The Truth About Crime

Karen Faulk
March, 2018

What is 'crime'? A social pathology? A violation of social order? The object or raison d'être of law enforcement? How can we best conceive of crime, criminality, and attempts to combat it? Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff unpack the place of crime in postcolonial, neoliberalized South Africa and beyond in their 2016 book *The Truth About Crime: Sovereignty, Knowledge, Social Order*. In doing so, they find the 'truth' about crime to lie in the way it serves as a medium through which ideas about social life are understood, shaped, and enacted. Crime is, in this assessment, fundamentally a reflective 'metaphysical optic' [8] through which people make sense of and act upon their social worlds, shaping and reshaping

their politics and publics, forms of governance, and adscriptions of sovereignty.

The book is divided into two parts. The first, divided into 3 subsections, concerns the changing landscape of state, governance, and capital starting in the late 20th century, and its effects on the social locations, regulation, perceptions, and representations of crime.

Their argument is that the impact of postcolonial neoliberalism in South Africa, and similar shifts in ideas of citizenship and forms and practices of state sovereignty elsewhere, have led to crime taking on a position of heightened prominence in the social imaginary, serving as symbol and symptom, cause and consequence of the breakdown in social order.

The first subsection does the brunt of the work in tracing this 'tectonic shift,' laying out how the emerging conception of social order is based largely on the "protection of property and the (self-possessed) persons who owned it from variously criminalized others," and in which the social and structural determinants of crime are erased from the language of law-making and law-breaking [25, 16]. In this new social order, as others have also noted, freedom is equated with choice, citizens engage in society as consumers, and state sovereignty is dispersed, though the privatization of security and the outsourcing of the work of disciplining labor to corporations and the vagrancies of the market.

In this configuration, policing becomes more a force for maintaining public order than fighting crime.

The second subsection focuses on the dyad crime-and-policing, a term which the authors use throughout the book to highlight the inseparable entanglement of the two. Specifically, they consider how the function of policing has trifurcated, "allocating the enforcement of order to the state, labor to the business sector, and the everyday protection of persons and property to the private domain, itself divided into the commercial (i.e., domestic security services) and the communal

(i.e., neighborhood watches, informal justice, civic associations)" [67]. They also consider how public perception of the police, in contexts rife with police brutality, fear of police institutions, and state repression, leads to a "pathological public sphere" [38], in which the state is still normatively expected to take responsibility for all aspects of protection and enforcement, even as trust in the police and the state's ability to carry out this function is seen as impossible.

In what is perhaps the liveliest chapter of the book, the final section of part 1 traces how this 'seismic shift' is reflected in popular representations and the role of these in articulating and shaping social knowledge. The analysis draws on televised serials like *The Wire, Breaking Bad*, and *The Sopranos*, films like *Hijack Stories* and *Gangster's Paradise*, and plays like *Love, Crime, and Johannesburg*. In doing so, it exposes how criminality serves as a privileged vehicle for exploring the tensions, contradictions, and configurations of contemporary society.
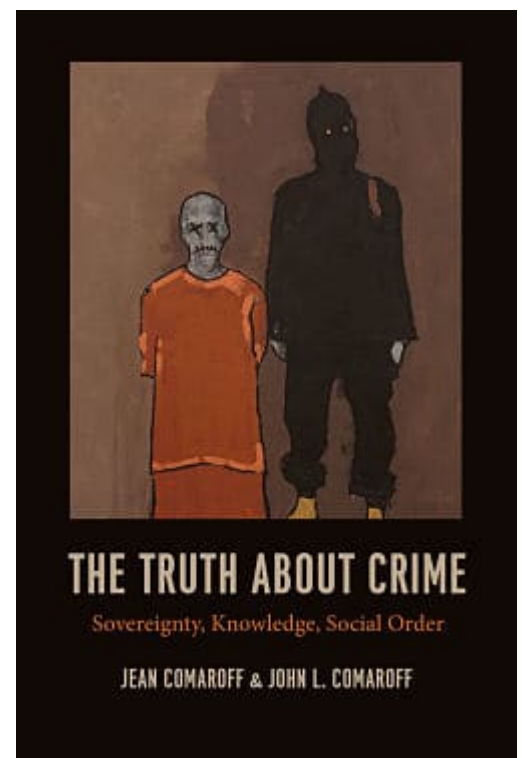
The second part explores in depth the interrelationships of law, policing (official or otherwise), and social order. Drawing on Durkheim, they emphasize the ways in which crime has served as the lens through which society is imaged as a normative, authoritative sociomoral order. Yet in the new social order, they propose, we have seen a drastic destabilization of forms of authoritative knowledge, with the effect that establishing social facts or trusted truths becomes difficult if not impossible. In focusing on policing and the many official and unofficial forms it now takes, they show how crime, having lost its ability to figure as the stable antithesis of sociomoral order, becomes 'unreadable, mysterious, explosive' [123].

The second and fourth subsections of part 2 take on the 'terrain of enforcement' in South Africa [184]. The second concerns the policing of personhood and the quest of establishing personhood in uncertain times. It covers charlatans, imposters, and zombies, and how these question (or are symptoms of the questioning of) the particular ideas of authenticity, property, and individuality that are embedded in the idea of the self-possessed subject. They trace how, as humans become ever more self-defined as entrepreneurs of the self, as a form of capital, as *homo economicus*, "...authenticity becomes at once fetishized and impossible" [142]. Overall, the enforcement and protection of personhood as property becomes yet another impossible benchmark for measuring security and evaluating the state. The fourth subsection further explores forms of alternative policing and informal justice and the degree to which they manage to exercise sovereignty in lieu of (or in conjunction with) the state and state or market-controlled forms of policing. It explores Lone Rangers, moral policing and forms of faith-based enforcement, and organized anti-crime. Overall, they conclude that South Africa, like much of the rest of the world, is drifting evermore in the direction of deregulation of crime and justice [216].

Quantifacts, or "statistical representations that make the world "factual"' [145], are the subject of the third subsection. It traces how crime rates circulate and how crime statistics (themselves the product of culturally mediated processes and not objective reflectors of any reality) come to increasingly represent that nation itself. The authors' 'criminal anthropology' (a provocative term ripe for further exploration) traces the currency that crime statistics acquire, gaining in value and veracity through the sheer act of their repetition, and how such measures of lawlessness and victimhood have become highly productive of social imaginings.

Covering a wide range of ideas and examples, the book as a unit provides an overview of how crime-and-policing serve as the medium through which reconfigured notions of sovereign authority, law, and citizenship, and the social contract are molded. It also probes the nature and construction of social truths and social order, and the messy, violent, and disruptive forms of social interaction that flourish in the reconfigured spaces between the state, capital, and sovereign

power.

> *This book will be of great use to scholars of crime, policing, and the state, or any facet of emerging social order following two decades of uneven but persistent implementation of forms of neoliberal governance.*

Overall, its chapters draw together threads of social theory in constructive and insightful ways, and it could be productively used in graduate courses on the state, political and legal anthropology, crime, or security.

Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff. 2016. [*The Truth About Crime: Sovereignty, Knowledge, Social Order*](). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 336 pp. Pb: $27,50. ISBN: 978-0-226-42491-0.

[Featured image]() *by* [Abhisek Sarda]() *(flickr,* [CC BY 2.0]()*)*

Podcast Interview Round Up: The Best of February

Allegra
March, 2018

Did you forget to give a Valentine's Day present to your ears? Don't worry, because you can still make amends through the gift of anthropology podcasts. Yes, it's our monthly round up of the best author interviews brought to you in collaboration with [New Books in Anthropology](#).
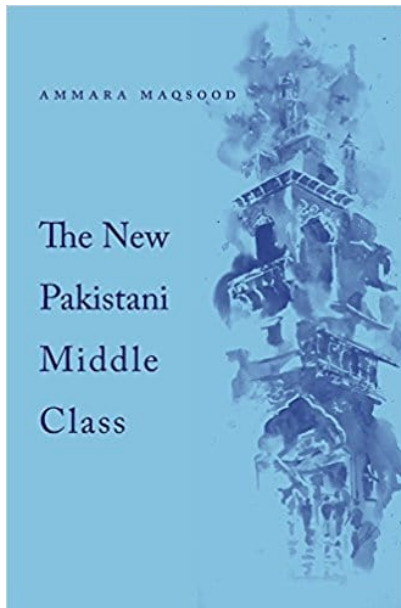
[The New Pakistani Middle Class](#)

by Ammara Maqsood

(Harvard University Press 2017)

The relationship between class and religious piety represents a theme less explored in the study of modern Islam in general, and in the study of South Asian Islam in particular. In her incredibly nimble and nuanced recent book *The New Pakistani Middle Class* (Harvard University Press, 2017), Ammara Maqsood, Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester, addresses this lacunae by offering a fascinating narrative of the intersection of religion, class, and piety among the urban Pakistani middle class. With a focus on the history and present of older and the new middle-class communities in Lahore, this book charts with remarkable analytical precision, the interaction of global and local politics, and the choreography of everyday religious life among the urban middle class in Pakistan. Theoretically sophisticated, historically grounded, and ethnographically vivacious, *The New Pakistani Middle Class* represents a groundbreaking contribution to the study of post-colonial Muslim societies, South Asian Islam, and to the anthropology of religion and Islam. In addition to its intellectual merits, this book also reads lyrically making it eminently usable in undergraduate and graduate seminars on religion and class, Urban Studies, South Asian Studies, Islamic Studies, and Anthropology.

Interview by SherAli Tareen

Listen **here**!

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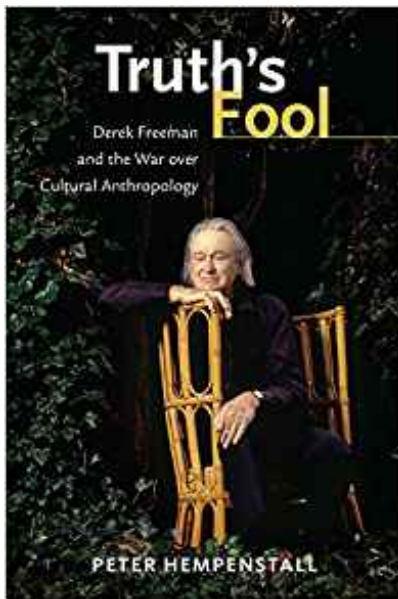
[Truth's Fool: Derek Freeman and the War over Cultural Anthropology](#)

by Peter Hempenstall

(University of Wisconsin Press 2017)

The debate over Margaret Mead's and Derek Freeman's conflicting ethnographic reports has gone on for decades. While no longer a hot topic, Mead-Freeman stands as a testament to the power and, sometimes, imprecision of social scientific inquiry. In his new book, *Truth's Fool: Derek Freeman and the War over Cultural Anthropology* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2017), Peter Hempenstall (emeritus professor of history at the University of Canterbury and conjoint professor of history at the University of Newcastle) gives an unprecedented look at the life and works of a controversial figure in the making of modern anthropology. In this interview, we discuss how cultural and nationalistic biases played a role in the Mead-Freeman controversy, whether or not Freeman suffered from mental illness, and why the man is often misrepresented in the history of the discipline.

Interview by Jared Miracle

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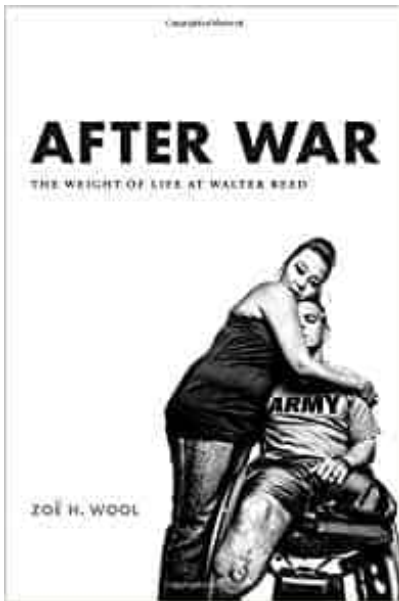
**[After War: The Weight of Life at Walter Reed](#)**

by Zoe Wool

(Duke University Press 2015)

Zoe Wool's ethnography of rehabilitation *After War: The Weight of Life at Walter Reed* (Duke University Press, 2015) describes how soldiers injured in the war on terror are pulled towards a normal and idealized American life (Duke University Press, 2015). She describes how the iconic military hospital orients its patients (mostly men) towards normative masculine domestic ideals in an attempt to assimilate them to ordinary life. By closely following their lives in and out of rehabilitation (clinical and domestic), Wool shows us how impossible and fraught this "ordinary" is as the men subvert and are caught between multiple desires and realities: to be home, whole, ordinary fathers and husbands, heroes and symbols of exceptionalism. The weight of life is carried by these soldiers and veterans who are asked to do so much cultural work in the service of their nation on and off the battlefield.

Interview by Dana Greenfield

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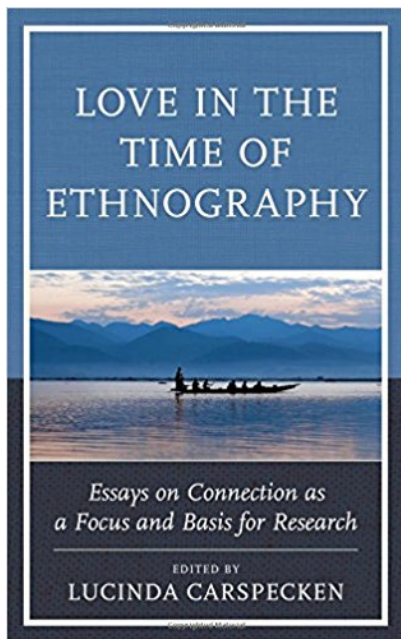
[**Love in the Time of Ethnography: Essays on Connection as a Focus and Basis for Research**](#)
by Lucinda Carspecken
(Rowman and Littlefield 2017)

Love in the Time of Ethnography: Essays on Connection as a Focus and Basis for Research (Rowman and Littlefield, 2017) is edited by Lucinda Carspecken, anthropologist and lecturer in the School of Education, Indiana University Bloomington. In this beautifully curated book, contributors from various social science disciplines—sociology, anthropology, education, psychology, etc.—explore different facets of a basic component of human life, love. The authors define love broadly to include affective feelings, expressions, practice and philosophy across different cultures and traditions. It not only reveals how affective feelings are deeply shaped by different cultural, social and political practice, but also examines love's potential to transcend the boundaries between self and the other, to increase the solidarity among young activists, to overcome traumatic experiences, and to anchor the relationship between human beings and nature. While grounded in the ethnographic approach, the book also intentionally includes unconventional academic writings such as poems and autobiographies. Of particular interest is the discussion of love as a primary tenet in social science research methodology: the conceptualization of research praxis as love-in-action and the expatiation of the relationship between love and validity.

Audience who are interested in the emotional and affective aspects of human life will find this book inspiring. It will also draw attention from social research methodologists who are searching for alternative research paradigms other than the predominant post-positivist approach.

Interview by Pengfei Zhao

Listen **here**!

http://files.newbooksnetwork.com/education/080educationcarspecken.mp3

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My Brother is an Only Child. Precarity and Solidarity in Post-Neoliberal Societies

Salvatore Poier
March, 2018

This text, written by our guest editor Salvatore Poier, is a plea for solidarity and a request to engage in a vigorous and honest debate about the meaning of precarity in academia and elsewhere. While UK Universities are currently on strike to save pensions, we, at Allegra, feel the moment is ripe to start a broader discussion about the future of work in institutions of higher education. Join the conversation! Share your experience with us by either posting a comment after this post or by sending us a text at: submissions@allegralaboratory.net. We want to hear from you!

"Mio fratello è figlio unico perchè non ha mai vinto un premio aziendale

[…] Mio fratello è figlio unico: sfruttato, deriso, calpestato, odiato. E ti amo

My brother is an only child because he never got a company award

[...] My brother is an only child: exploited, laughed at, stepped on, hated. And I love you, Mario

Rino Gaetano

My brother is an only child.

I saw him running from class to class, from campus to campus, piecing together enough under-payed adjunct teaching so he can have enough to pay rent, and his student loans.

My sister is an only child.

I saw her exhausted, juggling a kid and freelance contracts, many of which pay almost nothing, but promise "a foot in the door".

My brother is an only child.

I saw him keeping a straight face when they told him "you're overqualified" for a better payed job that he could do on the side, while focusing on his research.

My sister is an only child.

I saw her puzzled and frustrated when they told her "you haven't published enough" refusing her application for an assistant professorship.

My brother is an only child.

I saw him recommended to focus on his writing, that something will come up sooner or later, as if eating and sleeping in a house were free for everybody.

My sister is an only child.

I saw her being told to her overworked face that she should stop taking so many jobs and focus on what she really wants to become.

My brother and my sister are only children. They have been told to believe in a dream that rests on the ashes of many broken dreams.

"Precarity" has been used and abused enough. It's funny: the cannibalisation of the term happened under the good auspices of precarious people themselves, thinking that finally someone was actually paying attention to their situation, to the constant erosion of job security, of professionalism, of thinking of the future as something uncertain but nevertheless as something to look forward to.

In the early 2000s I was still an undergraduate student in Italy. My colleagues were starting to organize around the idea of "precariato" and they came up with the image of San Precario to play with the Italian iconography of saints and hagiographic creativity. Of course, San Precario was the protector of precarious workers and s/he was celebrated only on Sunday February 29th, to underline both the intermittent nature of precarity and the desacralization of the "day of rest".

In fact, there is no rest for precarious people.

We have to piece together different jobs, often at different locations, in order to scrape together some resemblance of a salary. The idea of being a "productive

member of society" is an expression we, the precarious mass, often just giggle at, a joke we tell each other.

Slowly but surely the idea of precariat has been picked up by European and South American countries first, and more recently by North Americans. Spreading from the South of Europe (Italy, Greece, and Spain, where first San Precario was "worshipped"), the cult of San Precario also started to gain followers elsewhere. Precarious academics started to write blog posts, and then articles, and finally books about the condition of precarity, and how that affects the future not only of peoples, but also of nations.

2018 is reinforcing the trend, and in the United States of America of all places, with even [Cultural Anthropology dedicating an entire online initiative to precarity](#).

But what is precarity, exactly?

I remember describing – in 2014 – the concept of precarity to my American students visiting Italy for a study abroad program. They looked puzzled, and at a certain point they said "that's what has always have been: it's being stuck in a temp job".

That definition troubled me. The use of "being stuck," for instance, subtends a fault of the worker – you're stuck in a series of menial jobs because you either don't apply yourself enough, or because you don't focus on what you want to do/become. But also the use of "temp job" is misleading: a temp job is possible when either there is a proper job that needs to be temporarily covered (someone is sick, a pregnancy, etc.), or when there is more demand for jobs that have a temporary nature (Christmas shopping, summer resorts, etc.). This mix of temporality and lack of drive did not sit well with me.

The main issue is that precarity is not just "jumping from a job to another" and not having the possibility or capacity to hold a steady job. It is more about the artificial creation of scarcity of steady jobs that pushes everybody to jockey for the desirable ones. To hire a precarious worker is cheaper than hiring a normal

one. And when there are many people looking for jobs, it becomes a race to the bottom – to those who are more desperate, thus willing to accept a job for less and less money, with fewer and fewer benefits.

Now, especially in academia, the idea of merit always guided the discussion: those with merit will rise to the top, while the others will find different employment. But in reality the very idea of merit is full of pitfalls. We love to think that we actually deserve our jobs – that our research is top of the line, that we worked hard, that we are experts in our fields. And still I meet plenty of people with menial jobs who *did* work hard; their research *is* top of the line; they *are* experts. Yet, they are scraping by.

In his multiple studies on the effects of wealth on the self, [Paul Piff found that the one (wealth) influences the other (self) in negative terms (narcissism)](#). [His TED talk](#) is actually pretty enlightening and sourly hilarious at the same time.

But if we academics are ready to laugh and point our fingers at those *really* rich people (think of people in finance, for instance), we are not that prone to think of ourselves as "those narcissistic and entitled a**holes". We did work hard for our tenure! Those who did not get tenure – or did not even get a tenure-track job – really do not deserve to be taken into consideration as our peers. There is no comparison between "us" and "them".

Or is there?

The problem is that even academic jobs are subject to the logic of the market. Sometimes your skills are precisely the ones that a specific position requires. Sometimes you don't have kids – or your kids are already grown up, or your parents or family can take care of them for free – so to accept a labor-intensive position that might be relevant for future growth is possible. Sometimes you are citizen of the right country, making it possible to accept a job that otherwise would have been unacceptable for bureaucratic reasons. Sometimes you connected to the right person at the bar after the conference. Sometimes your teaching or research is not seen as a threat to your students (Marx? You teach

Marx to students? Are you a communist? Should we be worried?). Sometimes you see a notification from the right Facebook friend mentioning a position you would have not found otherwise. Sometimes you were hired at a time when they were hiring a professor every month, and when publishing one article every year or two was plenty. Sometimes you are the son or daughter of doctors or professors. Sometimes you have gone to excellent schools since you were a toddler. Sometimes your skin is the right color. Sometimes your family was not even interested in buying a newspaper – let alone a book – because who needs to read if you have a TV. Sometimes you speak the right language as a native. Sometimes you could spend all your teenage years traveling abroad rather than flipping burgers and serving ice cream. Sometimes your merit counts enough not to embarrass those who decided to hire you instead of someone else.

What I'm trying to say is that merit counts for sure. But it is not all merit. Luck, as they say in Italy, sometimes *is* a great substitute to a well-planned plan.

To be precarious, then, is not necessarily all the fault of the precarious person. And to be fully employed – maybe tenured! – is not all the merit of the fully employed person either. We should stop thinking of ourselves as *fabri fortunae suae*. If part of our life is determined by our actions, not all of it is – as the guy hit by a meteorite once said. We should stop acting as if our jobs and careers are entirely defined by us. And, conversely, that the lack of job or tenure is all the fault of those who didn't get it.

I know this is a delicate topic that might irritate many. But it is also at the core of a sense of solidarity that is, right now, mainly missing. My brother is an only child because I cannot really imagine it is not completely and entirely his responsibility if he finds himself in such situation. The narrative of merit has permeated us all so intimately that we cannot really think that "we" – employed and maybe tenured – are exactly the same as those adjuncts or baristas. We thought class was a thing of the past – something for old school Marxists.

Yet we in academia are still in a class-based society, created and perpetuated

by our feelings of deserving the job that we got (good or bad); that merit counts, and that – at the end of the story, for those without a job "it's a little bit his/her fault".

Don't get me wrong: I am not saying that all precarious workers are saints, all without sins, victims of an unjust world. What I am saying is that those with a solid job do not necessarily develop a feeling of solidarity because we are taught to distrust our brothers and sisters rather than the system. It is easier to say that the person who doesn't want to take a job that demands 20 hrs/week of teaching/prepping/grading for 200$/week with just the vague possibility of a better job in the future is a snobby brat; who doesn't want to pay their dues; who is not willing to make sacrifices now for a better future. It is easier to say that they did not focus enough on their career, that they are not motivated enough. It is easier, in substance, to blame individuals for lack of effort rather than a system of privilege that rewards some because it can count on the low-cost labor of many.

It is, at the end of the story, a very religious way of thinking: we come from a long tradition of religions that promise eternal, luscious life in exchange for pain and discomfort now. We resent those who have fun now, and label them as immoral, as unethical, as grasshoppers in a world of hard-working ants.

But those grasshoppers did work hard. Those slackers did finish a Ph.D. Those lazy and entitled pseudo-scholars did teach for years for pennies. Why should they settle for yet another menial job? Why should their dreams of having space and time for their research be shattered by yet another job that doesn't pay enough to live, let alone to buy books or spend time writing? Why were they promised job security and maybe research money and now they are laughed at if they ask for a raise for their adjunct position, or given the response that "there is no money" or "all the others are paid this much:" "it's a matter of equality among faculty"? With tuition skyrocketing everywhere, how is it possible that there is no money for those at the core of the business of universities? Why and how has asking for a decent pay became an outrageous thing to talk about? Why do we need to bury

our dreams of a decent life; of time for our families; of time for reading, going to an exhibition, to a talk, to a museum; of not worrying constantly about money; of feeling useful and valuable members of society?

The fact is: we need broken people. They are the ones carrying on the costs of the dream – the dream of hard work that pays off: an office, research money, time for research, teaching any course that I can dream up, having T.As, having a sabbatical for Pete's sake! As in many other fields, the underpayed, hard work of most makes possible the narrative of hard-work-that-pays-off for some.

We all believe in a dream that rests on the ashes of thousands of broken dreams.

Because we hope we will be the ones to "live the dream". Forgetting that our dream rests on the shoulders of our brothers and sisters, all of whom are only children.

So, next time you see someone with a menial job, remember that s/he is the reason you have your solid job. And if you want to show solidarity, a generous tip doesn't make the cut: we ask for dignity, and we need help to show that our jobs are actually fundamental to the functioning of the everyday.

So keep your tip, and start standing ground along with us. At the next faculty meeting start asking about the pay for adjunct positions. Reach out to us, and help in organizing awareness seminars and meetings. Strike with us and maybe *for* us.

Show us we are not only-children anymore.

[Featured image by Jordan Whitfield](www.unsplash.com) *(www.unsplash.com)*

Review: White Gold. Stories of Breast Milk Sharing

Michael Costello
March, 2018

Those of the general public who have heard of milk kinship usually regard milk kinship as a feature of "primitive", "tribal" lineage-based societies, often semi-feudal, with residues almost confined to today's Middle East and Central Asia. In this volume Professor Susan Falls presents detail of her research on a kinship

network of human breast milk sharers in a capitalist society today in the southern USA. Her fieldwork is "at home" among women who share breast milk in variously-structured networks, and she discusses many aspects of the practices, and the social and commercial barriers erected against this that include so-called common sense, feelings of disgust, prejudice and pressures from commerce and the state. These often give rise to breast milk sharers finding defence in self-imposed anonymity to hide themselves and the networks from public view. Falls discusses a topical phenomenon which is very much alive, that goes beyond occasional feeding another mother's baby. It goes beyond the practice of hiring wet nurses, where the milk shared is often sought in the expectation that strong qualities in the mother will be passed onto the child through the milk. Falls examines the social networks of milk sharers that have arisen.

How companies exert pressures against breast feeding mothers includes 'inducements' given to doctors, midwives and health workers to recommend their factory-produced substitute products, as *The Guardian* (27.2.2018) reported: "Formula milk companies are continuing to use aggressive, clandestine and often illegal methods to target in the poorest parts of the world to encourage them to use powdered milk over breastfeeding."

The discussion is an anthropological one which ranges across sources of ideas within the discipline and tackles the many different ways breast milk sharing is organised. The chapters are each part of an interlacing web of evidence, ethnological, historical, cultural and commercial, covering notions of and the practices of breast milk sharing and buying, pulling them all together in lengthy narrative fashion. She considers the argument among sharers and others as to whether donated milk should be free or paid for, but shows that today's principal contentions are between social/personal wishes among mothers' preferences and the drive by companies to commercialise and regulate breast milk sharing through the promotion of substitutes by "the profit-driven formula", in the words of one of her informants (p.19). She herself adds: "the history of ideas […] is important, but I am interested in a more pragmatic question: How and why do tokens of 'liquid gold' matter?" (p. 19).
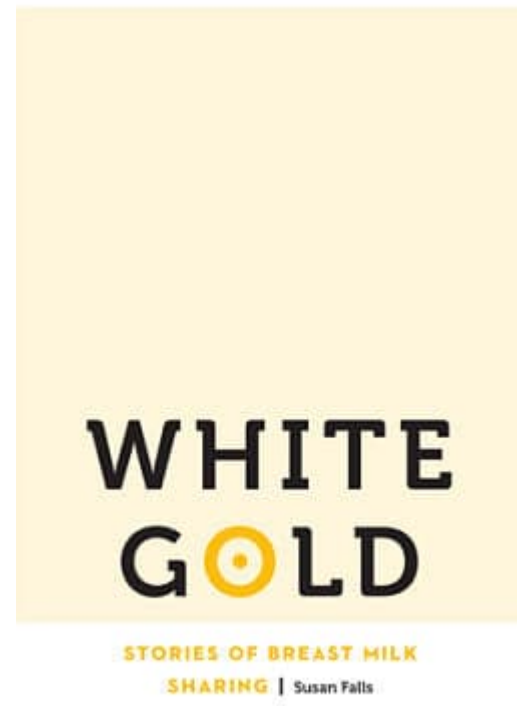
The imposition of state regulation works against individual milk sharers' perceptions and creates difficulties in sharers constructing social networks among themselves.

It is the telling of these conflicts that runs as a thread through the work, and lead to her describing human breast milk as in danger of being looked on as a trading commodity, one interpretation of the "White Gold" of the title. Despite the complication, she finds: "As a patterned socio-techno-material practice that is reproducing itself, milk sharing becomes ever more mainstream each day but still promises an array of undiscovered critical possibilities and outcomes" (p. 189).

Susan Falls' partisanship in her advocacy of the merits of breast milk sharing as

against buying substitutes is clear: "A refusal to participate in the commodification of breast milk using an unregulated sharing infrastructure is a way of refusing to reduce life to capital, and I cannot help but to (sic) wonder what legal, cultural, or economic techniques might soon make informal sharing more difficult" she muses (pp. 23-24). She returns to these ideas many times in the course of setting out and interpreting the wealth of findings from hers' and others' fieldwork, with theoretical elaborations on them.

Hers is fieldwork "at home", and was stimulated by her discovery in her own family of an extensive network of children related through women who shared their milk and their constructing milk kinship through cross-breastfeed babies was a stimulant to embarking on the research. It draws on interviews, conference discussions and an impressively extensive literature which carries the reader through time and across the world, through the views of multiple scholars, providing a wide range of references for researchers while commenting on them herself.

The whole makes for a challenging wealth of information for scholars who are interested in the topic and others who are finding their way through actual practice of breast milk sharing, as the author does not disguise her commitment to further study.

Indeed, she finds examination of the width of horizons to be opened up by further investigation imperative if people are to stem what she sees as the drift to total commodification of the milk of human beings to what some regard as cannibalistic, being sold in ice-cream, pies, pâtés etc.

It is her conclusion that "Milk sharing is a model for the circulation of material culture and ideas of many kinds, and it lends texture to the body politic a surprising, empowering, and diverse form of civil society." (p. 24). As to the contention of commercialisation and resisting it, Professor Falls allows for possible compromises: "Perhaps relationships enabled by commodified versus donated breast milk could work on a continuum, some participating in it strictly

for the money while others do it for the emotional satisfaction, or for some, a bit of both" (p.197).

Some non-specialists might find this volume something of a medley that makes it difficult to fathom what could appear to them at times as somewhat "crowded". A book for reference, a possible warning, a promotion of more social interactions between people based on sharing human milk and, certainly, stimulating for thought and research.

Because we're #HAPPY? REDUX

Miia Halme-Tuomisaari
March, 2018
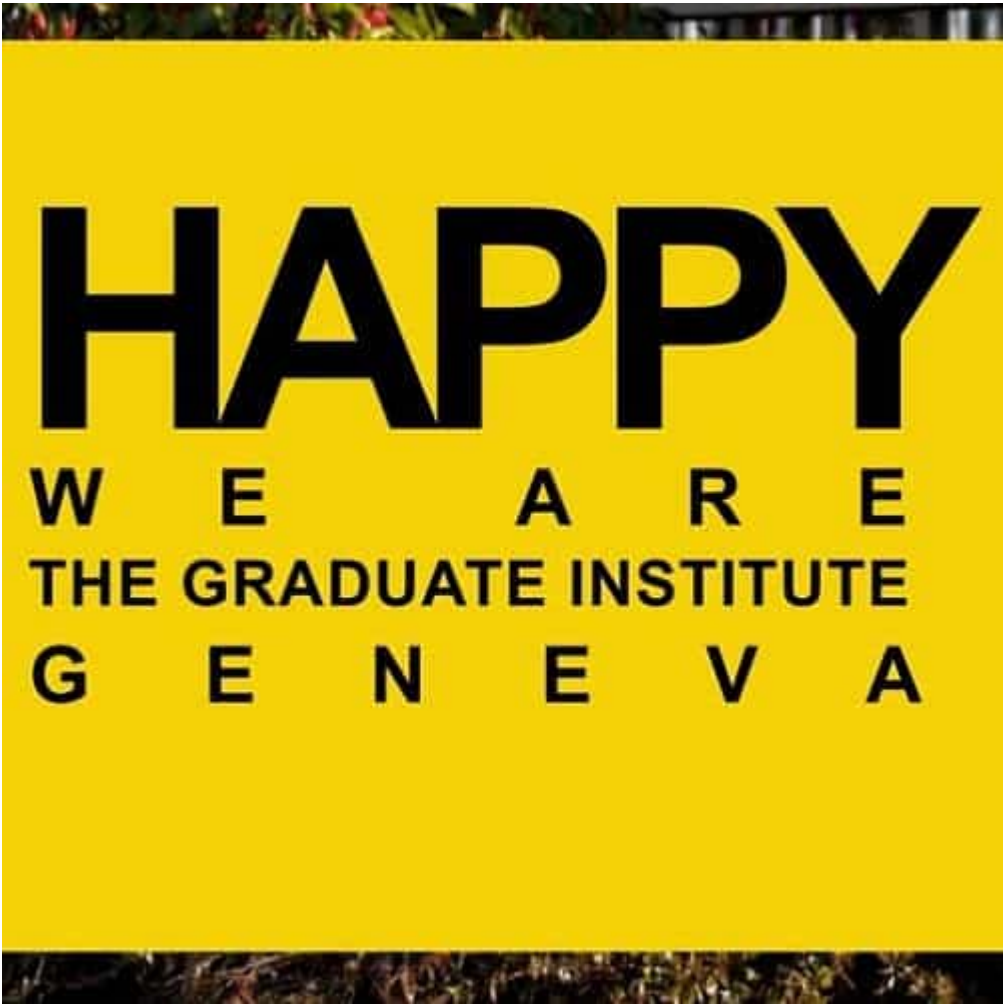
Today we have, once again, witnessed the arrival of the [World Happiness Reports](#) – reports that claim nothing less than to offer a neatly quantified, 'objective' measurement of just how happy we are! What are these reports all about – why are we enticed by the idea that happiness could be measured in any meaningful ways? Allegra's [Miia Halme-Tuomisaari](#) reflects on these thoughts and more in this 'jewel from Allie's archive', originally published in 2014 – at the height of [#happy](#).

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BECAUSE WE'RE #HAPPY?

Over the past weeks the social media has been flooded with videos of people

around the world dancing to [William Pharrell's tune 'HAPPY'](). One of the most memorable videos (shared also by Allegra) is the one [from Dubai](). However, the title for the video with the most nuanced subtext needs undoubtedly be bestowed on the video featuring [students of the Geneva Graduate Institute]().

In the video attractive young adults of diverse ethnicities dance in the gorgeous Geneva landscape filled with lush green parks, the beautiful Lac Léman and the breath taking mountains hovering in the background – and as if in concrete mockery of all those currently exposed to less-amicable climates, all are clad lightly (yet smartly) with no woollen scarfs or heavy down coats in sight.

The mood is bright – as is the lighting – with only positive sights in the horizon, both concrete and figurative. Indeed, how could these dancers *be* anything but HAPPY!

Inevitably the video features also numerous UN buildings – and why not, since the freshly finished new headquarters of the Graduate Institute are only a stone's throw away from the Palais des Nations. The video shows the spacious and calm surroundings of the Institute located in the nicely elevated part of the town,

embodying 'the international scene' that the city hosts to the max.

With all this combined, the outcome is the kind celebration of international collaboration and cosmopolitan spirit that is difficult to top. Whether the video is merely the result of spontaneous organizing or part of a premeditated PR campaign is difficult to ascertain, but it certainly succeeded in interpreting the pulse of the social media correctly, thus rightfully finding widespread circulation.

Today the video received significant additional exposure as it was featured in the official [UN Facebook page for the International Day of Happiness](#) – a page marking this little known 'calendar event' launched by the organization in 2012 to accompany the infinite previously existing special days recognized by the UN.

Indeed, today the UN celebrates Happiness. And of course the organisation has teamed up with William Pharrell.

Although at the surface all of these findings may appear innocent and merely as just that – a celebration of the GOOD and POSITIVE existing in the world and also in between people – a critical observer cannot but pair them with some rather somber undertones. Most followers of the 'trends' within international collaboration have likely noticed how, in addition to or even instead of, the more familiar surveys on standards of living, in recent years different 'studies' of *happiness* have been making international headlines as forming the new standard according to which to assess the world.

Two things have been particularly striking thereof. First, the countries commonly topping these 'studies' are virtually the same ones prevailing in all the other lists of similar nature – best places in the world to live in, best standard of living, best cities to live in, best places for women & children, highest levels of education etc. More often than not the 'top 5' slots go to different countries located in the Scandinavian region – something giving rise to a series of questions on the criteria used in these surveys as well as the purposes for which they are generated in the first place.

Second, few voices have publicly challenged the very exercise of measuring and classifying happiness. Let me thus embody such a voice here. What are these happiness statistics fundamentally about? What does it mean to measure happiness? Happiness how – as in moments of 'I feel good right now' or rather in 'I am content with everything that I have in my life'? Happiness as a perpetual state of being, or rather something that *some* people – perhaps by some mystery the people of the Scandinavian countries – are more prone to experience *collectively* than others? Are we thus looking at happiness as the exclusive 'right' of a privileged few? Clearly these studies are not accounting for the experiences of all the people who regrettably still for example in Finland suffer from alcoholism, depression or violent behavior – all of which, by the way, are also at record levels in the country when compared internationally.

These realities fail to fit in the new standardized measurements of happiness, and thus they are erased from view. This finding impacts how the consequences of this recent happiness-measuring-fascination appears. From one perspective it contributes to the standardisation and also polarization of the world into predetermined 'emotive states' where certain criteria classify a person as falling under the category of 'happy', and by turn other criteria place the person in the category of 'not happy' – or perhaps 'miserable'. The outcome, nevertheless, is a neat national average that can then travel to international comparisons. Simultaneously all those whose experiences do not find articulations in the existing categories are overlooked entirely. As their 'unhappiness' fails to fit into the pre-existing standardized parameters, their experiences are rendered

insignificant and non-existent.

Closer consideration continues the list of troubling nuances. To begin, it appears an extraordinary coincidence that the same states topping international happiness surveys are also among the world's most prosperous states as well as among the most active funders and users of the international human rights framework. In recent years significant international criticism has been directed at how inequality as well as persistent stereotypes are being reproduced by such policies as the 'Human Rights Based Approach to Development' – a policy adopted by virtually all Scandinavian and Nordic countries since the 1990s. Whether intentionally or not these recent happiness surveys offer potent arguments for the continued legitimation of such projects:

> *As you underprivileged people of the world can now see for yourselves, if you follow our lead you will not only become more prosperous, but also HAPPIER.*

From the perspective of the UN celebrating happiness appears perfect on numerous levels. As the difficulty to realize any *concrete* goals becomes more evident with each new failed resolution, insignificant new initiative and unmet international standard, the organization's very legitimacy is becoming increasingly vicarious. Here shifting our collective gaze from such past failures to happiness instead does important work. Why remind people of the unreached Millennium goals of which continually growing global inequality has made a virtual travesty when you can celebrate HAPPY people dancing!

And further: as long as the UN can be seen as synonymous with continually greater global happiness, it can – at least to its defenders – also justify its continual existence in the world. Even if it realistically may hold limited ability to inflict much change, at least the 'will' of the organization continues to be

embedded in desires to make people around the world happier!

And this, in essence, is what the Graduate Institute video embodies: it features people of all colors and races who come together in being happy. This is global collaboration in action – and that it occurs within an educational context, education forming one of the most important mantras for the UN, is 'pure gravy'! The video is an embodied celebration of diversity. Who cares of the thick layer of objective similarity that any closer examination bestows on the students of the Graduate Institute; who cares if those dancing HAPPILY in the video are really members of a very small global elite (after all, Geneva being one of the most expensive cities of the world to live in, it is otherwise impossible to find means to actually study there. And access to the elite professional space of UN staff is hardly any different).

Interestingly the UN International Day of Happiness was launched in 2012, introducing an undeniable commonality of time between its creation and the recent proliferation of international happiness studies. Would one be a terrible cynic if one wanted to know more of just who are the beneficiaries of the global 'Happiness Industry'? Just through what processes – by whom, where and how – has 'happiness' been elevated into a commodity that can be quantified, measured and thus celebrated?

I bet that somewhere in the world there are people scheming at this very moment on how to tap into the large market potential that 'happiness' still entails – are there already 'Happy International Happiness Day' cards? For William Pharrell's team all this must certainly be a [PR dream come true](). Now if only we knew: which came first, the idea for the song 'HAPPY' or the thought to capitalize on the International Day of Happiness?

Who really benefits from this global focus on happiness more: genuine international collaboration as people around the world (or those having access to the kind of internet connections that allows the repetition of online videos) think

> YES, I too want to join those HAPPY people dancing and thus make the world a better place – let's all live in peace and harmony!

Or the CEOs of Global Happiness INC? Is happiness the new opium the promise of which those in power – also in the industry of doing good in the world – want to get the globally underprivileged masses hooked on? Or are these dance videos being distributed and watched just because they make people HAPPY?

I would like to believe in the latter…

In addition to being Allegra's moderator, [MHT](#) LOVES happiness and enjoys collaborating internationally at the UN and the Geneva Graduate Institute. She is a fan of William Pharrell and currently contemplates on releasing her own HAPPY video. Warm thanks to Ninnu Koskenalho for wonderful editorial assistance!

Post Script: Because reality has an ironic sense of humour, this post has since its

writing received interesting additional layers as Miia Halme-Tuomisaari was in 2016 a senior visiting fellow at the Graduate Institute. She remains as inspired as ever by the Institute and it's Maison de la Paix, seeing it as an ideal site for [an ethnography of the academia](#).

Living a good life through infrastructure. A Review of three recent monographs on Central Asia

Botakoz Kassymbekova
March, 2018
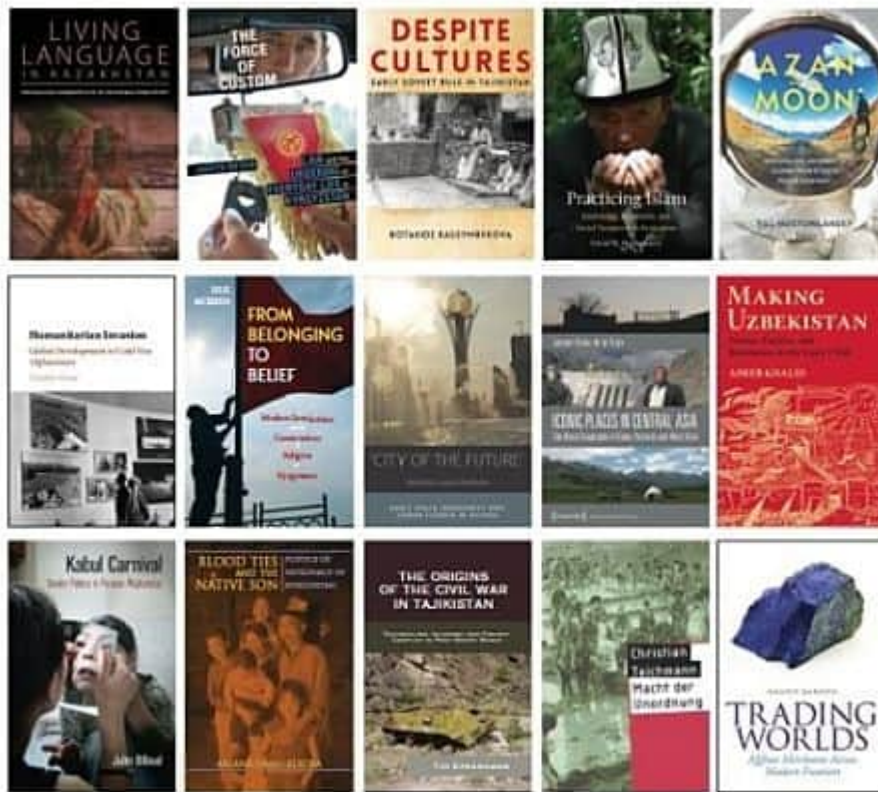
This post belongs into a series of posts on the [workshop "The Future of Central Asian Studies" organized by Prof. Dr. Judith Beyer and Prof. Dr. Madeleine Reeves at the University of Konstanz in September 2017](#).

Three new ethnographies on Central Asia analyze how people in various parts of the region engage with public spaces and infrastructures ranging from highways, capitals, dams, pastural lands and religious sites.

The studies describe complex processes of identification and open new terrains for thinking about the making of place, space and material surroundings.

The authors look at the aspirations of Central Asians to live modern, global, meaningful, good and moral lives, even in the context of larger discourses and

experiences of economic, religious and political crises and disorientation. In addition to providing accounts that challenge essentialist representations of the region, they also provide nuanced individual accounts of ordinary people's lives and capture insights into their self-representation.

Till Mostowlansky's *Azan on the Moon: Entangling Modernity along Tajikistan's Pamir Highway* looks at the life along Tajikistan's Pamir highway in a scarcely populated high mountain border region between Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan and China, which is referred to as "the roof of the world" by its residents. The highway was a prestigious Soviet borderland project and the region's residents enjoyed special provisions from Moscow. After the demise of the Soviet Union, the area turned into an economically and politically neglected region as well as an international borderland and potential international Silk Road trade route. Mostowlansky asks how people along the highway "negotiate, incorporate, modify, and reject different "projects" of modernity?" (Mostowlansky, xx). Taking the road both as a field site and a conceptual frame, the author reveals a myriad of ways modernity is discussed, imagined and identified by various groups and individuals in the Pamirs. He argues that despite Pamir's seeming geographic marginality, people do indeed not only perceive themselves as modern subjects, but also use the concept of modernity to navigate through their everyday attempts to lead the "correct" life either as Muslims or "civilized" citizens. Modernity, then, figures as a roadmap, but not a single concrete road, that is narrated and adapted contextually, offering a "differentiated view of geographical remoteness" (Mostowlansky, p. 150) and a global approach to understanding how modernity is lived and understood.
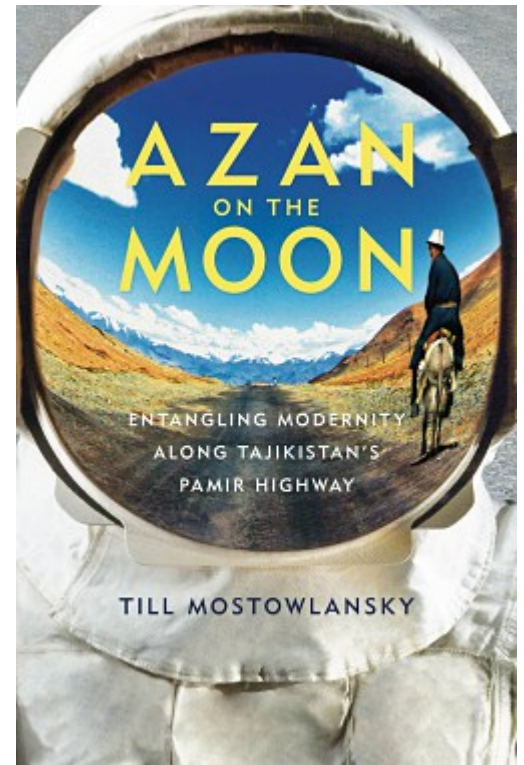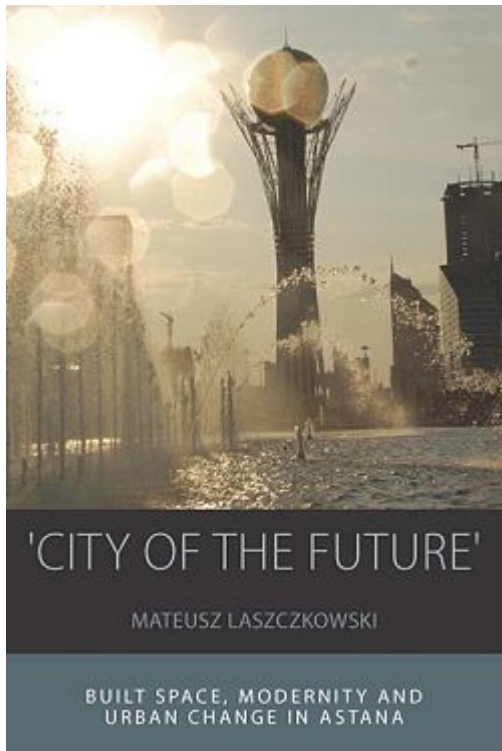
Mateusz Laszczkowski works at a both geographically marginal, yet politically central place in modern Central Asia: the new capital city Astana in Kazakhstan. In his book *City of the Future. Built Space, Modernity and Urban Change in Astana* the author explores "the complexity of connections between space and diverse emerging social actors, structures and representations" (Laszczkowski, p. 3). Astana, Laszczkowski convincingly shows, is a modernist project that "has served to revive, for Kazakhstani citizens, the faith in progress and 'modernity' that had been bitterly lost with the atrophy of the Soviet Union" (Laszczkowski, p. 178). But this process was not straightforward — neither for the government, nor for the people. Describing how the government of Kazakhstan decided for a Japanese city plan – not European but still western – the author looks at how the government searches for new orientations between the "west" and "east", borrowing, rejecting and appropriating various narratives, tools and mechanisms to craft its own, Eurasian, post-Soviet hybrid identity. Laszczkowski suggests that just as city's "[b]uildings gave 'modernity' a specific look and texture," the government and the people, too, creatively build and live the city, deriving their visions from the past Soviet ideals, consciously deciding for certain ruptures and integrating various trends and traditions into novel visions of a new place for Kazakhstan. Astana, then, is a creative and dynamic dialogue and experiment about the past, future, the world and the homeland. Lasczckowski offers a rich and dynamic picture of migration, identification, alienation and change behind seemingly straight lines of plans, streets and buildings.

Similarly, Jeanne Feaux de la Croix in her _Iconic Places in Central Asia: The Moral Geography of Dams, Pastures and Holy Sites_ investigates if and how people in the Toktogul region in Kyrgyzstan relate to dams, pastures or Islamic holy sites and what these places can reveal about the "competing and shifting regimes of worth and moral values in contemporary Kyrgzystan" (p. 24). At the core of her analysis is the question of what does it mean to lead a good life in the context of economic, political insecurity and a general "crisis of meaning and often exhausting struggle to secure a livelihood" (de la Croix, p. 25). De la Croix argues that, among other things, the narratives of beauty, health, wealth, tradition, purity and Kyrgyzness provide important sources for dignified, cheerful and moral living in the context of material and political insecurity that lead people to make "hard choices" regarding their livelihoods (p. 294). She explores the social and moral construction of _different sites and h_ow those are constituted to empower and provide meaning to different groups. The moral value of these places is often ignored by economists or development workers, yet, the study suggests, researching the moral economy of places provide important insights into local understanding of "good life", work and community in Kyrgyzstan.

Place-making, then, in all three studies is not only a physical or social practice, e.g. visiting _mazaars_ in Kyrgyzstan, or celebrating the "capital day" of Astana. It is also a normative dialogue about how "civilized," "modern," "moral" and/or "good" life is imagined. As Laszczkowski writes, "[s]elf-making and place-making were in that sense inextricably related" (Laszczkowski, p. 81). These discourses, however, can reveal complexities behind discourses. Thus, while Astana urbanites strive to be seen as civilized and modern, they stigmatize rural residents and,
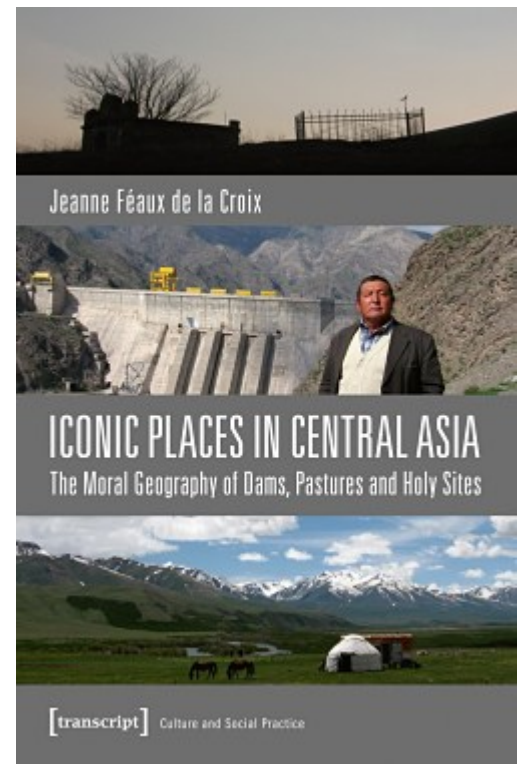
more importantly, rely upon rural networks and social economies for the production of modern urbanity.

While the books discuss everyday life outside of obvious political arenas and, except for Astana, most are remote from the institutions of the government, they are not apolitical and reveal a great deal about individuals' relation and expectation from the state. This is because the state infrastructures presented in the books (a capital city, a dam, a highway) are built by the state. The various ways in which ordinary people discuss these projects provides provide insights on how they judge the state's responsibilities towards its citizens and the nation. As de la Croix, referring to Mitchell, suggests, states do not build dams simply to provide power, building dams is also a process via which nation-states are built (de la Croix, p. 105). In all three accounts of livelihoods around infrastructural developments, past or present, residents associate infrastructures with state's welfare, and in cases where those are/were functioning and beneficial, such projects provide them with a sense of pride and hope. In the case of Astana, young people move to the city because it allows them to feel "properly human" and "to develop as persons" (p. 45).

Cement, then, – whether in dam, buildings or roads – is not only a physical material, but also represents a symbol of modernity and stability, creating a metaphorical link between individual and national destinies.

This process is not straightforward, neither linear. Skepticism towards the state and one's future, Laszczkowski shows, can turn into optimism in case one experiences real material improvement. The author provides an example of a couple, who was at first very skeptical about Astana, but later changed its views once it received a social support apartment.

While the three authors restate what is now a truism, namely that identity construction is a complex process – they offer rich ethnographies about its mundane mechanisms. Mostowlansky portrays life in the Pamir, despite its geographic remoteness, as perpetuated with discourses of modernity so that

people living there perceive themselves to be as modern as the Swiss, or at least, more modern than the rest of "central" Tajikistan or Afghanistan. He suggests, that "modernity and marginality are not a priori opposite sides of a dichotomy" (Mostowlansky, p. 148). For Laszczkowski, modernity is a "collective dreamworld" that transcends the 'now' to offer a future (Laszczkowski, p. 178). In the case of Astana, it is both a material and a normative project that is not only built, but narrated and performed (Laszczkowski, p. 81). Place-making is a disorderly process and should be seen as a political, socio-economic and cultural activity (Laszczkowski, p. 131). In case of Kyrgyzstan, De la Croix proposes that places of nature, religion and infrastructure become important because those who do not understand themselves as winners of modernity, need a "good" and "moral" life also despite modernity and despite the state. In the context of post-Soviet disbelief, De la Croix also reminds us that these alternative place-making practices also provide a source of happiness.

References:

Till Mostowlansky, *Azan on the Moon: Entangling Modernity along Tajikistan's Pamir Highway*, The University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017.

Mateusz Laszczkowski, *City of the Future. Built Space, Modernity and Urban Change in Astana*, Berghahn Books, 2016.

Jeanne Feaux de la Croix, *Iconic Places in Central Asia: The Moral Geography of Dams, Pastures and Holy Sites*, Transcript 2016

Further reading at Allegra:

Judith Beyer and Madeleine Reeves: [After the Eulogy? The Future of Central Asian Studies in the Accelerated Academy](#)

Eva-Marie Dubuisson: [Reflections on "The Future of Central Asian Studies"](#)

Save the Oceans!

Rasmus Rodineliussen
March, 2018

Numerous studies indicate if human waste management and consumer patterns continue as they are now, then [in 2050 the plastic in the world's oceans will weigh more than fish](#). The Ocean Conference ended in New York City on June 9th

2017. Fiji and Sweden initiated the conference, arguing it would be vital for global powers to unify around the 14th of the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#), namely the Ocean and its marine resources. It is important to view the 17 UN goals as intertwined; that is,

> *without sustainable cities and sustainable consumption it will for example be impossible to safeguard oceans.*

I have been chosen together with 28 colleagues by the Swedish government agency SIDA (Swedish International Development Aid) to be part of SIDA Alumni and represent the UN Sustainable Development Goals in Sweden. This includes holding lectures and workshops meant to teach the goals and inspire action. One of our core tasks is to show that these are global issues and that all 17 goals can only be achieved together. This post is part of communicating this mission and a continuation of Allegra's 2014 thematic thread #Sustainability; a thread even more topical now due to the UN AGENDA 2030 targets and the increasing public debate concerning the environment. With the material from my fieldwork I aim to show how local-global come together to work against marine debris. Moreover, I illustrate the link between some of the Sustainable Development Goals by connecting how the debris ended up in the water and if real change is to be achieved why it is important to educate the public rather than just clean up the debris.

The issue with marine debris

In late 2016, I flew from Sweden to two fieldwork sites in Brazil: Rio de Janeiro and Arraial do Cabo. I was interested in how the environmental policy on the removal of marine debris, promoted by the [NGO Project AWARE](#), was understood by local scuba divers. According to Project AWARE, the lion part of all garbage thrown on street corners, in bushes, and elsewhere inevitably end up in or in contact with water. In Rio de Janeiro this is particularly evident. The Guanabara Bay is acutely polluted. I was told by residents in Rio that much of the waste and

pollutants are brought to the bay via rivers from the inlands. [Newspapers have also described this, particularly during the time running up to the 2016 Olympic Games](#). Much of the waste comes from Rio de Janeiro itself—for example the "favelas" usually lack proper waste management systems or functioning sewers. Thus, most waste is flushed into Guanabara Bay with the rain, my interlocutors explained.

During my fieldwork I often travelled around Rio using the metro. On several occasions I noticed commercial ads that highlighted the issue of littering, and how such behaviour can result in environmental consequences. The ads usually consisted of a short cartoon video showing friends sitting at a pick-nick table, or having a barbeque in the forest. When the friends dispatched they left all their garbage on the ground. The ad showed quick slides with information on what happened with this garbage afterwards, how it became marine debris among other things. The ad concluded with showing the friends returning in order to collect and properly dispose of their waste. These ads were informative and they highlighted the issue marking social behaviour as the reason behind the problem. Although the government initiative with these ads was timely and important, from what I observed and was told by my interlocutors, it is not enough to stop the continuous pollution of the Guanabara Bay. More hands-on action, where waste is directly removed was, and still is, needed. According to my interlocutors the government of Rio had promised to clean up the Guanabara Bay before the games, by removing the debris. These cleanups never materialized. And because the waste floating around is both ugly to look at, and also dangerous, not least for marine animals that get entangled in it, it need to be removed in order to better the state of the bay.

Translating Environmental Policy into Local Action in Rio de Janeiro

Luiz is a man in his early 30s partly working as an independent PADI (Professional Association of Diving Instructors) instructor in liaison with Project

AWARE. One of the core ideas of Project AWARE is to empower divers to do something for the environment with every dive. Luiz makes sure his students have been educated in the practice of removing marine debris while diving. He is also in close collaboration with one of Rio's fishing colonies and they work together to clean beaches and water from garbage and marine debris. I learn that [all garbage removed by the divers from the water is then reported to Project AWARE in order to compile the amount of marine debris collected across the globe](#).

Cleanups are not all that Luiz and the fishermen do. They are also working with a youth prison center, located on Governor Island in Rio de Janeiro, to reforest a damaged Mangrove forest on the island. For Luiz, this is important as he tells me: "I believe that education is the key to a better tomorrow. Moreover, I believe that youth are more open minded and ready to change their ways of life than adults. Therefore I focus on educating the generation of tomorrow rather than arguing with adults of today."

Luiz believes in education and how it leads to improved social practices making them sustainable and how it resonates with the circular idea behind the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The goals are constructed in a way that they are all interconnected. For example, if to safeguard the oceans and marine resources (goal nr. 14) is to be successful there is need for education regarding why waste management is important. Moreover, the goal for sustainable cities (nr. 11) and sustainable consumption (nr. 12) are of great importance because they are directly linked to what products become waste.

Translating Environmental Policy into Local Action in Arraial do Cabo

Arraial do Cabo is originally a small fishing village with a population just below 30,000 and has become a popular tourist destination. In 1997 the waters around Arraial do Cabo was made a marine extractive reserve granting special extractive rights to fishermen by the Brazilian government. This was to help protect the exceptionally rich marine fauna caused by upwelling as a result of a natural

phenomenon. However, this has created competition for space at the pier, and in Arraial the relationship between fishermen and divers have become more hostile compared to Rio. With increasing tourism, which pays better than catching and selling fish, the fishermen have increasingly lost their slots. Local politicians have also sided with divers and tour agencies, which has caused complications in this context.

Ella, a woman in her 40s, is the owner of a popular dive center in Arraial do Cabo. She is also, as she told me herself, deeply inspired by the work of Project AWARE, although she is not officially associated with them. Her center is one of few in Arraial that conduct beach cleanups and dives to collect debris. Yet, she makes much less than what she would wish. This is due to the issue with fishermen and a slow and corrupt local government. Because the area is protected and 'given' to the fishermen by the national government, Ella needs the fishermen's approval to do cleanups. Since the fishermen already feel they do not get enough space or acknowledgement, they are not very enthusiastic about Ella's cleanups. The fishermen view these initiatives as beneficial for divers, not the community at large. Therefore Ella is only able to conduct three cleanups a year, which is far too little to make a real impact. However, she strives to make more cleanups in the future and makes sure to make the most out of the opportunities she is given to clean the water and beaches around Arraial do Cabo.

Ella told me that the local government is unwilling to assist her further because the main income in town comes from tourists enjoying the water and the beaches. In order for Ella to be able to do cleanups, parts of the beach and the water must be closed for some time. This is, according to Ella, the reason behind the lack of interest among officials. The fishermen do not support the cleanups because it gives more attention to divers and less to the fishermen, as one of the captains told me. Yet, both the argument of the officials, and that of the fishermen can be used to argue for allowing Ella to make more cleanups. This is because most tourists coming to Arraial do so because of the rich marine fauna. If the marine reserve is damaged by heavy pollution it will hurt fishermen, tour agencies, and local government drawing less tourism. One fisherman named Bob explained the

dangerous development: "When I came here 30 years ago you caught fishes with every hook from the boat, nowadays half of them come up empty, another part with plastic, and only some catch fish." A tourist who had been visiting Arraial for some years told me: "Before you could see dolphins, you could lay on the beaches and be surrounded by only sand and vegetation. These days there are no dolphins, and you need to clean up your spot on the beach before sitting down, there is too much trash laying around."

Both Ella and Luiz are actively working to try and spread knowledge about marine debris through education. They hold workshops, give out flyers with information, and have posters with illustrating pictures and slogans. It is possible that if the fishermen in Arraial were engaged through work in cleanups as those cooperating with Luiz in Rio are, then the possibilities for Ella to make a difference via cleanups would be much greater.

Concluding remarks

My time in Arraial allowed me to understand the importance of social practices on global concerns, such as marine debris. As an example, take the two images below, both depict the Prainha beach in Arraial.

When observing from a distance the first picture looks like any other 'paradise' beach in the world, but the same can be said for the space captured in the second picture. When one is looking close the issue becomes visible and so does the social practices behind the waste. To emphasise Luiz's concerns, it is by educating the generation of tomorrow that we can make a real change for a future, where hopefully the fish will still outweigh plastic within the oceans. These practices of waste management are created and reproduced in social milieus and can be studied and understood in such. To further the global work against marine debris, and to work towards fulfilling the UN goals before 2030, it is of great importance to pay more attention to local social practices because it is with these

most issues begin, and it is here the solution lies.

For a more throughout description of the events outlined above see: Rodineliussen, R. 2017. *Divers Engaging Policy—Practices of Making Water.*

[UN-Guidelines for Use of SDG logo and 17 icons](#)

#PrecAnthro in support of #USSstrike: once the pension dispute is won UCU should prioritise the fight against casualisation

PrecAnthro
March, 2018
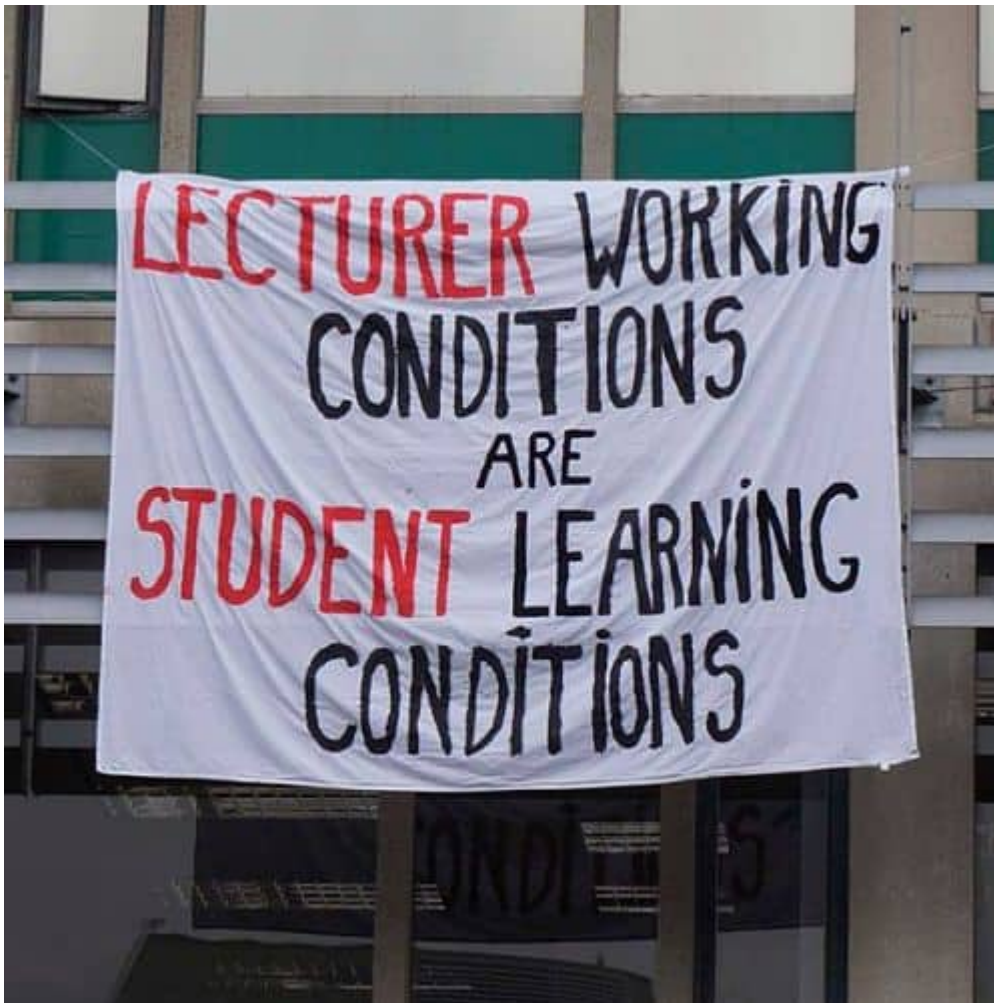
On the 22nd of February 2018 University and College Union (UCU), the largest academic union in the world with over 100,000 members went on an unprecedented long strike, 14 working days on the first instance. The reason for the strike is the assault against the USS pension scheme (Universities Superannuation Scheme). Given USS's £6.1 billion deficit, the vice-Chancellor membership body Universities UK (UUK) has proposed to change it from a defined benefit scheme, granting members a pension upon retirement, to a defined contribution scheme under which pensions will be subject to stock market fluctuations.

The strike is the biggest ever industrial action in UK higher education. Despite freezing weather conditions thousands of faculty and support staff have joined the picket lines across the country. Students have came out in support, with 61% in

favour of strike action. 17 vice-Chancellors have split ranks with their colleagues, and have asked UUK to sit back on the negotiation table with UCU. UCU has been invited to 'renewed talks' by UUK on Tuesday February 27. Yet UUK precluded reopening the negotiations for which decision was met with a majority of one vote. A leaked letter reveals VCs are not ready to alter their decision.

The #PrecAnthro collective stands in solidarity with academics and support staff on strike.

As the UK is one of the biggest employers of anthropologists worldwide many of our colleagues have joined the strike to protect their workers' rights. We see the strike as more than just a single issue campaign over pension. On the one hand, it is the reaction against the ever growing division between academic salaries and salaries of senior management with a few notable members of the latter group gaining in the range of 300-500,000 annual salary, including the Chief Executive of USS.

On the other hand, solidarity across ranks, with precarious teaching and research staff joining strikes, and a massive response by hugely indebted fee-paying students, is a response to broader problems of public higher education: the privatisation and commodification of public services, the casualisation, automation and outsourcing of work, the introduction of inhuman performance mechanisms, the socialisation of debt and financial liabilities accumulated by universities while they service the private sector rather than crisis-struck national and international constituencies.

The solidarity of casualised teaching and research staff with the strike is not to be taken lightly. Given the grim reality of 54 percent of all UK academic staff and 49 percent of all teaching staff estimated to be on fixed-term contracts, without serious structural reform most precarious academics stand little chance of gaining secure employment in academia. Those joining the strike from a precarious position suffer much higher risk and vulnerability than permanent faculty, with unclear returns in terms of their pension. We urge UCU once the

pension dispute is won, to prioritise the fight against casualisation in the sector.

Follow the news on the strike on [Culture and Capitalism](#) blog, at the University of Sussex.

Appeal to politicians: Italian anthropologists demand that more scientific information be made available to the public, in order to combat racism

Allegra
March, 2018

Presse release of 6 February 2018:

Scientific knowledge as an important tool in the social and political battle against racism: this proposal put forward by anthropologists will be presented Thursday, February 15 at 1 pm in the press room of the Chamber of Deputies, Rome.

Eighty years since the promulgation of the racial laws in Italy and with the recent racist attack in Macerata in mind, the need to take effective steps against the spread of racism appears ever more urgent.

In this regard, the document signed by the Associations and Scientific Societies of Anthropologists in Italy is a first response. The text points out that the study and understanding of biological and cultural diversity have now made it clear that human beings do not form a category divided up into separate groups which are

incapable of developing forms of coexistence, exchange, and sharing. Furthermore, there are no inherited qualities that justify the existence of "social hierarchies" based on putative cognitive or behavioral inequalities among human groups. Cultural differences suggest that people are similar in their capacity to learn and create rather than constituting a pretext for a tragic series of walls and barriers.

In the current social situation, marked by tension and risks of social conflict, it is essential that these and other elements of knowledge be shared, generously and in a more effective way, with all citizens.

During the press conference at the Chamber of Deputies, Italian anthropologists will present the document and appeal to political groups and parties and to the candidates in the upcoming elections on March 4th, to commit to making the spread of scientific information a priority, the most effective shield against all racism, and to promote policies and initiatives (beginning with the schools) which will provide our population with correct and up-to-date scientific knowledge as to the nature and significance of biological and cultural diversity.

AAI (Italian Anthropological Association); SIAC (Italian Society of Cultural Anthropology); ANPIA (Italian National Professional Association of Anthropology); ISItA (Italian Institute of Anthropology); SIAA (Italian Society of Applied Anthropology); SIAM (Italian Society of Medical Anthropology); SIMBDEA (Italian Society for Museology and Demo-ethno-anthropological Heritage)

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Antonio De Lauri
March, 2018

Amid the growing convergence between the politics of aid and policing, emergency and military governance, securitization and the production of collective fear, this series examines humanitarianism and security as both ideology and practice. To this end, it offers ethnographic and theoretical analyses that contribute to the development of critical approaches at the intersection of anthropology, sociology, geography, international relations, and other disciplines.

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The Road – An Ethnography of (Im)Mobility, Space, and Cross-border Infrastructures in the Balkans

Evanthia Patsiaoura
March, 2018

Central to the capturing cover-image, the downhill stone-paved street of the Pazari district of Gjirokastër, south Albania, reflects the orientation of Dimitris Dalakoglou's book *[The Road: An Ethnography of (Im) Mobility, Space, and Cross-border Infrastructures in the Balkans](#)* in that it places infrastructures at the foreground of understanding sociopolitical processes of change. Drawing from fieldwork between 2005-2006, Dalakoglou focuses on the main Albania-Greece highway and material entities such as the road, the city, and the house to approach post-Cold war Europe through one of its most 'othered' and understudied countries. The research participants' inclination to narrate their socialist past and post-socialist present through the cross-border highway informs Dalakoglou's consideration of the road beyond a subject of ethnographic inquiry to an integral part of local (hi)stories, perceptions and ontologies, necessitating an anthropology *of* the road.

This necessity is analysed in the first chapter. Within the contemporary context of profound shifts and transformations, Dalakoglou provides an engaging account of the 'anthropological road-phobia' embedded in the rationalistic orientation of the Western white anthropologist, perceiving 'remote' Others as sociocultural categories attached to fixed places. Following the critique of ethnocentrism and the decline of purist Marxist approaches to infrastructures, the late-twentieth-century leaning toward ontological plurality is discussed to explain recent approaches of roads as manifestations of complex and hybrid cultural formations.
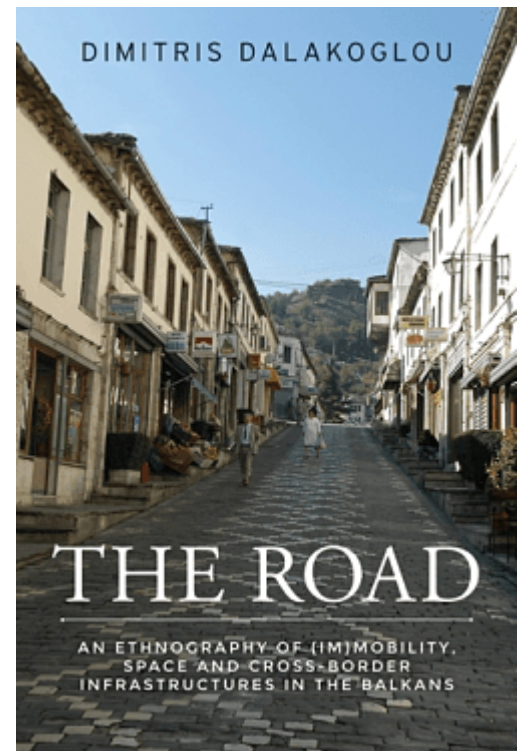
It is the ontological diversity of roads, their material, political and sociocultural dimensions with which Dalakoglou's anthropology of the road is concerned, while employing the Lefebvrian, post-structural perception of space as a process and Latour and Heidegger's orientations to frame the multiplicity of both tangible and imaginary experiences and realities attached to roads.

Löfgren's concept of 'imagineering' and the 'road mythographies' of Masquilier strengthen this framework, which follows an ethnographic genre throughout the book.

Chapter two sets the scene for the main research site: the city of Gjirokastër, south Albania, and the 29-kilometer highway extending from the city to the cross-border passage of Kakavijë. A rich background discussion on this site stretches from Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman times to the World Wars and the Interwar period, the anti-fascist resistance and the foundation of the Communist Party of Albania, the 1944 establishment of the socialist regime, Hoxha's shifting socialist alliances, Albanian-Greek relations and the 1985 official opening of the Kakavijë

border, and the 1997 collapse of pyramid schemes. Highlights include the socio-economic modernization programmes of the 1925-39 dictatorship (with Mussolini's-Italy construction input) and the socialist regime. The post-socialist period is introduced through the construction boom, the passing of infrastructures from the state to the private sector, and the EU neoliberalist agenda toward Eastern European countries.

Chapter three draws from socialist Albania's modernization and urbanization programme, focusing on road and house construction. The implications of road-building during state socialism are analysed through the emergent modernization, nation-state, and Albanian socialist subjects. Rich and evocative, interlocutors' words picture a collective socialist past, often seen as providing (infrastructural) 'order', as opposed to the 'evil' freedom of capitalism. Individuals' identification with the road ('I built this road', as interlocutors put it) strongly inform their narratives, even though the roads to which they refer were reconstructed after state socialism. Dalakoglou also considers socialist road-construction as an alienating project, while speaking of 'fragmented' road identifications for most Albanians who had to construct roads they could not actually use. Importantly, the idea of 'voluntary' road-building is discussed through a critical approach to the official history, revealing the shift from voluntary work to a 'standard measure for social oppression' (40).

In chapter four, the main parts of the city of Gjirokastër emerge as signifiers of three different periods: the pre-WWII old town; the urban complex of the socialist period; and the post-socialist section. The relocation of the urban centre from the Pazari to the 1-kilometer asphalt boulevard represents the transition from the socialist past to the post-socialist present. Being the city's main link with the cross-border highway and located between the socialist and post-socialist urban sectors, the boulevard constitutes an element of both continuity and transition. The new centrality of the boulevard is discussed as an architectural reflection of the post-socialist emphasis on automobility and migration, which, along with broader construction transformations, intertwines with a change of social practices and perceptions, including the decline of social solidarity, feelings of

nostalgia, new local hierarchies, social classes and tensions. The ethnography reveals distinct materialities and experiences emerging from Gjirokastër's new centrality, picturing broader transitions in post-socialist Albania.

Chapter five moves from the city to a discussion on the cross-border highway. Individual narratives and collective stories ascribe responsibility about accidents, violence and criminally to the road itself. Through people and media's representations the road emerges as a dark place, frequently accommodating the 'evil' as it manifests itself in the political turbulence and armed forces of Albania's post-socialist history. Dalakoglou examines road mythographies beyond geopolitical and historical divides, by tracing stories of road and danger in the Balkan folklore and road narratives in biblical mythologies and US fiction. Significantly, he shows how the association of highways with modernization in and beyond Albania invites a dual perception of roads as places of 'ease and progress' and 'fear and danger' (93). Often challenging official histories, the road narratives explored in this chapter reveal local stories, concentrating on car accidents, the events of 1997 and criminal activity along the 29-kilometer highway. They ultimately stress the inseparability of the road from shared experience, memory and representation of the socialist-post-socialist divide.

Chapter six follows with two road myths, accompanied by evocative excerpts of interviews. For Dalakoglou, the ethnographic significance of these stories rests in that they reflect common interpretations of an emerging Balkan nationalism, neoliberal globalization from above, and transnationalism from below through the everyday life of Albanian migrants. Designed and constructed by Greek companies while supported by EU funds, the cross-border highway project of 1997-2001 echoes a neoliberal market, contrasting with the socialist construction-ethos. People's identification with the road has become much more complex in post-socialist Albania. While perceived as an extension of Greece and facilitator of Greekness over the Albanian landscape, the highway also reveals less 'fragmented' road-identifications in that it accommodates the massive flows of people and products to and from Greece respectively, an aftermath of the political instability and financial dependency of post-socialist Albania.

Engaging ethnographic narratives disclose the shift from socialist anti-migration propaganda to the poverty generating migration, the material objects migrating from Greece to Albania, and the range of illegal activities involving border-crossing within the problematic context of EU border-crossing legislation.

Moreover, these narratives respond to why focusing on the transition from a xenophobic to an open-border Albania may be more crucial than that of the socialist-capitalist divide. Dalakoglou employs the term 'road poetics' to frame not only people's narrations but also practices on and perceptions of the highway: these invite a social construction of the road that empowers people and creates a 'local road-related history' (131).

The last ethnographic chapter focuses on house making which, like the road and the city, presents shifting identifications along the socialist-post-socialist divide. People's identification with the distinct materiality of the house is a source of symbolic empowerment, the house being built and used by people themselves as a secure financial investment in post-socialist Albania. Like 'road poetics', the concept of 'house poetics' is employed here to account for people's practices and perceptions of house making, which is strikingly distinct from house building in that it denotes a process where alienation is not at stake. 'Making a house', a key phrase for Albanian migrants building their houses in Albania while living in Greece, reflects a dynamic process of home making through both absence and presence, allowing for individual agency and extending to the making of self under fluid socioeconomic circumstances. This process extends to the broader post-socialist transformation of Albania; where people perceive their country as being 'under construction'. Interlocutors recount the hidden procedures of building-material importation from Greece to Albania, the prestige of migrants making their houses in Albania, and the anxious process of house-making, mirroring anxieties of the politico-economic transition from socialism to post-Cold war capitalism. Ultimately, the house is not only the main inflow from Greece to Albania through the cross-border highway but also 'a continuation of the

materiality and ontology of the road itself' (133).

This is an illuminating ethnography, approachable to diverse academic and wider audiences. Dalakoglou balances a focus on local stories with a critical eye on history and politics, providing an excellent piece of contemporary anthropological thought. His own involvement with the people informing his research appears in strategic discussions: the post-socialist household, unofficial means of transferring money, border-crossing and the inflow of house-construction materials from Greece to Albania, are explored via participant observation in the lives of others. Crucially,

> *this ethnography shows why, and how, cross-boundary spaces constitute powerful means of understanding the complex shaping and circulation of social practices, and processual challenges to political and economic systems from below.*

The focus on borders between marginal countries such as Albania and Greece offers an original approach to the shifting 'centralities' and 'peripheries' of contemporary Europe and beyond. The book comes with an [online companion](#), providing rich images and maps, an author's interview on the book, and a promo video with music by the Greek band Villagers of Ioannina City, fusing rock with idioms from the Epirus region and inspiring the visitor's journey into the Balkans.

Dimitris Dalakoglou. 2017. [The Road: An Ethnography of (Im) Mobility, Space, and Cross-border Infrastructures in the Balkans](#). 224 pp. £19.99. Manchester: Manchester University Press. ISBN: 978-1-5261-0934-7

All images courtesy of the [online companion](#).

Political and Legal Transformations of an Indonesian Polity

Tea Skrinjaric
March, 2018

The book ["Political and Legal Transformations of an Indonesian Polity: The Nagari from Colonisation to Decentralisation"](#) by Franz von Benda-Beckmann and Keebet

von Benda-Beckmann is a result of an extensive, multi-local and 'multi-temporal' (Howell and Talle 2012: 17) fieldwork conducted in Minangkabau starting in the mid-seventies up to the present (p. 31). Observing Minangkabau in different contexts and following various case-studies, the authors present over fifteen chapters a chronological overview of political and legal changes in West Sumatra. The focus lies on *nagari* (from Sanskrit and old Malay *negara*, state (p.1)), the Minangkabau polity – the most important political and territorial unit in Minangkabau (p. 48) – and their legal order based on adat, a "way of life or 'culture' in the widest sense" (p.1).

West Sumatra, also called Minangkabau, is populated by the Minangkabau people who were for centuries recognized as the world's largest matrilineal ethnic group (p.11). The coexistence of the matrilineal organization and patriarchy-based Islam, which started to influence Minangkabau from the sixteenth century onwards, was a puzzle for many scholars. As the authors explain (p. 12), previous scholarship considered the Minangkabau "a remarkable paradox in the sociology of Islam" (Bousquet 1938: 241) and "an enigma for Southeast Asian scholars" (Kahn, 1993: 1).

> *By analysing internal changes and external influences, constitutional alterations, legislative transformations and political re-organization, the authors show how Minangkabau became a synthesis of adat law, Islamic law and the state.*

They describe and analyse *nagari* governance structure in the pre-colonial (Chapter 2), the colonial period (Chapter 3), and Old and New Order regimes before the reforms (Chapters 4 and 5). They show how the national level administrative changes affected the transformations of the *nagari* in domains of family, property and inheritance, land rights and social life, and how adat elements got incorporated into state organization.

Although some scholars have questioned whether adat law can be considered as law, and rather interpreted as custom, the authors argue in Chapter 3 that Minangkabau adat did have clearly developed rules, principles and institutions in the pre-colonial times, and that the Dutch influence and (mis)interpretation of adat led to the emergence of two versions of adat: one used by the colonial administration ("lawyers' adat law"), and another used in rural settings ("adat folk law"). The legal pluralism within village (folk) adat was brought about not only when the Dutch started to incorporate the territory into the colony of the Dutch East Indies, but also when Islam spread over West Sumatra. Both developments largely influenced transformations of the *nagari* and general debates about the "adat-Islam-state triangle" (p. 62). Introduction of the *desa* system of village government in West Sumatra in 1983 (generally in Indonesia in 1979), during the New Order regime, had a major impact on *nagari* structure and it was considered that "*desa* destroyed adat" (p. 130). After the end of Suharto´s regime in 1998, the *Reformasi* period (reformation of the Indonesian state) introduced new laws on political and administrative decentralisation (Chapters 6 and 7), which encouraged discussions about the revival of *nagari* and replacing the *desa* with new *nagari* structures (Chapters 8, 9 and 10).

Two cases of transition from *desa* to *nagari* are described in Chapter 8 to give a reader an impression of the complexity of the process itself.

The transition increased autonomy of villages, refigured the relations between adat, Islam and state law, and changed the relationship between village government and the state administration.

Yet it also had some shortcomings, such as re-emergence of old boundary conflicts and inequality between villages.

The following chapters detail struggles over property and natural resources, property law uncertainty (Chapters 11, 12 and 13) and identity politics (Chapter 14) after the return to *nagari.* Finally, in Chapter 15, the authors state that their research contradicts the general idea that adat was completely lost due to the *desa* structure (p. 436) and conclude that adat "remained intact as a cognitive and normative system defining important kinship and property relations" (p. 437).

Finally, the authors suggest that the other researchers of this issue focused mainly on national political and legal level, which brought them to conclusions and false comparisons that the similar regulations were applicable on local levels.

To visualise the present state of this complex relationship, the authors chose a photograph of a construction site in a small street as the book's front cover image, which they explain on the back cover:

"[T]he architecture of the newly built Grand Mosque in Padang combines the characteristic roof structures of mosque and adat lineage house as an expression of the close relationship between adat and Islam. The picture symbolises the fact that this relationship is continuously under construction."

The significance of this ethnography lies in its elaborate analysis of Minangkabau political and legal history and complex periods of change and continuity by pointing out the importance of observing those changes and continuities in the context of all three pillars of Minangkabau social organization, i.e. adat, Islam and state.

Moreover, it is also relevant to wider discussions on topics such as law and society, customary laws, property relations and relationship between religion and state, and remains as an elaborate base for further research on Minangkabau's political, legislative and social issues.

von Benda-Beckmann, Franz and Keebet von Benda-Beckmann. 2016. [Political and Legal Transformations of an Indonesian Polity: The Nagari from Colonisation to Decentralisation](). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 528 pp. Pb $49.99. ISBN: 9781316618530.

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