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Problems of 'Travelling Theories' in Post-socialist Countries: An Albanian Case Study

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Abstract

The neo-liberal discourse has dominated policy analysis in post socialist cities. Said's (1983) 'travelling theory' opens up a crucial research agenda, which establishes the displacements of ideas in different cultural or national sites as an important aspect of the production of knowledge. Drawing from Said's 'travelling theory' Smith (2006) suggests that theories of transition have travelled at different paces in different post socialist countries. This principle can be applied to the situation in Albania, which continues to defy a straightforward translation of western urban theory to an understanding of the local context.

Albania provides a good example of two aspects of 'travelling urban theory': (1) the transfer of 'good practice' models of urban governance and (2) the application of Anglo-American urban theories to knowledge of changing spaces of governance and suburban development in the Tirana city region. Focusing on the analysis of suburban development in the Tirana city region, this paper examines in what ways can, or should, 'travelling urban theory' be grounded in the evolving complexities and contradictions of urban life in the Tirana city-region. Specifically it considers the relevance of urban theories developed by British and American scholars of urban development for transitional urban economies. Enacting the transfer of theory from one context to another represented a challenge for the author, who is an Albanian scholar doing PhD research in the UK. While some theoretical concepts were helpful in contextualizing the situation in Albania, I propose that western theory does not 'fit' well within the context of understanding processes of suburban development in Tirana. I examine two contexts where travelling urban theory collided with local knowledge on the ground and consequently led to a modification of conceptual themes. These were, respectively, (a) knowledge of local livelihood strategies and (b) local property knowledge.

Introduction

In the late 1980s and early 1990s as communism collapsed and as the new social, economic and political orders in the former socialist countries began to take shape, British and American scholars turned their attention to the study of transitional economies and processes of urban transformation therein (i.e Smith, 2002, 2006, 2007; Stenning, 2002, 2006). The recent development of post socialist countries has been strongly influenced both by new regulatory frameworks based on neoliberal capitalism and private property as well as by path-dependencies originating in prior socialist and communist systems. Relatively stable spatial structures and patterns inherited from socialist period are now being shaped by specific forms of capitalism established during the period of multiple transformations since 1990.

An important issue for this paper is the status of ‘post-socialist theory’ and its relationship to the methods used to observe empirical urban patterns. In recent years, a considerable body of theoretical and policy work -- mainly developed by scholars in the west -- has been applied to the Eastern European context. Much of this has been devoted to teasing out the complex spatial and social relations of East European economies as they undergo transition away from central planning towards more market-orientated or neo-liberal regimes. Indeed, western theory and policy has helped to shape transformation. As Pickles and Smith (2007) have suggested, the collapse of Soviet-style socialism was not only an event that transformed the political and economic landscapes of Europe but also had wider global ideological and theoretical effects. Drawing from Said’s (1983) ‘travelling theory’ Smith (2006) suggests that theories of transition have travelled at different paces in different post socialist countries. This principle can be applied to the situation in Albania, which continues to defy a straightforward translation of western urban theory to an understanding of the local context.

Albania provides a good example of two aspects of ‘travelling urban theory’: (1) the transfer of ‘good practice’ models of urban governance; and (2) the application of Anglo-American urban theories to understanding changing spaces of governance and suburban development. Focusing on (2), and the analysis of suburban development in the Tirana city region, this paper examines in what ways can, or should, ‘travelling urban theory’ be grounded in the evolving complexities and contradictions of edge-urban life in the Tirana city-region. More

specifically, it considers the relevance of urban theories developed by British and American scholars of urban development for transitional urban and suburban economies.

Pickles and Smith (2006) suggest that global neo-liberalism appears to have structured thinking about post-socialism in more powerful ways than have social democratic development models and critical political economy. In the same way the neo-liberal discourse has dominated policy analysis in the region, is there not a danger of allowing political economic theory to determine what is investigated and what conclusions are reached about the urban spatial effects of transition in Albania? In what ways can, or should, ‘travelling theory’ be grounded in the evolving complexities and contradictions of urban life in the Tirana city-region? Enacting the transfer of theory from one context to another represented a challenge for the author, who is an Albanian scholar doing PhD research in the UK. While some theoretical concepts were helpful in contextualizing the situation in Albania, I found that western theory does not ‘fit’ well within the context of understanding processes of peripheral urban development in Tirana. I examine two contexts where travelling urban theory collided with local knowledge on the ground and consequently led to a modification of conceptual themes. These were, respectively, (a) knowledge of local livelihood strategies and (b) local property knowledge.

Following Pickles and Smith (2007), I argue that one solution to the challenge of ‘travelling theory’ is to encourage a renewal of the historical imagination, which challenges the totalising tendencies not only in theories of the socialist cities but also those of post-socialist transition. The duty of the paper is to help to uncover more complex views of post-socialist transition, focusing on the nuances of social relations, economic practices and political conditions in grounded historical (and spatial) contexts. In this respect, ‘travelling theory’ is used to establish broader concepts and discourses relevant to particular transitional contexts but these contexts in turn shape how and in what form theory travels back to its original context. The result is less of a totalising model of post-socialist urban development and more a set of concepts and abstractions that are more or less sensitive to place, process and context. This approach is similar to the mode of geo-historical synthesis and abstraction as outlined by the likes of Sayer (1989) in the study of urban and regional geographies. Therefore this paper takes into account the ways in which particular theories may or may not be useful in explaining specific processes in particular urban settings.

Albania in Context: Transition Theories of Urban Development

Map 1.1: Political and Administrative Map of Central and Eastern Europe



Map 1.1 illustrates the political and administrative borders of East-Central European countries. For many Eastern European countries, the end of communism brought an opportunity to embrace a revitalized global neo-liberalism and the new economic and political opportunities it portended. In this view, the end of communism ushered in a period of great hopes of a return to Europe; a return that would expand economic opportunity and open personal and political freedoms (Pickles, 2005). At the same time, and in support of these developments, ‘theory’

travelled widely across Europe and to great effect, mainly orchestrated by neo-liberal intellectuals and institutions.

As a researcher educated in Albania but now based in the UK, I am particularly keen to understand how western theory travels to the Albanian context. By ‘western theory’, I mean the discussions of neo-liberal approaches to the city and notions of urban governance, ‘growth machines’, property right and livelihood strategies and the like. The paper is set up to explore how well these theories explain the Tirana city-region and its post-socialist ‘transition stories’. Are western theories appropriate for the study of post socialist urban forms and patterns, especially in Albania where theories of neoliberal capitalism could be applied without regard to the specificities of old and new national and local urban contexts?

Commenting on urban development trajectories in transitional economies, Sykora (2008: 289) suggests that there is some convergence with western urban forms and it is problematic to impose western theories of the transition to neo-liberal urban forms on such transitional contexts. He raises the following questions: What kinds of trajectories are being fixed in post-socialist cities? What are possible future path dependencies? How can an examination of post socialist urban transformation contribute to the development of critical geography?

In comparative perspective, political context and urban practices in Albania provide a good example of whether western theories of urban transition ‘fit’. The paper offers a post-socialist critique of urban studies, explaining urban theory’s neglect of cities in Albania. The paper argues that the Albanian case reveals the inherent diversity of urban experiences across the post socialist countries in East-Central Europe.

The following section provides an overview of urban development in East - Central Europe before and after the socialist era, trying to identify common patterns and differences between Albania and the other socialist countries in urban development politics.

Urban Development in East-Central Europe before and after the Socialist Era

East European urban policies passed through several phases in the socialist era. In the early 1950s there were no explicit urban policies. The planning system in socialist countries was

more a political category than an economic one. The early 1960s witnessed the introduction of the first regional and urban strategies in East-Central Europe. The strategy was used to limit the expansion of large towns and to encourage the development of small and medium-sized towns. By the 1970s, the state still played a dominant role in the urban planning regarding to the approval of the urban plans. As a consequence of this local urban authorities had the task of coordinating development and no decision-making power and public participation was reduced to largely symbolic involvement (Enyedi, 1990).

Past studies of East European cities have tended to emphasize the distinctiveness of the socialist model of urban development (Murray and Szelenyi, 1984). Even though East-Central European countries considered themselves as socialist countries, in practice they experienced different pathways of urban development. The level and structures of urbanization varied greatly between and within the countries of East-Central Europe depending on their geographical, historical, ideological, and political factors (Enyedi, 1992; Milanovich-Pichler, 1994; Eskinasi, 1995; Sykora, 2009). Even though the Soviet model of ‘rapid industrialisation, centrally planned within a system of state ownership’, was a motto for the Communist parties of East-Central Europe, under communist rule land reforms were implemented, enterprises were nationalized and governments moved to control all aspects of economic and social life through programmes of nationalisation (Turnock, 1989: 15).

Generally speaking, urban development patterns in most European transitional countries followed the rank-size rule; urbanization occurred in a similar manner and over a similar period as in Western Europe. Socialist initiatives did not lead to major distortions of the size distribution. This is because the exposure to central planning was much shorter compared to the long periods of time underlying the development of most cities in Europe. The former socialist economies, however, differed considerably from their western counterparts in one important respect: most of their largest cities were not oversized outliers (i.e. urban primacy was not a feature of the urban system in socialist states). Rather, they tend to be smaller than predicted by the rank-size rule. This reflects the legacy of the central planning where privilege of living in the capital was strictly regulated and the movement of population was highly restricted. Moreover, there was a high degree of imposed specialization by region/city in the various sectors of secondary industry, which dictated the population movement in a forceful way (Clunies-Ross and Sudar, 1998).

Urban Development in Albania pre and post-1990

Post-socialist scholars, like Sykora (1995, 1998, 2008, 2009), have offered a description of the model of post socialist city. Yet, the story of Tirana's life and context is not like that of a post-socialist city such as Prague. Tirana is a busy and vibrant city and has its own 'fuzzy' model. Rather than a smooth transition to universal private property occurring, property rights at the suburban fringe are constantly made, remade and unmade by actual livelihood practices.

During the socialist period, Albania was one the most centralised economy in the SEE. During the period of state central planning, the state played a major role in limiting urban development. Rate of urbanization was controlled through the imposition of migration controls and people were not free to change residency as they pleased. The 1976 Constitution imposed a complete ban on property rights (or private property). Before 1990, Albania had some of the lowest quality and overcrowded housing in South-Eastern Europe. After 1991 there was a boom in the housing market and is increased the request for housing. Rapid growth of new houses in the outskirts of the city and uncontrolled alterations of the existing buildings has been characteristic of Tirana's urbanization in the transition period. During this period, the urbanization rate in Albania in 2000 was 41.2% and approx. 35% of the total population now lives in the Tirana city-region.

Since 1990 a relatively free movement of people in Albania from rural areas toward urban ones. Urban population has increased dramatically from 35.8% in 1990 to 44.5% in 2004. State collective farms have given way to housing and building on fragmented private property at the urban fringe. After a period of liberalisation, there are now attempts to regulate land use and property rights at the suburban fringe. In some urban areas such as Tirana, Durres and Fushe-Kruja, the urban and surrounding rural population grew at the alarming rates. Consequently, construction building has been rapidly expanding.

Private property has more significance for people in Albania than in other socialist countries because of its near total abolition in 1976. The privatization process in agricultural and urban land was helped with the passage of substantive laws. People that were unjustly deprived of their property in the past it was said can regain their property or an equivalent of alternative property or money from central government. The laws are controversial and the land issue was left for later resolution.

As the result of unprecedented rural-urban migration the suburban land in state ownership has been occupied by squatters. Since 1990, in the Tirana city-region there is an increase of urban density in city centre, along development corridors and outskirts. Central government was weak and unprepared. Because of the free movement of population, the suburban areas of Tirana took a totally new character since 1991. Agricultural land uses have given way to housing and buildings and around 40% of investment in informal buildings supported mostly by remittances. Between 1992 and 1996, private sector (construction sector due to very high demand for housing) in GDP share grew from 10% to 45%. Informal settlements in Kamza, north of Tirana occupy an area of 23.2 km² and with a population approx. 100 000 inhabitants in 2009 has got the density of 3420 person per km². Legalisation of informal settlements is one of political priorities of each government. Since the transition to a market economy, rapid urbanization has occurred in the capital cities of South Eastern Europe and has led to the proliferation of peri-urban areas and informal buildings. Tirana is no different in this respect.

During the 1990's, disruptive economic, political and demographic changes took place during which control of land became confused, and many citizens subdivided and built on land without legal authorization. These actions resulted in 'informal' urban districts on the periphery of cities Tirana, Durres, Fushe-Kruja. Take together the reform programs creating private property rights, state property inventories and illegal actions have subdivided Albania into 4.5 milion land parcels and seperately-owned immovable property units. Privatisation of housing proceeded with great speed. The programme started in May 1993 and by November the same year the transfer of ownership of some 97% of flats was completed.

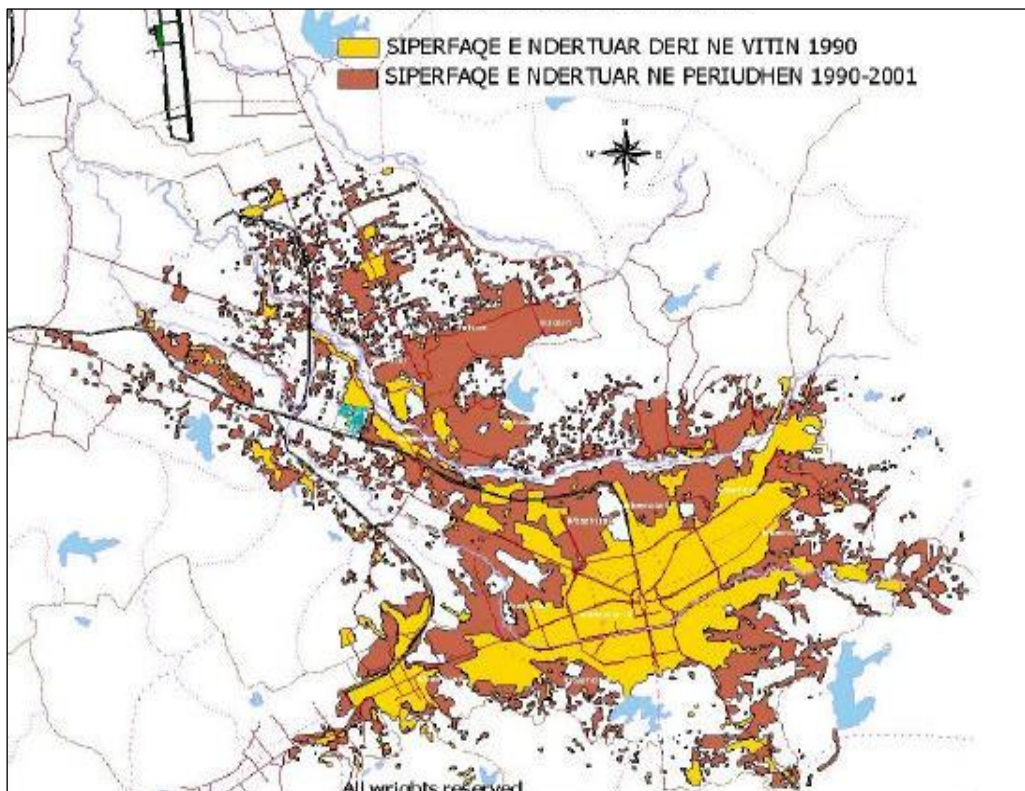
Because of the free movement of population and unregulated land development, the suburban zones of Tirana have taken on a totally new character since 1991. Agricultural land uses have given way to housing and building. Unprecedented rural-urban migration led to very high demand for housing in Tirana city-region. It was in short supply and the available stock was dilapidated and overcrowded. While many parts of the periphery remain in state ownership, no public entity is in position to acquire or hold land future right-of-way in the same of the district or national government.

The following section will outline in more detail key post-socialist practices on struggles around property rights at the urban fringe in Tirana city region.

Suburban Development in the Tirana City Region

The compact character of the former socialist city is being changed through rapid commercial and residential suburbanization that takes the form of unregulated sprawl. New construction of suburban residential districts is fragmented into numerous locations in metropolitan areas around central cities. The appearance of ‘fuzzy edge city’ is mainly related to the political, economic and social institutional causes of transformation from centrally planned into free market economies (Carnobell and Gerxhani, 2004). But unlike ‘edge cities’ in North America, western countries and Eastern Europe, there are not the result of large scale private development. Instead the ‘edge city’ in Tirana represents an informal settlement created out of fragmented property rights.

Map 1.2: Tirana expansion 1990-2001



Source: Co-Plan, 2002

Map 1.2 illustrates the expansion of Tirana city region between 1990 and 2001 as a result of the rapid growth of population at its fringes. There are pressure as a result of the explosion in the growth of informal housing, problems around the provision of infrastructure and the issues of the funding of local government especially in the burgeoning suburban areas of the

Tirana city-region. These tensions include an explosion in the growth of informal private housing, problems around the provision of infrastructure, and the issue of the funding of local government especially in the burgeoning suburban areas of the capital city-region. It is expected that new suburban spaces of re-regulation reflect the interaction of Albania’s inherited legal and administrative structures with new pressures of land development under a free market system. Securing property rights is an important part of the new regulatory context in suburban areas of Tirana. The analysis of suburban development in Tirana city region is based on the data collected through field observations and interviews with local actors, migrants¹, residents and ex-owners categories, focusing on actually-existing struggles around the acquisition of local property knowledge and livelihood strategies (*See* Table 1.1. below).

Table 1.1: Categories’ Composition of Respondents

Categories	Respondents	No
Migrants	This group included people from different parts of Albania who settled down illegally in the periphery of Tirana city region after 1990	11
Residents	This group included people settled in the suburbs of Tirana before 1990 and got free state land in 1991 ²	13
Ex-owner	This group include people, whose property was expropriated during the Agrarian Reform in 1976	21
Officials	This group include local and national officials, academics, public and private sector	13

The following sections examine two contexts where travelling urban theory collided with local knowledge on the ground respectively on struggles around property rights at the urban fringes of Tirana city region.

Local Property Knowledge

Smith and Timar (2010:121) argue that engaging with and developing interpretations of post socialist urban and regional development is no easy task. One critical issue is how the kinds of knowledge can be developed to provide effective understanding of ‘post-socialism’.

¹ Throughout Albania people living on the fringe of the big cities are frequently referred to as “migrants/newcomers”. During the course of research it became apparent that this term was not entirely accurate description. This qualification is being fully descriptive of their particular situation. Accordingly, the term “migrant” is used.

² The privatization process in Albania include the implementation of the Law on Land, *See* Law No.7501

Theories of neo-liberal urban development are negotiated in different ways by local contexts in Tirana city region. Tirana is not like the other post socialist cities, such as Budapest, Warsaw, Beograd, and Prague. Tirana city region differs from these post socialist cities' experiences. The flux of rural immigration and consequent urban sprawl has meant that conflicts and tensions around property rights are likely to happen (Hartkoorn, 2000; Petrovic, 2003: 20).

In Tirana city region multiple stories are activated and circulating during the period 2006-2009. Residents and migrants struggle to make claims on private property and livelihoods. Specifically, recent migrants through self regulation and later through legalization exercised their property rights and at the same time garnered knowledge of such rights. The following findings not only confirm the complex ways in which property rights in transitional urban economies of Tirana city region relate to survival mechanism but also it concerns the underpinning role of property knowledge in shaping livelihood strategies in Tirana.

During the socialist system, the ownership of land and entire term 'property' was an abstract idea. Albania was unusual, if not unique, among transition economies in a prompt and radical privatization of urban housing. The political history of Albania (since the Ottoman Land Code of 1858) has created a palimpsest of property rights which are of great legal complexity. Indisputable property documents are unusual in the large areas of informal housing which arose around Tirana since 1990. The supposed land owning class from pre-communist (Zogist) days has attempted to recover their lands. The problem of illegal buildings is growing in scale and to bring the illegal construction back to the formal sector to enforce rule of law, and to develop a financial system and legal frameworks is a challenge. Massive migration brought illegal settlement built on an agricultural land with obviously no infrastructure. Informal settlements have existed for 15 years; and those settlers who originally built there, are still building their homes. Informal settlements had serious economic, social and environmental impacts. A considerable number of conflicts and tensions were tied up in unplanned settlements (Felstehausen, 1999; Bertaud, 2006; Childress, 1999, 2006).

The privatization reform during the transition period helped different actors to understand the importance of property and how to manage urban living space in different ways. It can be argued that much of land development was poorly planned, with minimal provision for basic infrastructure and services. What this meant in practice was that, in order to get involved in the free market and mobilize the title of property different actors have to actively participate

in land development and molding their urban living space even though law and regulations on property ownership and land market are suspended. The analysis of suburban development in Tirana city region based on the data collected through field observations and interviews with local actors, migrants, residents and ex-owners shows how local property knowledge differs from different practices and experiences of different actors, on one hand, and how the knowledge of property helps their understanding of it, on the other hand.

Most migrants explained in detail the main reasons they moved in the fringes of Tirana city region and how they provided title from the legal owners. To some extent, these suburban areas have produced an interconnected geography between remote north areas and central and south ones. However, a considerable number of them in the period between 1994 and 1998 got the land from forceful occupation of unwanted or neglected land in Kamza area. Most migrants and residents used to use their land as a basic shelter. One migrant, settled in Kamza since 1995 stated:

“After 1990 living in our remote villages we found ourselves without job and affordable livelihood. This led to squatting on vacant state or private owned land at the fringes of Tirana city region. Deprived from land ownership more than four decades, we thought we could use the land however we wish. Before we used to be selfish and did not care too much about our neighbourhood. In this context we were not thinking how to make a vivid interurban landscape and build up neighbourhood but only how to build a house as a shelter”.

However, recently they started to realize something was wrong and missing in their landscape and neighbourhood. Securing title to property was important. Having a shelter and a piece of land was not enough. They wanted to mobilize their properties via participation in urban land development. They are conscious that awareness of the rules and regulation will help in growing use and exchange of their property. The same migrant continued:

“After 2000 our attitude about property started to change. Before we used to build a house in an empty land and we hardly asked ‘what’s next’. Recently, we started to understand that if our land is not registered officially and get a title of it we can’t have access on land transaction, infrastructure, electronic post, etc”.

Migrant, Tirana’s suburb, March 2009

With ‘what’s next’ the migrant wanted to say that in the past they did not pay attention and asked for any existing planning regulations or go to urban office and provide information

about area's zoning plan. Between 1995 and 2002, most of migrants considered the right to occupy and use land more important than the legal ownership.

Illegal acquisition of land through migrants' neighbourhood influence has been a major source of insecurity for those migrants not having clear title to their land. The resulting insecurity has created anxiety and they desperately want to allocate in a legal way. One migrant moved to one area close to Tirana city region in 2006 stated:

“Everyone left the village and we could not stay on our own. We moved in Kamza for a better life and to stay close to our neighbours. As no land left, we are obliged to rent the houses used as a shelter from our friends before 2000. The existing conditions are very basic and we feel more like refugee than a citizen. We started to realize that without a clear title of property we don't have access even to social benefits”.

Migrant, Tirana city region, May 2008

However, property rights used to be an abstract idea for decades, now during transition property rights is being mobilised and different categories get themselves involved in land market. Furthermore, the local strategies of the interviews categories relating to property rights are going smoothly and their local knowledge of property is shaping their understanding of livelihood. The livelihood is being achieved through the use of a number of strategies.

Knowledge of Local Livelihood Strategies

According to Sykora (2004), who has conducted work on socialist cities in transition, the spatial mismatch between the location of jobs and residences, contributes to increased travel-to work in metropolitan areas. In the Albanian case, the only solution for poor people was the alteration of condominiums (built during the Communist system) and illegal building after 1992, a trend that spread mainly throughout the country. Because of the free movement of population and unregulated land development, the suburban zones of Tirana have taken on a totally new character. Agricultural land uses have given way to housing and building. According to Aliaj *et al.* (2003: 89)

“The great demographic increase of urban zones following the political change resulted in the enlargement of urbanized areas and the deterioration of the environment in Albania due to the construction of innumerable buildings”.

However, for many people 'property rights' is an abstract concept. While private property is an important precondition for exchange in capitalism, exchange occurs in different concrete context (or particular places). This chapter examines how the abstract idea of property rights is grounded in different knowledge practices in urban and suburban areas of Tirana. Such practices utilize access to livelihood strategies.

During the research the author conducted semi-structured interviews with migrants, residents, ex-owner and officials categories will be used to reveal particular characteristics of suburban development, focusing on the regulation of private property and how property ownership influences public participation in local government. The semi-structured interviews with different categories of participants (migrants, residents, ex-owners, local officials) examining the conflicts emerging around suburban development in Tirana city region. The interviews were used to gather information about particular characteristics of urban development, focusing in particular in the regulation of private property and how property ownership influences the securing of livelihoods in the city. The semi-structured interviews and participant observation address what new pressure are creating in Tirana city region due to property and land development. These pressures form a new kind of tension and conflict associated with the development of new suburban spaces. Based on the findings, it is concluded that particular theories may not be useful in explaining specific processes in particular urban settings i.e Tirana city region. Travel theory (via Neo-liberalisation process) in Albania produces conflicts around regulation different modes of property ownership rights.

There has been a significant migration towards suburban areas, especially around Tirana city-region and to the western coast of Albania. This has resulted in a regional differentiation in housing construction activity with booming suburban areas. In the Tirana city region, the intensity of housing construction is nearly three times higher than the national average (INSTAT, 2006). The informal nature of suburban development is a way of securing property and access to livelihood (Bertaud, 2006). It is expected that new suburban spaces of re-regulation reflect the interaction of Albania's inherited legal and administrative structures with new pressures of land development under a free market system. Gaining access to property has given residents and migrants a stake in how their communities deliver and therefore property and land use regulation becomes a way of consolidating livelihoods. The livelihood is being achieved through the use of a number of strategies.

The post-socialist transition is a broad, complex and lengthy process of societal change. Smith and Stenning (2002) discuss household and community practices for managing increasing social exclusion in post-transition economies. They focus on the strategic role of households in such practices, and on identifying ‘geographies of practice’. In transitional urban economies of South Eastern Europe property rights relate to the use, exchange and regulation of urban and suburban space. There in turn reflect on the complex ways in which livelihoods are secured.

Some of findings are that migrants develop a range of livelihood activities to enable them to cope with the challenges of living in Kamza. However in a transition context these challenges are made more difficult by contradictions around property rights. Although people in transitional economies have increasing access to private property, there are also pressures to regulate property which creates tensions around those livelihood strategies that depend on ownership and access to property.

Conclusion

The collapse of the communist system resulted in the processes of urban transformation in central and Eastern Europe. The examination of post-socialist urban transformations contributes to the development of critical geography. The paper aims to bring together scholar of western countries and East-Central Europe to exchange ideas and findings concerning the mutual problems of the transitional countries in the face of urban transformation. It is nowadays increasingly apparent that post-socialist urban change is not a simple evolutionary process leading from a known point of departure (state socialism) to an expected destination. The development of cities in the region shows plenty of variety and this variety may stem from the paths of economic reform chosen during transition, differences in residential preferences and urban transitions’ and not least, the structures inherited from socialist era. The aim of this paper is to investigate the divergent paths of urban transformation since the demise of socialism in East-Central Europe by identifying the role of both legacy and transition-related factors on ‘travel theory’ as a policy in the Albanian context.

The paper has shown how livelihood strategies and struggles over property rights in urban and peripheral urban spaces of Tirana shed light on our knowledge of transitional economies

and neoliberal urbanism. The politics of urban living space in Tirana city region is deeply contested. The 'neoliberalisation' of urban development in Albania seems to have produced conflict around regulating different modes of property ownership rights. If the property title issue remains unresolved the most likely outcome as Petrovic (2003) argues is that Albanian cities will become unregulated post socialist cities having more similarities to Third World cities than to Developed World cities. Path dependency is a cornerstone concept of comparative analysis of the transition from state socialism. The concept of path dependency earlier appeared in the business and economic literature to account for the lock-in tendency observed when a particular technology becomes accepted as an industry standard. In the studies of transition economies this concept thus far has been evoked to characterize the mechanism that reproduce and perpetuate core features of the preexisting social order. In classical state socialism, the axial institution was the party state, which not only managed the economy by fiat power but also maintained direct political controls over the entire ensemble of societal institutions. In state-centered accounts of transition, the structure of public ownership and long standard vertical ties linking government bureaus with economic actors perpetuate a pattern of resource dependence deeply entrenched in the economy and society (Nee and Cao, 1999: 800). As Fligstein (1996) observes, 'the heavy hand of the state is everywhere' in post socialist society.

Neoliberal (western) urban theories have not travelled well in Albania. On the whole, they fail to adequately assess how post-socialist transition developed in a weak-state context like Tirana city-region. In fact, the findings suggest that theories of neo-liberal urban development are negotiated in different ways by the local contexts in Tirana and are challenged appreciably by the transitional context in Albania. As an Albanian scholar I have my wariness of applying wider 'Eastern European' models of post-socialist transition to Albania uncritically: the uniqueness of the Albanian case demands recognition.

Pickles and Smith (2006) suggest that global neo-liberalism appears to have structured thinking about post-socialism in more powerful ways than have social democratic development models and critical political economy. The neo-liberal discourse has dominated policy analysis in post socialist cities. Said's (1983) 'travelling theory' opens up a crucial research agenda, which establishes the displacements of ideas in different cultural or national sites as an important aspect of the production of knowledge. Drawing from Said's 'travelling theory' Smith (2006) suggests that the transition theory travels at a different pace in different post

socialist countries. This paper looked only one of two aspects of ‘travelling theory’; how the theories of western writers were interpreted, negotiated and contested in different practices of communities in Tirana city region. It might be assumed that transition theory should be able to ‘fit’ in any post socialist city. This paper proposes that this theory does not ‘fit’ well within the context of Albania. It appears that travelling theory has to adapt and modify to the local historical-cultural context and these strategies and theories should be tailored and fixed to such constraints, not vice-versa.

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