

The Road: An Ethnography of (Im)mobility, Space, and Cross-Border Infrastructures in the Balkans by Dimitris Dalakoglou, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017. 203 pp

Review by Hannah Knox for American Anthropologist, 2018

Who is this road actually for? This is a question posed by one of Dimitris Dalakoglou's research participants and it takes us to the heart of this detailed and sensitive ethnography of a road near the Albanian/Greek border.

Dalakoglou's study of the Kakavijë to Gjirokastër highway is one of a number of recent ethnographic studies of infrastructures in anthropology. These have ranged from studies of transport to energy, housing and borders and are broadly concerned with how ethnographies of infrastructures can reveal the dynamics of political relations. For Dalakoglou the choice to study a road was in fact a detour from his original plan to study architecture and everyday materiality in post-socialist Albania. The focus on the highway emerged in response to the residents of the city of Gjirokastër who articulated their experiences of life in post-Socialist Albania through reference to a road that links Gjirokastër to Greece, Europe, and neo-liberal modernity.

*The Road* helpfully begins by locating the ethnography within anthropological and sociological discussions about mobility, circulation and flow. Roads figure here both as research site and objects that captures particular currents of thought in social theory. This first chapter describes a shift from Marxist influenced understandings of infrastructure as a determinant of the social order, to more post-structural understandings of infrastructures as key to the social production of space. Henri Lefebvre's influence is clear throughout. Roads offer a particularly vivid example of this transition, with their focus not on stasis or continuity but rather on movement and transition. Chapter 2 serves to provide further contextualization for what is to come, explaining the background to Albania's complex relationship to Greece and the European Union. Here we are also introduced to the town of Gjirokastër. Importantly we learn about the centrality of cross border migration in this region, and begin to gain a sense of the way in which infrastructure projects have played a part in the making of this social and political space.

Chapter 3 delves deep into the 20<sup>th</sup> century history of road construction in Albania and retells Albanian politics from the perspective of people's engagements with highways. The main message to emerge from this chapter is that intimate engagements with roads under socialism derived from the incorporation of Albanian citizens into the very act of constructing these material infrastructures: "*each individual Socialist subject shaped the roads of the socialist regime with his/her body and, conversely, the building of the road shaped the body and hypothetically the psyche, of the same individual into a socialist one*" (p45). Chapter 4 continues this historical narrative by shifting attention onto the town of Gjirokastër itself and its status within Albania as both an Albanian regional city and a place defined by its close relation to Greece. The Kakavijë to

Gjirokastër highway emerges as central to the dual identity of the city of Gjirokastër.

At the same time the location of the highway outside the social space of the city also produces its own social dynamics. Chapter 5 demonstrates, as other ethnographies of roads have also done, that the quasi-urban, quasi-wild location of roads triggers stories about dangers that threaten the social order. In the case of the Kakavijë to Gjirokastër highway these range from the prosaic and everyday risks of accidents, to robberies, armed conflict, and trafficking. These latter dangers in particular have provided people with ways of talking about the risks that outsiders pose to social arrangements under both socialism and post-socialism.

In chapters 6 and 7 *The Road* excels in demonstrating, ethnographically, how infrastructures become mediums for the expression of national and transnational identity. Take, for example, the description in Chapter 6 of Albanian car wash owners who have literally extended the concrete footprint of their yards a few centimeters over the asphalt of the road in an act of micro-Albanian colonisation of what they see as an inherently Greek highway; or the description in chapter 7 of houses in Gjirokastër which perform and navigate the tensions of national and transnational belonging. In this chapter, we learn how residents hang national and EU flags outside their homes to deflect the unwanted gaze of others and thus protect against the dangers of the evil eye; how people deal with the complexities of living in properties formerly owned by Albanian families who have migrated to Greece; and how the experience of post-socialist forms of everyday life are characterised by everyday engagements with unpredictable flows of capital and goods.

Ultimately this book is a timely intervention not just into discussions about the way in which infrastructures perform political relations but also about the complex relations of mutual interdependence that exist between states, supra-states and local and migrant populations. In response to Dalakoglou's research participant who asked 'who is this road for', *The Road* shows that the question of what they do and who they are for remains enduringly unresolved. By dwelling in this space of irresolution, *The Road* offers a case study of the everyday experience of the shift from socialism to post-socialism, and a compelling description of how lives are lived in on-going states of transition.