

Dimitris Dalakoglou. *The Road: An Ethnography of (Im)mobility, Space, and Cross-border Infrastructure in the Balkans*. Manchester University Press. 2017. xiv + 203 pp. Illustrations, map. Paper.

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Book Review

The Road: An Ethnography of (Im)mobility, space, and cross-border infrastructure in the Balkans is a newly published book (2017) based on anthropologist Dimitris Dalakoglou's doctoral research. The ethnographic sites of his study were the small city of Gjirokastrë in Albania and the highway Kakavia – Gjirokastrë, a road that links Gjirokastrë with the main cross-border passage to Greece. The principal analytical category of the book is the "road" as infrastructure. Around this key figure several other concepts and ethnographic categories, such as mobility and immobility, houses, borders, cross-boundary inflows and outflows between Albania and Greece, are masterfully orchestrated by the author. As Dalakoglou claims, "the highway and its flows" are not ethnographically significant "because of their uniqueness" (16), but because they provide a prism through which an anthropologist can ethnographically approach wider dynamic processes, including socio-cultural and political phenomena such as the Cold War, the transition to post-socialist Europe and the new social-class divisions, European integration, migration, and the social and financial crisis.

As the author explains in the introductory chapter, in the context of classical ethnography, the topic of roads was marginalized because it creat-

ed anxieties and insecurities for the "ancestors" of the discipline. This phobia stemmed from the fact that roads implied the crossing of epistemological, spatial, and cultural boundaries and put at stake dominant anthropological perceptions, such as the identification of specific cultures with specific places (3). On the contrary, Dalakoglou sees roads as key elements of wider socio-material and cultural nexuses that connect people, places, materialities, ideologies, affects, political regimes, and different historical phases. He also sees roads as elements that *disconnect* these things when they fail to fulfill infrastructure's promise of mobility.

By proposing not an ethnography on the road but rather, an ethnography of the road, the author suggests that anthropology can make roads a central ethnographic subject and calls for the development of a new critical *dromological* discourse. This shift of emphasis from Paul Virilio's concept of *dromocracy* to a new critical *dromology*, is derived from the author's attempt to avoid the use of analytical concepts, such as infrastructure as universal categories and grand schemes, as well as from his effort to overcome the occasionally ethnocentric elements that characterize the critical discourse regarding the "modern postwar expansion of highways..." (9) (i.e. the universal appli-

cability of David Harvey's concept of *time-space compression* and Paul Virilio's speed). By drawing on Lefebvre's approach to space, the author focuses on the diversity of roads through an examination of different representations and narratives that emphasize the historical, socio-material, and sociocultural dimensions of the Kakavia – Gjirokastër highway. He also traces the diversity and transformation of roads and their materiality among different historical periods (from socialist to post-socialist Albania), as well as within different phases of each period.

In the third chapter of the book, the author claims that during the first decades of socialism, the construction of roads in Albania functioned both as repressive and ideological apparatuses (alongside education and the army) and, therefore, as political technologies at the service of the socialist state. Through road construction the state could achieve the modernization of Albania. It could also succeed in linking dispersed places and parts of Albania, a process through which a national identity was imposed "...upon people who for decades neglected the concept of a nation-state" (45). Finally, road construction had a huge impact on the constitution of the socialist subject. Roads were constructed through compulsory unpaid labor, provided by almost every Albanian citizen. What was accomplished through the "...collective building and state control collectivism via the instructed *communitas* of collaboration in manual labor" (46) was the ideological inscription of socialist principles (the superiority of manual over non-manual labor, the non-commodification of labor through the absence of wage) to the Albanians, the creation of a sense of belonging (*communitas*), and the identification of people with the roads and their materiality (47).

In contrast to descriptions of "the modern world in terms of automobility" (5), Dalakoglou points out that the Albanians who built roads were aware of the fact that mobility was not an option. The prohibition of the private ownership of vehicles and the high degree of difficulty in obtaining a passport turned the collectively constructed roads into fields of immobility rather than mobility. Hence, the identification of the proletarian self with roads was fragmented since it was an identification with construction but not with use, a process which played an important role in the gradual detachment (during the late socialist era) of socialist subjects from the socialist regime and to the subsequent collapse of the latter. People's frustration and disappointment with the regime was reflected in the very materiality of the road. Over time, disappointment and harsh daily life led Albanians to put less effort into the construction of roads and, consequently, the quality of roads significantly decreased.

In the fourth chapter of the book, the author claims that with the collapse of the socialist regime, the urban landscape of Gjirokastër was radically transformed through the centralization of its road networks, both spatially and socially. The introduction of private cars, as well as the boom of immigration from Albania to other European countries, shifted the emphasis from immobility to mobility, bringing forth new social hierarchies and divisions. The border of the highway in question, which once constituted the boundary of an entrenched society, turned into an emblematic passage of various inflows and outflows of people, remittances, and materials. The economic collapse that was triggered by the pyramid schemes of the pseudo-banks and the consequent war of 1997 led a large proportion of the population to a second migration within the same decade and further enhanced the new condition of fluidity and uncertainty.

In addition to the aforementioned transformations, for many Albanians, the introduction of private immobile "...property, profit and neoliberal statecraft was closely linked to the rise of organized crime and violence" (96). Of particular interest is the analysis of road poetics that the author attempts in the second part of the book (chapters 5 and 6). He observes that the transition to post-socialist Albania is reflected in narratives, stories, and mythologies about the cross-border highway. Through these stories narrators try to make sense of the new condition and by telling how "...the road itself [is] producing and reproducing the meanings of the space" (82). These stories serve as creative explanatory schemes with respect to the three basic characteristics of daily life in post-socialist Gjirokastrë: a new form of Balkan nationalism, the boom of immigration, and the transition to the market economy. Stories about road accidents, dangerous bandits, vicious villages, and violent acts of war and crime compose a multi-faceted mosaic that attempts to confront the uncertainty regarding the new post-socialist era.

Crucial in this context are the stories concerning *inflows of unwanted dangers and outflows of Albanian wealth*. The road "became a highway between 1997 and 2001...[built] by Greek firms and by the Greek state, using materials purchased and brought from Greece" (163). Thus, the 29 kilometer highway was perceived as a kind of Greek intrusion into Albania and became the theatre of a local road mythology. According to one of these tales that depicts an inflow of an unwanted national danger, Greek spies put Greek artifacts in the coffins of dead Albanian immigrants that were sent to Albania from Greece through the highway, in order to deceive future archaeologists and "legalize" the vision of Greek nationalists and expansionists regarding Greek irredentist territorial claims to South Albania. Another tale (this time about an unwanted outflow) describes how several people witnessed armored lorries escaping to Greece with the two billion US dollars that were lost due the economic collapse of 1997. For the author, this story reflects the unwanted "...outflow of the most productive cohort of the Albanian population..." through migration, as well as "...the outflow of their remittances to the EU, and in the case of Gjirokastrë, to Greece..." through consumption (115).

In chapter 7, the author's use of one of the most emblematic anthropological categories is exemplary. The *house* is not understood as a static unit, but as the primary form of inflow of the cross-border highway. Houses in post-socialist Albania are constructed with materials that Albanian immigrants transport from Greece. Hence, the beneficial inflows of migrants' remittances re-flow to Greece in the shape of the consumption of building materials in order to, eventually, return to Albania for the purpose of housing. It is also important to note that houses were the only element of material culture that under socialism allowed for a coherent identification, since unlike roads and other infrastructure, they provided participation both in construction and use. In post-socialist Albania, however, houses made by Albanian immigrants are rarely inhabited. This paradox indicates the social and cultural priorities of Albanian immigrants, as well as "... the contradictions of a transnational existence in a world of international inequality" (164). Through building houses, Albanians de-alienate the road and the experience of displacement and migration, while at the same time, the construction of houses, perpetuates the dependence of Albanians on migration and displacement.

In the final chapter, which is in part a summarization of the book, the author focuses on the socio-material and political transformations that took place in Europe after the end of the Cold War. The construction fever launched at the initiative of Western Europe was an effort aimed at the "metaphysical destruction of the communist regimes' infrastructure and materiality-its very ethos" (166). Migratory

flows from Eastern to Western Europe, in addition to providing profit, also provided grounds for the formation of new subjects and relationships. Immigrants either added to the existing lower classes (immigrants from the Mediterranean countries and colonies) or, as in the case of Greece, they became a completely new inferior class. The tensions between the previous European center and periphery were blunted with reference to the new otherness, the Easterners. Nowadays, however, after the accession of many former Eastern European countries either to the European Union or through accession negotiations, Easterners are claiming their Europeanness with reference to the new non-European immigrants and refugees in Europe. Meanwhile Albania, along with other European countries, has sealed its borders and impeded these new migratory flows. In this context, and given that the post-Cold War European construction project has significantly narrowed since the 2008 crisis, the author notes that the only untouched point of the program remains the security of the European borders and control over the mobility of these new non-European *others*.

If the book lacks something, it is a detailed presentation of the author's methodology. The work seems quite clearly to belong to an anthropological tradition of multi-local and mobile ethnography. References to George Marcus' work, nomadism, the road itself, and descriptions of ethnographic episodes where the author crosses the borders of the highway with his interlocutors make that connection clear. It is also obvious that the author succeeds in combining several resources (other relevant ethnographies, official statistics, oral history, official history, blueprints) in an excellent manner. However, for a reader not versed in anthropological bibliographies, a clearer explanation of methods of data collection and procedures through which the author forged relationships with his interlocutors would have been valuable.

Secondly, though I found the call for an anthropology of the road a generative programmatic statement, I would like to have seen a clearer argument about what roads in particular constitute legitimate analytical objects. Dalakoglou claims that the grand category of infrastructure, as it has been used in the context of Marxist anthropology, "...is too general to be defined empirically" (11). This is a valid point. Nonetheless, the category *road* seems quite general as well. In an anthropology of the road, could we ethnographically approach only asphalt, concrete, and large-scale highways? Highways are definitely prioritized in this ethnography. However, the Bulevardi 18 Shtatori, a "...roughly 1-kilometer-long asphalt-surfaced boulevard..." (62) that became the new center of the post-socialist Gjirokastër also plays a significant role in Dalakoglou's analysis (chapter 3). Would we be able to ethnographically approach other types of roads such as alleys, cul-de-sacs, rural roads, parking lots, and private roads in gated communities, as well as other crucial aspects of infrastructure such as runways?

Aside from these two weaknesses the book remains a rich and highly informative ethnographic work with intriguing suggestions and concrete arguments, both at a theoretical and empirical level. I would definitely encourage readers interested in the anthropological study of infrastructure and space, as well as those interested in the study of political, economic, and cultural relationships in the Balkans and post-Cold War Europe, to read this book.