

RECENSIONI

Dimitris DALAKOGLU | *The road: An ethnography of (im)mobility, space, and cross-border infrastructures in the Balkans*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2017, pp. 203.

«Roads are one of the best infrastructures through which to study anthropologically» (p. xi). In a nutshell, this is Dimitris Dalakoglou's thesis in his excellent volume. He sets out to offer an ethnographic and historic exploration of the «sense of *roadness*» (p. xii), through the elements that make up the cultural-material universe of the Albanian Kakavijë-Girokastër highway. Dalakoglou's book is a powerful ethnography of roads and, implicitly, a manifesto for the ethnographic research of infrastructures.

The introductory chapter begins by observing that classical anthropology tended to locate roads and automobility «far from the ethnographic Other» (p. 1). Perceived as modern artefacts of the Western world, Dalakoglou has identified a bias in the ethnographic site selection, in the sense that in the past ethnographers sought out communities and subjects that are as remote as possible. The situation slightly changed in the mid-20th century, when ethnologists began acknowledging that «highways had marked the end of the semi-isolated, non-modern people that comprised the discipline for most of its history» (p. 2). Subsequently, building on Paul Virilio's concept of the «dromocratic society», Dalakoglou draws attention to the need for a «new critical domology», which goes beyond the occasionally ethnocentric perspectives in reference to non-capitalist or non-western contexts, where «the mass construction of roads was not necessarily accompanied by the widespread introduction of automobility or a similar promise» (p. 9).



In the second chapter, Dalakoglou points out how, in the contexts of the Albanian post-socialist transition and the establishment of the EU in the early 1990s, cross-border highways worked as Alterity filters in the transformation of Greece from migrant-sending country to migrant-receiving country.

Such filters distinguished between the «new Westerners» and «the archetypal necessary Other» (p. 17), a role attributed to the Albanian migrants of the neighbouring country. The collapse of eastern socialist regimes was followed by a series of tortuous and endless transitions to capitalism translated both into privatizations and austerity policies, as well as into a boom in the construction sector. The Lefebvrian spatial dimension of the political economy engaged in this project is an exemplary crystallization of the neo-liberal government project in (re)constructing the transportation infrastructure, a key element in purchasing the status of aspiring integrated member of the European Union.

Chapters 3 and 4 are an ample review of the management of the transportation infrastructure in Albania under various political regimes, beginning with the abundant road network inherited from the invading fascist regime, passing through socialism, and ending in the post-socialist era. If the first stage of extensive road infrastructure development in the 1930s, during the fascist regime, served as an enabler for Albania's invasion by Italian and German troops, the socialist regime led by dictator Enver Hoxha enriched this heritage by connecting the state with the remote mountain villages, thus dissolving the previous sociopolitical system. A large portion of the road system was covered in asphalt, while some roads remained rudimentary paved with fragments of crushed stone. The fragility of the latter became a metaphor for the «fragmented modernization brought on by the project of the Albanian socialist regime» (p. 38). Moreover, the state prohibited private transportation to its citizens, despite mobilizing their labour for building the road infrastructure. Rather than pragmatic or utilitarian, the instrumentalization of these roads, Dalakoglou argues, was a political technology symbolically drawing «the new lineal aesthetics of socialist state» (p. 49). Afterwards, the socialist collapse brought on a series of radical spatial re-significations in Gërkastër, by moving urban centrality from the Pazari historical centre (market, bazaar), located in the medieval area of the city and classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2005, toward the “September 18” Boulevard, that attracts shopping and entertainment investments to the lower part of the city and towards the highway to Greece. Ironically, in front of the former Culture Palace lays the largest outdoor parking lot in Gërkastër.

In chapter 5, the author describes how highways, in the wake of the post-socialist changes, particularly the possibility to own a private car, has become the scene of bubbling mobility. The pioneers of private automobility, lacking experience, have generated the highest rate of car accidents in the world. Dalakoglou highlights the way in which the imagery of perils associated with the highway is dominated by narratives about accidents, attacks by thieves, and other atrocities from the economic collapse and civil war era in 1997. The road is thus the material expression and the symbolic topography of sociocultural anxiety of the entire Albania post-socialist transitional project.

Chapter 6 begins through an analysis of two main road myths. Dalakoglou sees these myths as possibly «the greatest insights into postsocialist, transnational everyday life in Girokastër» (p. 98). The first myth highlights a loss, referencing the possibility that large sums of money lost in the “pyramid schemes” that triggered the 1997 civil war. The second myth revolves around an «uninvited gain», in reference to the ebbs and flows of perils associated with a presumed Greek intrusion. Mobilizing different elements of material culture, the intrusion would entail the identification of certain items that could prove Greek permanence over the centuries in the coffins of Albanians migrant workers who died in Greece and were buried in the (disputed) southern Albanian territory. Another source of anxiety metabolized via the materiality of the road was the rehabilitation project of the Kakavijë-Girokastër border highway, funded by or via the Greek state and enacted by Greek companies, as part of a series of initiatives developed by foreign institutional sponsors. One consequence, in terms of road mythography, of the deployment of this project is the perception that it brings about “national dangers” from Greece, in the context of the rebirth of nationalism.

Even if Dalakoglou does not use the metaphor of the “Trojan Horse”, it seems somehow implicit, especially since it clarifies the relationship between the sponsors’ statement for the «neoliberal privatization of the public sector and particularly of “utilities” encompasses road rehabilitation» (p. 116) and using road infrastructure as a driver toward a market economy. Towards the end, Dalakoglou revisits a previous contribution focusing on Albanian migrants’ house-making projects in their home country, in the absence of a project to return «ensures a constant dwelling and dynamic “proxy” presence for migrants in their community of origin».

As I was reading this highly original volume, I felt that two aspects could have been covered more in-depth. A methodological reflection would have been useful for grounding even more firmly his innovative ethnography into the mainstream anthropological research. Second, it would have been illu-

minating to have (even) a succinct parallel history of the railway infrastructure and its transformation for getting a glimpse of the entire political economy of mobility. Throughout the book, Dalakoglou approaches the infrastructure of automobility through a wide range of theoretical lens, relevant to a wide range of anthropological, sociological and human-geography audiences, capturing the deep manifestations of «the ideological apparatus of road-building» (p. 41).

Bogdan IANCU |

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest

bogdan.iancu@politice.ro