

‘The Road from Capitalism to Capitalism’: Infrastructures of (Post)Socialism in Albania

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ABSTRACT *The overarching question of this article is how can we develop a critical understanding of the social place of highways and automobility in the case of a non-capitalist European context such as socialist Albania? Socialism was a period of modernisation for Albania. Part of this modernisation project was the production of a modern built environment, especially infrastructures and urban spaces. Within this context during socialism thousands of miles of new roads were constructed in the country. The remarkably limited use of roads, combined with their systematic building and maintenance, kept this infrastructure's materiality in a relatively good condition for many decades. Since the early 1990s, though, the end of the regime has signified a period of booming mobility and automobility. Postsocialism and the wider context of neoliberalism have been marked by state withdrawal from many of its previous roles, and the maintenance of basic infrastructures has become increasingly dependent on international aid. Nevertheless, the roads are currently being socially reappropriated and reconfigured, as people embrace automobility, which was a very limited practice during socialism. This article explores the kind of socio-material relationships that road construction and the roads themselves generated in socialist Albania and how these are linked to postsocialist spatial practices.*

KEY WORDS: Socialism; Infrastructure; Highways; Materiality; Materialism; Ethnography; Albania

Introduction

A celebrated postsocialist anecdote suggests that ‘socialism was the longest and most painful road from capitalism to capitalism’ (Verdery 1996, p. vii). In the case of Albania this assertion was materialised very literally, as the great majority of Albanian citizens – between 1945 and 1990 – were forced or volunteered to create their socialist homeland by building many km of new roads and resurfacing existing ones. According to the doctrines of scientific socialism such personal involvement in public works would lead to new socio-material relationships and consequently to an emergence of new socialist human subjects. So, Albanian people did not only partic-

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ipate in the production of modern infrastructure, but also in the rest of the Albanian socialist modernisation project, which included the collective construction of their own socialist subjectivity. In this framework, the highways built during socialism in Albania must be seen as one of the most emblematic and symbolically loaded projects of the regime. But more importantly road construction has to be perceived as a key measure of social engineering, since – in a materialist manner – what was primarily created via the production of road materiality were new human subjectivities.

If the materialism of scientific socialism advocates the necessity of novel material infrastructures in order to move towards a new communist social formation, it is also the case that a rather romantic but celebrated trend of Marxist materialist thought, based on the other side of the cold war divide, were not big fans of motor-roads. They were mostly unhappy for a similar reason, namely due to the sociocultural formations emerging out of the new materialities and infrastructures of daily life. A good example of such authors is Henri Lefebvre, who considered motorways as the archetypal spaces produced for the domination of society and the environment (1991 [1974], pp. 124–125, p. 165). Harvey (1990) also draws attention to the political significance of the highway systems for late capitalism's urban growth. A few years before Harvey, Virilio (1974) described modernity as the regime and the rule of the roads (dromocracy) and referred to the city of Paris as being in a permanent state of siege by its peripheral highway with its ceaseless flow of cars. (2004[2005], p. 3). Already since the 1960s some of the most radical thinkers of the continent such as the Situationists, were explicitly paving the way for the critique of highways and automobility. The academic offspring of this wave articulated their critiques not longer after Debord (1967 [1994], p. 123) stated that: 'The dictatorship of the automobile – the pilot product of the first stage of commodity abundance – has left its mark on the landscape with the dominance of freeways, which tear up the old urban centres and promote an ever-wider dispersal'. Perhaps within this tradition we have to consider Marc Augé's perception of motor-roads as exemplary of non-place: spaces which lack social significance (1995, pp. 73–74, p. 100, p. 106, p. 118).

The major concern of the aforementioned Marxist studies of modern spatialities is speed, the so-called time–space compression and the new socio-material relationships it produces in late capitalism. This condition took place thanks to the generalisation in the use of transportation and communication technologies after the Second World War, which resulted in what Marx called poetically and prophetically 'annihilation of space by time' (Marx 1858[1993, p. 539]). After the Second World War, in the West, express-ways and cars were together creating the iconic autopias (Wollen and Kerr 2002) of late capitalism, becoming the major reference of an accelerating and long-distance cosmology of everyday life (Baudrillard 1986).

The aforementioned authors correctly perceived motorways not merely as an economic tool, but as a major political and ideological apparatus of the state's sovereignty and most importantly also as a formidable element of a completely new sociocultural condition. However, we should bear in mind that a major initial reference for the most critical of these authors (e.g. Virilio or Lefebvre) was the emphasis put on motorway construction by both the Italian Fascist and German Nazi regimes. The modern motorways were adopted, developed and extended by these two regimes, with the *autostrada* of the lakes in Milan to be considered the first modern motorways as we know them today. A few years later, the *autobahnen* of the Third Reich provided one of the most filmed, promoted and iconic elements of Nazi propaganda (see Vahrenkamp 2002, Mom 2005, 2006, Zeller 2010).¹ If the cement-surfaced

motorways of the 1920s and 1930s were symbols of totalitarian regimes and the essential part of an economy of war, currently in late modernity we in fact live in an inverted – and asphalted² – version of Hitler's *autobahn* dream. After the Second World War motorways were elevated – from the rural landscape aesthetics and the far-right war machine – into the standard spatial forms of late modern urban sprawl. In spite of the vernacularisation of the process, all over the world governments and societies after the Second World War, started imagining their development and modernisation as a process that would require the hard surfaced, modernist lineal highway aesthetics. Roads were largely about extending the built environment and surfacing 'natural' landscapes with these tangible proofs of technological advancement.

Nevertheless, this aforementioned critical thinking about automobility and motorways occasionally seems to be too Western-centric. In most non-capitalist or non-Western contexts historically the mass construction of roads was not necessarily accompanied by the widespread introduction of automobility. Nor did time-space compression or high speeds follow for the great majority of people. On the contrary, in most non-Western and non-capitalist contexts automobility and high(er) speeds were so exclusive that the asymmetric power divisions were explicitly materialised on the roads, where the more powerful (e.g. the colonialist, the elite etc.) could enjoy the symbolic and practical benefits of fast(er) and more private mobility (see also Ingold 2004). The social differentiation of road use was increased by the fact that in some places those who did not have access to automobility were the same ones who had to build the roads, as happened in colonialist African frameworks (Evans-Pritchard 1960, Thomas 2002) or as we will see below in socialist Albania (Dalakoglou 2009a, 2010a).

Under these circumstances, in non-capitalist and non-Western contexts, probably the promise to expand automobility and the aspiration of the poor and disempowered to be included in the emerging worlds of automobility should be approached critically, but simultaneously this critical thinking should break away to a significant extent from the critiques of automobility in Western late capitalism. Within this context, the overall purpose of this article is to explore how we can understand highways and automobility critically in the non-capitalist context of socialist Albania and its postsocialist version. Based on my ethnographic and archival research of 2005–2006 (Dalakoglou 2009a), I argue that post-Second World War road construction in Albania emerged initially as a de-alienating process through which people aspired to create a novel, socialist and modern future. Later it evolved into a monolithic state-run project, failing on its basic materialist conception, namely the creation of certain social relationships and human subjects. Nevertheless, this incomplete de-alienation paved the way for postsocialist spatial practices and socio-spatial relationships. However, these newer socio-spatial relationships do not comprise a panacea of human-material de-alienation either, but on the contrary they create new social asymmetries.

The Roads of an Immobile Society

The officially approved history of Albania when it refers to the first post-Second World War years states:

In the great burst of rebuilding, the reclaiming of the marsh, the cutting of irrigation-canals and the construction of roads to link the distant regions with

the rest of the country were all set in motion on local and national scale. Voluntary, unpaid work was to play an important role, which was to be one of the most characteristic features of the reconstruction effort in the country. (Pollo and Puto 1981, p. 249)

In the 1940s the idea was that the building of socialism needed the participation of every individual, and the government's plans called for people's direct involvement. These ideological principles were articulated in a report by the editorial offices of the 1946 Constitution of the People's Republic of Albania: 'People are not solidly supporting the democracy unless they grasp the economic problem in their own hands' – pretty literally. This theoretical statement was soon materialised on the roads with the law No. 747 which came into force on 30 December 1949, dictating that it was compulsory for adult men, until the age of 45, to work 'voluntarily' in road maintenance and construction (Gazeta Zyrtare 1950, p. 4), similar laws remained active until the end of socialism. For example, when the 'Road Code of the People's Socialist Republic of Albania' of 1984 (Gazeta Zyrtare 1984, pp. 85–115) was introduced, it included articles outlining the responsibility of countryside dwellers for the administration and maintenance of the roads within their villages. Besides the voluntary maintenance, the regime also extended a policy of paid road maintenance during the 1980s. Several university students in the late 1980s were paid to work during their summer holidays in some of these road works, although the majority of road works in Albania were still constructed by 'volunteers'.

These motorways in Albania were an economically and symbolically oriented priority of the socialist regime and did not address the issue of automobility for the wider society, with the exception of mobility to and from places of work, and sometimes not even that. For example, in the relatively favoured Gjirokaštër region, where I conducted my own ethnography, people of various ages would recall how during socialism they had almost always walked to work; also when inhabitants of the surrounding villages wanted to go to the capital city of their prefecture they had to walk, sometimes for several hours. Although the distances within the city were relatively short, this reflected a more general lack of spatial mobility. It also points to the respective scarcity of vehicles: In 1969, the entire country (with a population of more than 2,000,000 and a total 4000 km of highways) had no more than 2700 passenger vehicles, plus 7700 heavy vehicles (trucks and buses) (Britannica 1974, p. 191; Marmullaku 1975, p. 101; *Vjetari Statistikor* 1991). Most of my informants claimed that they travelled very little, if at all, by passenger car during socialism. Private cars were not allowed in socialist Albania, until permission was granted in a law passed on 19 March 1991 (Fletorja Zyrtare 1991, pp. 122–124).

Furthermore, another dimension of the general condition of spatial immobility was the strict control of internal migration; no one was allowed to leave her or his settlement for another without specific permission. Certainly regarding international mobility the condition was notoriously bad as passports were not available to the general population. Mehmet Biber, one of the few journalists to obtain a visa for Albania in the early 1980s, wrote in a National Geographic article with a certain amount of exoticism involved:

No international highway crosses Albania, no railway crosses its frontier and no foreign airplane is allowed to fly across its airspace, the few commercial

flights have to come from seaward and [in] daylight hours only. (Biber 1980, p. 532).

If one had to travel abroad she or he had to obtain a special one-page permission, a temporary passport which was very difficult to secure and was exclusively available to people with state and Party affiliations. Potential escapees automatically condemned their kinship group to a bad 'biografia', the regime's blacklist, leading, if nothing else, to serious difficulty in gaining access to tertiary education, to Party or other public affiliations. Informants who did their national service on the borders confirmed that border guards during socialism had shoot-to-kill-on-the-spot orders in case they saw an escapee or invader, both considered equally dangerous for the social order. These instructions caused some macabre and at the same time ridiculous incidents when they came into force, such as the execution of people whose backyards were divided by the obscured Albanian–Greek border (see Green 2005 and Dalakoglou (2010a) about this ambiguous border).

Nevertheless, already in 1945 several major automobile arteries and plethora of bridges blown up during the war had been reconstructed. While the Party was organising a socialist politico-economic system, road construction became one of the first priorities; 'Transport and Communications' accounted for the highest investment, after industry and agriculture, during the entire socialist period (*Vjetari Statistikor* 1991). This emphasis on economic modernisation and roads resulted in a significant increase in the length of asphalt-surfaced highways in Albania, from 181 km in 1950 to 2850 km in 1990 (*Vjetari Statistikor* 1991). According to the regime-friendly publications of the 1970s and 1980s, the total (surfaced and unsurfaced) 'automobile roads length was increased three times in comparison to the pre-war period' (Anonymous³ 1984, p. 165; Marmullaku 1975, p. 101). These statistics though do not only hide the practical limitations on road usage by the Albanian society – but most importantly – they mask that this very same society was ideologically and physically forced to work on road building without payment.

Building the Roads

As an Albanian-Kosovar sociologist and Yugoslavia state official (Marmullaku 1975, pp. 101–102) put it in the mid-1970s, 'In Albania every citizen must spend one month taking part in work drives; even diplomats roll up their sleeves and give a hand in the work brigades when they are home on leave'. A decade later in the 1980s the Party of Labour of Albania intellectuals claimed that 'In Albania [...] you are liable to come across workers of the administration, people of intellectual pursuit who are working directly in production shoulder to shoulder with the workers and the peasants' (Anonymous 1984, p. 216).

Although these texts have certain propaganda elements involved; it is true that most informants do not recall ever riding in a passenger vehicle during socialism but they recall helping in the building and rehabilitation of the road network in the country. The unpaid road works involved many different categories of people. First of all were the convicts who did systematic labour on roads and other public works; for some of the (imagined or actual) anti-communist inmates, road construction facilitated the embedding of state-socialist principles and thus their ideological reha-

bilitation. Besides prisoners, various youth unions, women's unions, unions of various non-manual labour workers, local Democratic Fronts, cooperatives and other groupings, all under the Party's control, organised expeditions of 'voluntary' labour on public works, such as roads. Students in higher education also 'volunteered' – and later were paid – for some road construction.

The political power of an apparatus which involved almost everyone capable of work is apparent. Building roads, besides the practical value of providing infrastructures, could be considered ideologically as powerful as the universal and mandatory school education and the universal military training programmes of the socialist regime. As stated explicitly by a popular slogan of the period: 'Let us found a socialist state with a pickaxe in one hand and a gun in the other' (Pollo and Puto 1981, p. 267). The two processes were often materialised through the same policy; as a helpful informant recalled of his army service in the 1970s: 'What guns? We were digging roads and holes in the mountain [bunkers], rather than learning army things'.

Materialities of Modernisation

According to socialist Albanian historiography: 'The ACP were hoping to make Albania, which until then had been the most backward country in Europe, a developed and modern state in the shortest possible period' (Pollo and Puto 1981, p. 251). This modernisation had as its main objectives the industrialisation of production and urbanisation. The latter processes were advertised a lot by the regime: 'Before the war, over 85 per cent of the population was rural and lived in backward and unhygienic conditions, with a high illiteracy rate. Since the revolution this ratio has been completely altered' Marmullaku wrote (1975, p. 107). Or another anonymous Party's intellectual explicitly set out the elements comprising the urban materiality of Albanian modernisation: 'In 1975 the urban population made up 34.4 per cent of the population of the country, as against 15.4 per cent in 1938. The number of towns now is nearly threefold that of 1945. The old towns are being reconstructed, too, with wide, asphalted streets, multi-storeyed modern buildings, cultural and sports institutions, parks and gardens' (Anonymus 1978).

The state authorities undertook the urbanisation projects having built new urban dwellings, industrial zones, redesigning districts, expanding the cities and introducing new infrastructures. This emphasis on urbanisation is indicated by the fact that almost every new residential building constructed by the state was located in the cities; the people in the countryside had private or semi-private houses and they had to take care of the refurbishment mostly by themselves (Dalakoglou 2009a). A necessary part of this new urban planning was the surfacing of roads which were evolving into the key element to complete the picture of modernisation and, by extension, of socialism *per se*. Besides this official literature, people even today never fail to mention the roads as one of the successes of the socialist period. Dino, a former low-ranking official in the Party of Labour of Albania argued during a conversation about progress:

Enver and the Party made this place a country, before they had nothing here, you are young, but if you had been here you would have seen that Albania before the war was nothing because of the king and the foreign interventions! Without state, without order, with poverty, without doctors, if you were sick you were dead! Finished! Illiteracy, to exploit them better, without big build-

ings, without electricity, without water, without roads, without army, without police, without anything! N-o-t-h-i-n-g! Everyone with a pickaxe, and very few 'clever' ones who had the primary accumulation since the Turks [Ottoman period], that was Albania. Eh, Hoxha⁴ made some mistakes, but he took care of the country ... the Party was ordered, today this, tomorrow that, slowly-slowly.

Road construction was accompanied by the building of a modern state apparatus which would have control over its territorial domain and the people living there. Historically the problem that the Ottoman and early post-Ottoman⁵ authorities of Albania faced had been the mountainous terrain of the country. This is to say that often the authorities had to confront semi-isolated mountainous populations who refused to exchange their customary political system for the new modern nation-state. Two pre-Second World War ethnologists of North Albania (Durham 1909, Huslack 1954) and other contemporary travellers (Swire 1929, 1937) provided graphic descriptions of this situation. This disobedience in the early twentieth century was regularly articulated as a refusal to build the roads for free, since voluntary road building was a policy that supposedly was applied by presocialist regimes, indeed with little success. For example, Swire (1937) mentions that local chiefs amongst the Catholic clans of the North had refused to allow their clan's participation in these projects. These disobedient Albanian highlanders had an elaborated unwritten customary law – which, among other things, was associated with extensive weapon use so several presocialist state interventions ended up in armed revolts. In contrast, socialism's roads were often translated as successful 'penetration' of national state presence. State-run publications would express their admiration: 'Motor transport now penetrates deep into the mountain regions of the interior which were inaccessible before' (Anonymous 1978). Besides the roads as such, the socialist state had very effective apparatuses against possible disobedience, precisely via spatialisation of the punishment (exile and displacement) for the ones who would refuse to build the state's spatialities. An informant who is a migrant in Greece today, explained:

We come originally from Shkodër [North], but when they brought the road to our village and my grandfather, with some others, said that they would not build the road for its entire length, but only the section of our plateau, they exiled them with their entire families to the mountains down [South].

The roads, when they arrived, connected up the various remote corners of Albania, effectively networking the state. This expansion of the state apparatuses actually imposed a national identity upon people who had for decades neglected the nation-state idea and remained focused on their local regional systems of references. Since the 1940s, socialism and modern nationalism as unified and unifying ideologies were introduced to local communities, through the inspiration that communist ideals provided to impoverished population of rural Albania and via a Second World War national resistance movement which physically involved thousands of men and women from all over the country. Certainly for the ones who were not inspired by the new ideologies or were indifferent, the enforcement of the new political structure was materialised very tangibly after the Second World War victory. The post-war introduction of roads to remote villages signified first of all the coming of policing apparatuses – comprised partly of

Partisans who had just liberated the country and certainly people's justice system. Gradually, the land collectivisation and the foundation of local agricultural or/and pastoral cooperatives and the local Party's branches arrived along the roads. These processes established completely new spatialities to the local communities alongside innovative ethos and new temporalities. A number of straightforward ideological state apparatuses appeared at the same time as the roads; state schooling, libraries with Party's publications and of course the 'volunteering' for the construction and maintenance of public works were established in towns and in villages. In fact socialism was the first regime which managed to effectively apply a body of such radical reforms on a national scale in Albania.

The Incomplete Subjectivities of the Road

Some of the aforementioned statements, in documents and by informants, imply a relationship between individual subjectivity and the construction of surfaced roads. The individual – potentially – socialist subject was shaping the roads of socialism with his/her body and the building of the road was shaping the body and hypothetically the psyche of the individual into a socialist one. An informant, Adil, explained with positive feelings the logic of the collective building of infrastructures:

That was the socialism of Hoxha, Enverism, all together working one next to the other, with our own hands, with our own sweat to build Albania and to progress, in order to understand what it means, how it is being created, not to wake up in the morning and see a road ready, a square ready, a block of flats high like this ready, like it happens now, but to know well how that was made, how difficult it is and its importance.

Arber, from Gjirokastër, articulated road construction in the 1980 as oppression, but he also emphasised what seemed like an irrational character of the process:

That was Hoxha: 'shut up and work'. Sit here, break stone, build the road, build the wall and do not speak! They were above your head; they were guarding your mouth ... if you would dare, speak! Say something! Complain about working! And see what would happen to you [...] what did they want the roads for, without cars? Why did they have the roads? I tell you, in order to see who complains, they were clever...to see who had contacts abroad, who received television (signal) from Greece and knew that out there everybody had cars! Not like us, we made the roads without cars.

Although this paradox principle noticed by Arber was very much a fact, the collective road construction had a logic; a peculiar one perhaps, but it was a logic. The former members of the Party of Labour of Albania that I knew in Gjirokastër and generally a large number of socialist ideologists considered these kinds of practices as the core of a socialist lifestyle. The collective participation in the building and the consequent development of the new sense of belonging to the new entity of the socialist social body was probably the most powerful ideological element in that process; while the concrete materialisation of this collective effervescence, the road,

was standing there reminding the participants of their contribution to the building of the new Albania and their socialist self. 'I built this road' is what four different people told me about the same road section on four separate occasions in the Gjirokastër area. The road section that they referred to – and that all of them claim to have built – has been largely reconstructed and repaired since 1990, yet the strength of their identification with the site was such that still they state that it was they who built it.

Several men and women were, for a while, collectively transformed into road builders. This innovative experience was embodied by the subjects through intensive physical labour, eventually resulting in the creation of a physical, tangible entity: the road. This was materializing emblematically that collective experience and was comprising a material memory of their collective socialist subjectivity. This was the case particularly with the Party's 'pionieri' (analogous to the Soviet KomSoMol) or in the case of students and young soldiers who had to participate in this road constructions at a particular point in with their lives. In their case one can observe very explicitly the power of the experience of collective building. This was a type of accreditation of the individual communist self. It was the passage from childhood to the real communist adult, who got his hands dirty in a real, manual and productive type of job.

The Materiality of Declining Socialism

Phrases like 'I built this road' imply individual identifications with the state infrastructure. But at the same time, they offer a striking reminder that this identification merely referred to the labour for the building of roads, but could not be expanded to the usage of these same roads. Probably this fragmented connection to state projects was expressed best in the question posed by a woman, who as a student in the early 1970s had participated in the surfacing of the mountainous road that links Gjirokastër with the city of Sarandë. 'For whom were we making the roads?' she wondered, as we chatted together on the bus journey between the two towns.

The Tiranë Party authorities assumed that everyone who participated in road construction automatically identified with the regime's project. As a result, within three decades the regime had become increasingly alienated from the society that had initially inspired. A society which had participated actively during Second World War in the resistance organised by communists and subsequently had voluntarily taken part in the construction of a socialist country, was the same society which a generation or so later challenged the socialist regime precisely in relation to its favoured infrastructure. In the 1970s (especially after the 1976 constitution), the Albanian state turned completely into an isolationist regime; it attempted to enforce total collectivisation even on the level of small domestic flocks and house gardens. However, without international economic exchange and without that small-scale decentralised food production, it could no longer sustain the availability or variety of basic goods. Even the central committee of the 'Party', in 1990, admitted in one of its last publications, in a rare spirit of self-critique: 'Nothing can justify shortages of vegetables, milk, even of meat on the market of any city' (Vickers and Pettifer 1997, p. 22). But the majority of the Tiranë officials were counting numbers rather than people. The state could not offer the various elements of a potentially 'pleasant' identification with its project (such as adequate food or petrol in the stores or the possibility of geographic mobility) but it nevertheless expected the less pleasant

aspects – such as unpaid road building. Within this framework, even if the evidence suggests that the collective building of roads was a genuinely voluntary activity during the 1940s and 1950s, in the 1970s it had become an oppressive apparatus and served to complete an increasingly widespread perception of a state working against society.

Besides the collective feeling of disappointment, this condition was eventually reflected in the materiality of infrastructure, as the road building and maintenance gradually diminished in quality. Many people did not put all their efforts into the road construction while the authorities did not have sufficient local support to mobilise the volunteers. Eventually, in the late 1980s, the government had to pay more and more people for the maintenance of the roads and the voluntary labour was employed only now and then, making newspaper headlines. The materiality of decline can be illustrated by the story narrated by Kosta who remembers with joy an event that took place in the mid-1980s. Someone important for the regime was to visit from Tiranë to review their livestock cooperative. The local Party authorities mobilised almost everyone, to work on the rapid repair of the worn out road that the official's convoy would use. The VIP visitor from Tiranë used the road to arrive punctually at the time announced, but a storm forced him to stay overnight. The locals did their best to satisfy their visitor, who of course enjoyed his stay. But the next morning, the new road was not there anymore as it had been washed away by the rain since nobody had bothered much with the quality of their work.

Postsocialism as Spatial-Material Challenge of Socialism

The collapse of Albanian socialism is closely linked to the challenge of geographic immobility. So the new cities, the roads and the borders, the domains where Albanian socialism had spatialised its own political, social and material existence gradually became the spaces where the everyday challenge to socialism was located.

The revolt which signified the end of socialism and the transition to a multi-Party state actually took place in the Tiranë neighbourhood where the foreign embassies were concentrated. On 2 July 1990, a crowd of hundreds of youngsters clashed with the police, jumped over the fences into the embassies' enclosures and claimed asylum 'abroad' (Vickers and Pettifer 1997). Soon after those events the once sealed and unpeopled highways in the south leading to the Albanian border with Greece were transformed into vast crossing fields. According to a report (de Zwager *et al.* 2005) by the International Organization of Migration's Tiranë office, from 30 to 31 December 1990 alone, more than 800 Albanian citizens crossed the Albanian–Greek border at night. Today, Albania is the most migratory society in Europe: in 2000 it was estimated that around 800,000 Albanians were migrants to Greece and Italy alone, in comparison to 2,500,000 living within the country (King and Barjaba 2005, p. 3). This migratory flow and its scale proved determinant for the demise of socialism as the most productive age groups and thus the most important means of production for Albania, i.e. labour, literally flowed out, within a few months. State plans could no longer be materialised without workers.

Despite the halt to the country's productivity, international migration led to an increase to family budgets due to remittances, which still constitute the major source of cash in Albania (see Dalakoglou 2010b). However, the extended web of highways, their promise of mobility and the past prohibition on private vehicles

have to be seen as closely linked to the development of particular consumption patterns and spatial practices in postsocialist Albania: the first two consumption priorities for those who could afford them were the purchase of a private vehicle, preferably a Mercedes-Benz, and the building and/or restoration of a house (Dalakoglou 2009b, 2010b). Thus, it was that a country with a couple of thousand publicly owned vehicles in 1990, only three years later had ca. 130,000 registered road vehicles and unknown numbers of unregistered ones.

But motor-roads and borders were not the only domains where the regime tried to spatialise its own foundational project and which were subsequently used by people to challenge the entire socialist construction; as was mentioned above, urban planning was another ideologically loaded arena. During postsocialism, the urban planning undertaken by the previous regime was also transformed into precisely a site from which to challenge the values of the old regime. The example of the urban topography of Gjirokastër city where I carried out my ethnography perfectly exemplifies this phenomenon: the old part of the city was registered as national architectural heritage since the 1960s and since 2006 has been classified as a UNESCO world heritage site. Thanks to conservation policies, the city has three relatively well-distinguished zones which correspond to their respective historical periods: (a) presocialist, (b) socialist and (c) postsocialist.

Socialist urban planning included everything that dominant modernist socialist ideology recommended: a wide asphalt-paved boulevard named ‘Boulevard 18 September’ (Figures 1 and 2), after the date that Partisans liberated the city, including a roundabout (Figure 3) at its west end, plenty of multi-storeyed modernist blocks of flats, a stadium and a sports centre.

The post 1990 outburst of private building – mainly sponsored by migrants’ remittances – shapes the most recent urban expansion, on the periphery of the socialist city complex (see Figure 2).



Figure 1. The Boulevard and the rest of the urban expansion of Gjirokastër in the late 1970s.

Source: Photo from Riza (1978), Museum City, Gjirokastra.



Figure 2. The Gjirokastrë's Boulevard in the 2000s.



Figure 3. The Western end of the Boulevard during a typical evening in spring 2006.

However, socially, the most important part of the postsocialist spatial transformations is not the gigantic expansion of the town, but the rapid relocation of the city centre. The Socialist city inherited and expanded the presocialist urban centre: the market district (Pazari) of the Gjirokastrë's pre-war plan, which is located on the hills under the Medieval citadel. However, since 1990, this old centre is rapidly declining and a new one is emerging. The new social centre is the asphalt-paved Boulevard '18 September', which was built during socialism as one of the most emblematic spaces of the new system at the time (see Figures 2 and 3).

Since 1990, the social, economic, political and juridical activity of the city has been concentrated along this 1 km boulevard. Most of the retail shops are there, as

are most of the ready-made food and drink outlets. Moreover, some public services such as the police department, tax office and courthouse have moved from the Pazari area down to the Boulevard. The daily open-air market takes place there as well, and the three supermarkets of the city are also located there. A second post office was opened on the Boulevard, along with five bank branches, in contrast to the one branch in Pazari. In Pazari, there are less and less people and the shopkeepers there complain about the dramatic loss of clientele. Every summer afternoon the Boulevard and its side-walks are packed with cars and people, (see Figure 3) while the transport of both pedestrians and cars in the Pazari district is strikingly diminished; the shops there are gradually closing down while new ones open almost monthly along the Boulevard (see Figure 4).

This urban centralisation of road infrastructure in the form of the Boulevard is closely linked to the mass introduction of private vehicles and the limited space for automobiles in the hilly and steep narrow streets of Pazari by comparison to a wide and asphalted Boulevard. However, the relocation of the urban centre is not only a practical or a spatial phenomenon; it is primarily a social one. The people of the city and the region of Gjirokaštër dramatically centralise geographic mobility in their daily lives. It is estimated that more than one-third of Gjirokaštër's pre-1990 population lives abroad, above all in Greece. So the Boulevard did not emerge as the ideal new centre simply because it meets the requirements of an increased use of motor vehicles as an integral part of urban living, but also because this same Boulevard links the city with the 29 km motorway leading to the Albanian–Greek border. (Dalakoglou 2010b). Given that today about half a million Albanian passport holders live in Greece, these 29 km today, arguably concentrate one of the most amazing volumes of traffic in the country, as they are the few last (or first) kilometres of the largest Albanian–Greek cross-border passage. This cross-border road was indeed one of the best examples of the paradox of the road policies of Albanian socialism. It was literally a forbidden road for the ones who did not hold special permission to reach the borders.



Figure 4. One of the most derelict streets of the Pazari-old centre of Gjirokaštër city during the same period.

Conclusions

According to several anthropologists of postsocialism (e.g. Humphrey 2003, Buchli 1999, Alexander *et al.* 2007, Verdery 2002, etc.) infrastructures in (post)socialist societies have to be approached from a Marxist materialist perspective. That is as both physical–material–economic entities and also more abstractly as entities on which the sociocultural superstructure is being erected. But it is not only anthropologists who think in this way; the majority of people who lived under socialist regimes understand how infrastructures are foundational systems of reference for the entire society (Humphrey 2003). The seemingly inevitable analogy between infrastructure's materiality and the social order is what causes deeply ontological uncertainty and moral panics in many postsocialist contexts, when infrastructures regularly break down due to the cuts in public expenditure and the consequent collapse of the state apparatus in these neoliberal times (see, Humphrey 2003). This material decline represents to most people a wider social decline that has an immediate impact on individual personhood and contributes immensely to the uncertainties of everyday life.

However, the case of roads in Albania seems to be different from other kind of material infrastructures. For example, in the case of postsocialist Albania, although the materiality of substantial parts of the roads was or is in severe disrepair the society reappropriated the roads anew in completely different terms. In spite of the moral panics involved in the increase of automobility, the new postsocialist usage of roads and the explicit inequalities to the ways roads are used and accessed (Dalakoglou 2009a), there are much less feelings of uncertainty linked with the materiality of collapsing roads than one would perhaps expect from a society largely socialised to approach the world in materialist terms. On the contrary, while the materiality of roads is an important subject of discussion in Albania today, and although the material decay of the roads in late socialism led to collective concerns at the time, Albanians in postsocialism seem not to be worried by the uneven quality or simply bad quality of their country's roads *per se*.

Such responses imply ethnographically that the roads in our case are socially appropriated during postsocialism in ways that neglect their materiality. More generally it also implies that roads are a different kind of infrastructure. By definition roads are a far more archetypical social infrastructure than for instance electricity networks or pipelines. Even when roads take their most modern(ist) form – that of motorways – they are still in principle considered part of a familiar technological realm, linked conceptually with the usual categories of familiar mobility infrastructure, well embedded in human experience, imagination and language. So whereas the vast majority of people in socialist modernity were introduced to the other infrastructural networks (such as electricity lines, telephone lines or pipelines) these were experienced as more novel, more modernist, mystified and fetishised than roads were.

During socialism, road construction was prioritised because roads were the material entities that would tangibly and explicitly link the central state to the people of Albania, through controlling a semiologically established material entity. The building of new roads or the repair of existing ones suggested that the state could be imagined not only as a modernising force bringing new things like electric light or other unfamiliar and new technologies, but one that explicitly sought to transform existing daily materialities and provide nationwide networks linking the bodies of new socialist subjects with the state. This link was achieved mostly via people's involvement in the (re)construction of these infrastructures. However, as we saw

above, given the restrictions in mobility roads had little value as infrastructures of human mobility, but they had enormous value as a political technology and material entity that resurfaced the new national territory with the new lineal materiality of the socialist state.

However, the materialism of socialist cosmology sooner or later led to a fetishism of the material infrastructure as such. It prioritised material infrastructures and their economy, missing the links with social relationships and individual subjectivity. Theoretically, the latter ones would be determined in relation to the material form and the socialist mode of their production, which would lead to the consequent socialist consciousness. The physical involvement of people with the emergent infrastructure was considered necessary in order for the desired social order to be (re)produced.⁶ Although the roads under the Albanian Party-Socialist regime were supposed to be produced based on labour relationships that were intended to unite state and worker, eventually this experience of roads alienated the masses from the state. By late socialism, the internal contradictions had become more evident. The value of roads became primarily that of political emblems, monuments to what socialism meant to be and eventually also to its own failure. The spatial policies of the socialist state, in fact literally paved the way for the postsocialist spatial practices of Albanian society. However today in Albania possessing a car becomes one of the most explicit markers of social and class distinction. So despite the promises of the postsocialist dream which were incorporated into the new spatial practices, these practices are not de-alienating for the majority either.

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Notes

1. Already since the Second World War automobility and non-railway-based inland mobility emerge as major elements of the war machine since millions of people had to move to the fronts to kill each other. However, it was during the Second World War when automobility becomes both a major war technology and an ideological state apparatus.
2. The Third Reich's motorways were surfaced with cement not asphalt.
3. A lot of books published by the state-run publishing house '8 Nentori' during socialism in Albania have no author or other entity which signs them. This is a standard practice seen in the context of socialist states or organisations. As a librarian from Tirana explained, the idea behind this practice was that a lot of these books were describing the achievements of all Albanian people and so were representations of the collective spirit.
4. Enver Hoxha was the leader of the Party of Labour of Albania (Communist Party) and iconic leader of the country after the end of Second World War until 1985.
5. The territories that comprise Albania today were part of the Ottoman empire until 1912.
6. A situation that can also be seen in the most social of material 'infrastructures': housing. The claim here is that in socialist contexts the mass housing projects should be seen as part of the wider infrastructure construction projects, with particular significance in fact, since they refer to one of the most intimate and familiar spheres of daily life (see Buchli 1999, Dalakoglou 2009a, 2009b, 2010b).

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