

# Zona urbană. O economie politică a socialismului românesc (Urban Zone. A Political Economy of Romanian Socialism) by Norbert Petrovici

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*Document Version*  
Final published version

*Published in:*  
Studia Universitatis Babes-Bolyai Sociologia

*DOI:*  
[10.2478/subbs-2018-0016](https://doi.org/10.2478/subbs-2018-0016)

*Publication date:*  
2018

*License*  
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*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Ban, C. (2018). Zona urbană. O economie politică a socialismului românesc (Urban Zone. A Political Economy of Romanian Socialism) by Norbert Petrovici. *Studia Universitatis Babes-Bolyai Sociologia*, 63(2), 173-175.  
<https://doi.org/10.2478/subbs-2018-0016>

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Download date: 30. Mar. 2023



## BOOK REVIEW

***Zona urbană. O economie politică a socialismului românesc (Urban Zone. A Political Economy of Romanian Socialism)* by Norbert Petrovici.  
Cluj-Napoca: Tact Publishing House and Presa Universitară Clujeană,  
2017, 331 pages.**

**CORNEL BAN<sup>1</sup>**

With *Zona urbană*, Norbert Petrovici wrote a necessary, informative and theoretically dense book about the political economy of industrialization and urbanization during Romania's experience of state socialism. Indeed, this is the first scholarly attempt to unpack the regional (rather than the conventional firm) dynamics of the centrally planned economy in Romania as the ambitions of its political-administrative apparatus experienced a number of domestic limitations (productivity crises; innovation lags etc.) as well as unexpected international shocks (the oil price hikes of the 1970s, the debt crisis of the 1980s) and opportunities (the exceptionalism of the Romanian rapprochement with Washington and key West European States).

One would hope that *Zona urbană* would initiate a new literature on the regional dynamics of socialist political economy in Romania. The book cuts in more directions than one may expect but to me its claim to fame is this: by bringing the analysis down at the regional and municipal level (with the Transylvanian city of Cluj-Kolozsvár at the centre of the analysis), the analysis uncovers the specific dilemmas of developmental elites as they struggle to mobilize investment and labour into economic development templates that are more bespoke than conventionally assumed. Indeed, to my mind the most original part of the book is the one showing how the socialist developmental alliance of company managers and bureaucrats attracted and disciplined a booming industrial working-class population by providing it with vast housing estates and attending service facilities while effectively keeping workers' quarters separated from the centrally located boroughs of the elite, intelligentsia and, most interestingly, the

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predominantly Hungarian background population that had dominated Cluj before the war. I wish that this part of the book been bolstered and provided with more empirical detail as it captures some of the most intriguing internal developments of socialism at a manageable level of analysis.

The ways in which international economic crises, domestic regime type, class and ethnic politics mix in often puzzling ways are captured with a fresh eye. However, in capturing some of these paradoxical outcomes, Petrovici is careful to de-exoticize them and in fact seems keen to run strafing rounds on scholarship that had pushed rather too hard for conceptual iron walls separating the socialist and capitalist city. Having spent some time studying the macro-level dynamics of Romanian socialism, I read many of the pages of this (mostly) city-level analysis with great curiosity and pleasure, as they put a more detailed, if not necessarily grassroots set of lenses of what was actually going on at a more human scale.

There are several areas where one may feel the urge to quibble with the book. First, like all path breaking interdisciplinary books, *Zona urbană* often falls into the trap of using its findings to challenge too many established schools of thought, from underurbanization theory to performativity of knowledge discourses while responding too easily to the temptation to generalize from the regional to the national level of analysis. This can be distracting and sends the reader not only into several theoretical rabbit holes but also into a space where it is hard to assess how convincing the rebuttals are for theories developed in very different fields. A clearer sense of theoretical priorities, better circumscribed findings and more generous interdisciplinary glue would have been handy. Second, while I find commendable the desire to provide a detailed literature review and conceptual translation of the political economy of socialist industrialization and urbanization in the language of a country in which political economy does not really exist as a subfield, this endeavour takes rather too much space (almost 40 percent of the book is taken up by this) and leaves the entire excursus skewed towards the theory side. Sure, the conceptual repertoire of Romanian language sources discussing these issues in ways that are intelligible to international scholars is quite poor and Petrovici's book is a welcome jolt into the right direction. Yet one often gets the sense that many of the terms are explained but not really given enough empirical flesh. Third, as a political economist of macroprocesses I found some of the book's macro findings to be quite unsurprising. For example, it should sound familiar to many in my tribe that infrastructure, industrial equipment and housing were leveraged as the fundamentals of a complex economy via various demand multiplier effects. It is truly useful to see how this mechanism functioned and then broke down by the 1970s, but it is truly not new music in the conventional literature.

Similarly, a whole raft of literature already demonstrated the reasons behind the increasing emphasis on exports after the 1970s in places like Poland, Hungary or Yugoslavia. The fact that this also happened in Romania during the same period is already discussed in the literature and we certainly need more work on the internal dynamics and external implications of the shift, but this book does not really advance the state of knowledge much on this front. Finally, a quick note on methodology: it would have helped to have an appendix providing more detail on the use of archival evidence, the administration of the interviews and the ways in which interview transcripts were used etc. Also, while I found many of the quotes well-chosen, I was left wondering why interview evidence was not used more frequently (e.g. via short paraphrases and quotes shorter than a full paragraph), leaving the impression that some claims were not sufficiently substantiated empirically.

If there is any credibility to the claim that the legacies of central planning weigh heavily on the political economy of today's capitalist development, then Norbert Petrovici opened a new window to assessing its implications.