneath the city center for the sake of development. Elites, for their part, are not just staying in the city center but increasingly living above it, in residential and office towers (O'Neill 2022b). The aesthetically repurposed underground, as I have come to understand it, is no prize. It is instead a site for containing the problems that the middle classes pose to wealthy elites.

The middle classes no doubt experience, as Liviu Chelcea puts it in his commentary, a "soft violence" compared with the "direct violence" endured by the most vulnerable. Situated within the arc of my own scholarship and framed by the literature on gentrification, my intent with this and related writings is to show the two to be related to bring into view the broadening reach of the forces of gentrification. In a moment when wealth is concentrating globally among the top 10% of earners, and most pronouncedly among the top 1%, at the expense of the bottom 50% (Piketty 2020), does it not give pause that even the middle classes are being cleared to advance the privilege of the very elite?

Heatherington is right to note a lack of female voices in this essay. Publication has its own distinct temporality. While I wrote this essay to frame the key themes that had emerged out of my initial investigations into the underground, it appears in print after subsequently researched and written essays. As the fieldwork took full shape, the important perspective of women came into clearer view (see O'Neill 2022a, 2022b).

The Middle Classes

The middle classes receive concerted attention across the commentaries, with questions raised about how the middle classes are conceptualized, where they are found in Bucharest, and what it means to position the middle classes as a kind of protagonist. Dražen Čepić, to start, voices frustration that "the middle classes" is too vague of a concept to achieve sociological coherence. His suggestions oscillate between setting the concept aside entirely and further modifying "middle class" with the additional designations of "lower" and "upper" (though surely, by the same logic, these subdesignations are also fuzzy, vague, and dissatisfying for him).

For all of its admitted conceptual messiness, "middle class" is very much a collective subjectivity in circulation in Bucharest, as elsewhere (see Yeh 2017), with the growing size and density to dramatically shape urban life. States are investing in the middle classes, while city planners are creating new spaces for them; developers are building and designers are staging projects to appeal to the middle classes, while city residents

locate themselves and others within (or outside of) the middle classes (O'Neill 2020). These efforts are consequential: they place people physically within the city, and they also have the effect of ranking people within a social order. The argument here is that the underground has emerged as a privileged site for forming middle-class publics in Bucharest.

Liviu Chelcea's very thoughtful commentary notes that in the above essay, the middle classes appear to enjoy the unlikely role of protagonist. He asks what it means, politically, to advocate for the middle classes when middle-class politics can have antipoor elements. He raises the important possibility that my sympathies have been misplaced.

To be sure, I too shared these concerns at this project's outset. The middle classes, after all, are historically associated with privilege rather than precarity. As Chelcea notes in his commentary, when Lara Nader wrote her seminal text on "studying up," she could confidently lump the middle classes with elites and safely assume a shared affinity between the two (Nader 2018). What a sustained eye on Bucharest's gentrified and expanded underground has made clear, however, is that the lives of the middle classes cannot be so safely assumed to approximate the lives of elites. Instead, I found the place of the middle classes to be not only separating from that of elites but also "sagging" beneath them. Again, I find that the middle classes are getting swept up by the same structural forces of gentrification that target the poor. Set against the backdrop of my earlier work on homelessness and displacement (2017), my point here is to bring into view lesser-seen forms of structural violence—forms of violence that evidence the intensification of techniques of class separation that privilege the wealthiest at the expense of the rest (O'Neill 2022*b*).

This is to say that I take seriously Chelcea's concerns, yet my fieldwork has led me to the conclusion that sympathies for Bucharest's middle classes can coexist alongside sympathies for the city's poor. I do believe, however naively, that reading and writing can be transformative. I hold out hope that this essay might prompt certain readers to rethink their orientations. Rather than imagining affinities with those positioned upward from them, this essay invites middle-class readers to consider that solidarity with those perceived as standing downward from them might make for better politics. I would also add that the very idea of the "sympathetic protagonist" is its own product of representation. As others have noted, Karl Marx created the proletariat as a coherent and morally upright working-class protagonist through a process of purification (Ferguson 2019:8), while some of the most inspired anthropological texts readily acknowledge that the most sympathetic of protagonists, such as the working classes (Walley 2013:42), the homeless (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009:12–15), and migrants (De Leon 2015:93), at times voice sentiments that are likely to cut against the sensibilities found around the seminar table. The hallmark of ethnography is to reveal that every subject position is more complicated than could have otherwise been imagined.

Magdalena Crăciun's commentary raises another kind of concern. Crăciun points to Bucharest's suburban developments and makes a case that they should have figured more prominently in the analysis.

To be sure, suburbs have sprouted around Bucharest. They are, however, developing in a very different way than the twentieth-century suburbs of Americanism and Fordism that serve as a counterpoint for the above essay's conclusion. As Daniel Mains elaborates in his own commentary, American suburbs were underwritten by state subsidies in numerous kinds of infrastructure: home loans and roads (as I mentioned) but also (as Mains notes) water lines, lift stations, sewage treatment plants, and so forth. These state investments stimulated suburban growth by making suburban home ownership more affordable for white, but not Black, Americans (see Johnson 2020). In Bucharest, by contrast, planning documents characterize suburban development as market driven and unplanned, with developers building and selling entire neighborhoods that lack access roads, much less connections to basic municipal services. Those who have bought into these developments can wait years to be connected. In the case of Bucharest, state investment is not directed outward so as to create middle-class suburbs that sprawl toward an ever more distant periphery. Instead, the state has directed its investments downward, spending heavily on new metro lines intended to connect unplanned suburbs back to office parks located in the center north. I therefore see the state instead not so much as composing suburbanism but rather as developing the underground to constitute suburbanites into a mobile pool of cheap labor that is available to foreign investors.

In serving this role, the expanded metro also contributes to, in Donald McNeil's terms, the primacy of centrality. As Lewis Mumford (1938) observed nearly a century ago, "Though [metros and subways] open up new areas on the outskirts of the city, they but thicken the crowding at the center. . . . Metropolitan subway lines have been almost uniformly built so as to throw an increasing load of passengers into the central district" (239). The expanded metro contributes to the density of claims made on the city center—a process that further fuels the expansion, renovation, and conversion of the center's underground basements, cellars, and parking garages.

Dreams and Degradations

In their generously engaged commentaries, Bruce Grant and David Pike raise important questions about the relative satisfaction of those who have moved underground. Their questions invite something of an epilogue to the essay and point to the aims and objectives of this project moving forward. The fieldwork for this project began in earnest in 2014 and concluded in December 2019. This relatively long duration gave the fieldwork a longitudinal quality that allowed me to track, as Bruce Grant puts it, the "dreamworlds" of the middle classes

and, in David Pike's words, "the promises and problems" of the underground and of the middle classes alike.

As I return to this essay, I see clearly how it captures the optimism that characterized the setting of the initial fieldwork. This is an optimism fueled by planners, developers, and designers who were investing, constructing, and staging underground projects as well as producing glossy materials to promote them as sites where a sense of middle-class respectability could be found. It also reflects the initial optimism of those who bought into that promise. By holding out the possibility of a share of prosperity that reflects the city's broader development, the aesthetically repurposed underground opened up, as this essay argues, as a site of middle-class aspirations for upward mobility.

As the fieldwork evolved, the dreams and aspirations of the gentrified and expanded underground grinded against the underground's social and material limitations. Over time, the repurposed underground lost its initial gloss, and the dreams of those who had bought into it gave way to disenchantment. At the edges of various projects to make the underground into an aesthetically appealing place for the middle classes to live, work, play, shop, and commute, the underground's muck and mire had always threatened to seep through. Even in instances where the underground's staged materiality succeeded in retaining its promise, those living or working in underground apartments or offices struggled to convince friends, family, and clients of its comforts. The underground's associations with poverty proved difficult to shake, and the inevitable limitations of subterranean life brought with them the threat of disillusionment. Moving forward, then, my interest is in detailing ethnographically how both the dreams and the degradations of the gentrified urban underground have shaped what it means to be middle class in twenty-first-century Bucharest.

At its broadest, the development of cities downward raises basic ethnographic questions as to who goes underground, when and why, and who does not. How these questions get answered in different places and times dramatically shapes the meaning of the underground. Looking globally and comparatively, as Bruce Grant rightly encourages, one sees that the underground has become a vast experimental field. There is no shortage of glossy reports from consulting firms boasting of the development of underground malls, museums, cinemas, nightclubs, university lecture halls, public parks, swimming pools, and hockey rinks in places as diverse as New York, Toronto, London, Moscow, Helsinki, and Seoul (Admiraal and Cornaro 2018; Reynolds 2019; WSP 2018). Planners worrying about the effects of climate change and rising population density on cities not only underscore the promise of the underground but also frame its full utilization as a necessity. As these projects seek to capitalize on the promise of the underground, one takeaway from Bucharest is the need to better account for the emergent verticality of cities the world over. This verticality prompts scholars not only to ask who is "in" the city and who has been pressed "out" of it but also to con-

sider the significance of being "on bottom" of the city versus being "on top."

—Bruce O'Neill

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