Passport Troubles: Social Tactics and Places of Informal Transactions in Post-Socialist Albania*

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Passports, bureaucracy and uncertainty

In January 2005, I traveled back to Albania during winter break to obtain a new passport. I had inquired earlier about the application process through relatives living in Tirana, the capital. As is often the case with bureaucratic procedures in Albania, however, once there, I discovered the process would take longer than anticipated. There was, of course, no other way of finding out about these changes other than pushing through a crowd from behind the rusty iron-bar window of the dilapidated passport application office located at the back of a nameless alley near *rruga Fortuzi* (Fortuzi street). The crowd included other immigrants returning from Italy and Greece who, just like me, were also using their winter holidays to arrange documents and visas back home. Through push and shove, my relatives and I finally managed to reach the window. We found out that after submitting my birth certificate and official request to the Office of Passports (*Zyra e Pashaportave*), my file would be sent to the Precinct Police Station (*Komisariati i Policise*) for a routine criminal record check. Next, the documents would be transferred to the Regional Police Station (*Rajoni i Policise*) that issued the new passport. We were provided with no specific timeline or contact information for any of these offices, which are spread over different parts of Tirana.

My relatives had not known about the second stop at the Precinct Police Station. It was a step recently added to the previous procedure. This meant that the process would take longer than we had anticipated. The extended procedure could take an extra two to ten more days. In the big scheme of things this was not such a big tragedy. However, I was also operating under a temporal constraint; I needed to have my new passport ready in a few days for my appointment at the American Embassy where I was applying for an extension of my F1 student visa.[1] Given the need to expedite this process and the lack of a specific timeline from the Albanian authorities, we immediately felt a familiar anxiety in the face of bureaucratic uncertainty.

Having been on a student status in Canada and the US since 1995, like many of my peers contributing annually to the national brain drain, I had experienced an endless number of complicated strategies of aligning embassy requirements with local bureaucratic procedures. I was by then used to the annual cycles of paperwork involving proof of identification and family composition, medical tests, criminal record, financial records, and proof of ties to the country of origin, among others. Alas, despite all the years of practice shuffling between different offices, I still had not acquired immunity against the grueling sensation of anxiety that something could go wrong. I was only too familiar with this feeling of uncertainty in dealing with local authorities, foreign embassies and, especially, when trying to navigate between the two. It is a particular way

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of feeling that I had learnt to embody throughout my childhood and teenage years.[2] In this article I explore the specific historicity and the social and spatial organization of this sense of uncertainty surrounding transactions with public officials in postsocialist Albania.

A country of 3.5 million, situated across the Adriatic from Italy and bordering Greece, Macedonia, Kosovo and Montenegro, Albania has for many years occupied an odd geo-political space in the Balkans. Following the end of The Second World War, The Socialist Republic of Albania joined the Warsaw pact embracing the former-Soviet empire. For most of the communist period, authoritarian leader Enver Hoxha (who ruled from 1945-1985) led the country into total isolation not just from its socialist and capitalist neighbors—former Yugoslavia, Greece and Italy—but also from all countries in the Eastern bloc. In 1960, Hoxha broke ties with the Soviet Union protesting its de-Stalinization and, allying with the Socialist Republic of China, replicated the Cultural Revolution in Albania in the 1970s, thus deepening internal divisions between regular citizens and the so-called "enemies of the people."[3] Breaking political and economic ties with China in the late 1970s, the country turned into one of the most isolated of the former communist world, matched only by North Korea. Throughout these years of increased isolation, Albanians lived with a daily paradox: on the one hand, official propaganda boasted of overachieving the five-year plans; on the other hand, people were spending more of their time waiting in longer lines for basic subsistence items. Part of the contemporary feeling of cynicism towards formality in general and bureaucracy in particular is a legacy of the cynicism cultivated through these never-ending lines.

In 1991, following the fall of the Berlin wall and the successive transformations in other Eastern European countries, Albania also experienced a remarkably peaceful political transition from monism to pluralism. It was not long, however, before the initial euphoria of opening up to the world after years of isolation reverted to the familiar cynicism as people now free to travel abroad found out that foreign embassies were not so welcoming after all. Thus, the current skepticism towards public institutions also emerges from the more recent sour experiences of long lines, endless waiting, and flat-out rejections at the doors of foreign embassies. But how do people cope with this sense of impossibility on a daily basis? How do they navigate these situations of uncertainty?

My three days of trying intensively to renew my Albanian passport were a journey into an intricate space of formal and informal transactions with state authorities and intermediaries. The rules of these transactions, whether real or imagined, illustrate how a web of informal negotiations taking place in personalized public spaces mediates the postsocialist sense of uncertainty and distrust towards formal institutions. This journey explores different tactics used to mitigate this uncertainty. I focus first on the dynamics of connections and cash gifts in exchange for public services. Further, I discuss the place that particular public-private spaces occupy in these transactions. I argue that given the multiple and unstable meanings of these places, they constitute one of the most trusted spaces for negotiating with state power in postsocialist Albania.

My reflections here focus mainly on what political scientists define as "petty

corruption"—that is, the exchange of public services for gifts, bribes, or favors.[4] The main story in this paper is based on my experience of participant observation with the passport issuing institutions in Albania's capital, Tirana, in winter 2005. The observations that follow refer to that particular moment in time. While no actual bribing or gift giving took place during this journey, I discuss the palpable presence of their possibility. Further, I point to the multiple meanings of cash donations to public officers—as gifts, as *bakshish* (tip), or as bribes—depending on the temporality of exchange.

Revisiting this story after completing 15 months of fieldwork in Tirana during 2008-2009, I also note some changes and continuities. Most importantly, although there persists a general acceptance of "petty corruption" in everyday life, there is today an increasing local concern with "state capture." In contrast to petty corruption, state capture is defined as the unfair process of privatization and procurement contracts. While local residents generally condone "under the table" exchanges of gifts, favors, and payments, they strongly condemn acts of appropriation or biased distribution of state property.

Although people still largely approved of social practices deemed corrupt (according to the definition of petty corruption), anti-corruption activists I spoke with during fieldwork stressed a decline in the sheer quantity of petty corruption. My own experiences in 2008-2009 leant some credence to these claims: As I still had to perform many bureaucratic procedures during my recent stay in Tirana, I noticed that many of the public offices, especially those issuing birth certificates or other identification documents, had made an effort to become more presentable and more transparent. Many had posted information online or in the public waiting rooms of their offices. Nevertheless, I often experienced indirect refusals to provide service and access to public information in the form of non-availability of officers on duty, delaying meetings, or simply ignoring formal requests. After many attempts at getting things done through official channels, I often resorted to the network of acquaintances, often just to obtain the mere attention of a public servant. These experiences led me to conclude that everyday interactions with bureaucracy still retain some of the patterns of strategizing and networking described in the following ethnographic vignette from 2005. To illustrate this continuity, I end this article with an uncanny déjà vu "replay" of my journey through the passport issuing offices, captured by the hidden cameras of the investigative journalism television show, *Fiks Fare*, which originally aired in September 2008.

Who do you know? Zeneli, tahiri, 'i njohuri'

To mitigate the sense of uncertainty vis-à-vis state bureaucracy in Albania, individuals engage in informal practices such as the use of connections, favors, gifts, and/or bribes. Although I was quite aware of such "alternatives" before the 2005 trip, my efforts to expedite the process of issuing a new passport was my first direct exposure to this ubiquitous reality. Anticipating the usual bureaucratic delays, my relatives had contacted Zenel,[5] an acquaintance who claimed to "know" someone at the Regional Police Station, the last stop of the new

passport. As someone "in the know," Zenel was our *i njohur* (connection). *I njohur* in Albanian derives from the verb *njoh* (to know). To know someone at a given institution implies to have a connection, someone you can rely on, someone who can help you bypass official obstacles. Often, when faced with uncertain bureaucratic procedures, people ask, "A njeh njeri atje?" (Do you know anyone there?). "Knowing" here implies trusting someone for help outside formal rules, having enough familiarity to ask for a favor.

Another word for "connection" or "pull" is *miku,* meaning a good and trustworthy friend. When talking about a third party that received a valued asset or service through a connection, people say they obtained it '*me mik*' (through/with a "friend") or '*me miqësi*' (through/with "friendship"). The English word "friend" does not, however, capture the Albanian meaning of *mik*. *Mik* connotes both a trusted friend[6] and also a guest—be that one known from before or a stranger. Both connotations command the highest form of respect. Obligations towards *miq* and *miqësi* have occupied an important place not just in the traditional moral codes of *kanun*[7] but also throughout the socialist history.

'*I njohuri*' and '*miku*' have been integral to the economy of favors not only in communist Albania but also throughout the former-socialist countries (Sampson 1987). These intermediaries have enabled a realm of distribution of goods and services as an alternative to the economy of shortage. Hence, I reflect on my personal experience with *të njohur* in Albania in conversation with two key ethnographic texts on the economy of favors during socialism. In her study of the Chinese *guanxixue* (the art of using social relationships) Mayfair Yang (1994) explored the uses of kinship, friends, acquaintances, and neighbors in mediating a series of exchanges with state authorities. Similarly, Alena Ledeneva (1998) underscored the importance of *blat* (pull/connection) in the former Soviet Union. Both have suggested an analogy to Marcel Mauss' (1990[1924]) analysis of the gift, emphasizing the inherent elements of reciprocity and mutual help in the socialist economies of favors: "*Blat* was embedded in intimate relations which resulted in mutual help, help which could prove crucial to the conditions of scarcity" (Ledeneva 1998:16). Both authors have also suggested that these social institutions received a boost during the time of the respective socialist regimes.

So pervasive were these modes of exchange during socialism that, as one of Ledeneva's informants describes, they had become a habit, a social psychology:

> These exchanges were inseparable from good relationships. I suppose one could actually arrange something formally but the habit of using contacts was so strong that one always asked acquaintances first. It was a specific psychology. I always rang a friend to ask him to ring another friend about me, about appointments or whatever. [Informant quoted in Ledeneva 1998:140]

This particular habit, as the following story shows, is still very much a part of the daily engagements with bureaucracy in Albania. Having a *të njohur* mitigates the uncertainty of formal procedures. Finding a *të njohur* is a psychological strategy for personalizing an unknown

territory. *I njohuri/miku* plays the role of an intermediary, a go-between. Writing about a similar phenomenon in socialist China, Yang states:

> The intermediary is often a friend who is familiar with the other person. Since *gunaxixue* [the art of social relations] has to work through channels of familiarity, introductions by an intermediary are often much more effective than self-initiated acquaintance. [Yang 1994:124]

Zeneli was one such intermediary my relatives had contacted to bypass formal procedures. He was a colleague of one of my relatives and claimed to know the Regional Police Station from the inside since he had once worked there. Further, he claimed to know someone directly involved in the process of issuing the new passports. The said transaction would then take place through a chain of intermediaries. Primarily, we relied on the weak, yet, "known" relationship to Zenel. At the same time, as I came to know later, it was well understood—albeit never articulated—that Zenel would receive a cash gift. The expression "cash gift" might seem an oxymoron, especially for the extensive literature on the anthropology of the gift.[8] However, in contemporary Albania, this oxymoron increasingly captures a reality that spans beyond the mere exchanging of favors for services; it includes also a broader range of social situations where cash has substituted gifts in symbolic objects.[9]

The cash that my relatives planned to give to Zenel constituted for them a gift rather than a bribe because the intermediary had never explicitly asked for money, nor were there any negotiations on the right price. At the same time, this was a classic case of the obligation to return, as outlined in Mauss' analysis of the gift (1990:40-41). Everyone I talked to seemed to think it was only fair to give something to the intermediary; the cash was seen as given out of (obligatory) gratitude. There was, however, one important difference in this gift from the classic one: this gift to the intermediary was supposed to be made in the form of cash. Combining personal obligation and gratitude with cash is a distinct feature of the postsocialist economy of favors and connections. A number of important recent studies have explored the monetization of the socialist economy of favors arising from a replacement of the shortage economy with the market economy (see esp. Humphrey 2002, Ledeneva 2009). Monetization does not, however, necessarily imply commodification. Instead of focusing on the relative reduction of the economy of favors as a consequence of the monetization of relations in the postsocialist context, this journey through the network of intermediaries in Tirana raises an alternate question: Why are intermediaries necessary when cash is involved?

Given the legacy of the socialist economy of favors up to the present, it is worth revisiting some key findings from anthropological literature on this subject. These earlier findings provide us with an index of the organization of social relations in mediations through connections. In her account of the Chinese economy of gifts and favors, Yang (1994) emphasizes "familiarity" as the guiding principle of *guanxixue*. She concludes that using familiar intermediaries as a way of navigating through formal institutions indicates that people ultimately

trust personalized networks rather than formal institutions. This principle of trust and familiarity in informal networks, I argue, continues to mediate transactions in contemporary Albania. But we must inquire further into the social dynamics of familiarity and trust. How does one cultivate a trusted network of friends? What counts as familiarity? How do people generate and sustain familiarity and trust? Yang has provided us with an elaborate index of relations mobilized in the Chinese *guanxixue* (the art of social relations). She differentiates between different levels of familiarity: family and kinship, neighbors and native-place ties, non-kin relations or equivalent status, and non-kin superior-subordinate relations (1994: 111). Each type of relation also involves different expectations and obligations. This index is strikingly similar to the use of *të njohur* (connections) in Albania. For instance, our initial intermediary, Zenel, was a non-kin relation of equivalent status. In this sense, the relationship did not involve a "regime of affection" (Ledeneva 1998:147) nor one of "status" (ibid, 150). Yet, it was a relationship of necessity that relied on the principle of mutual help and obligation, with some benefits for both parties. Given the distance with the intermediary, of the parties involved in this case, my relatives had taken a bigger risk.

In fact, Zenel did not turn out to be as reliable as we had initially hoped. When asked for help with the middle stop (the Precinct Police Station), he claimed he did not "know" anyone there. Later on, we discovered that even his connection at the last stop, the Regional Police Station, was weak. This "connection" was his neighbor, a young woman who was a customer service employee at the Regional Police Station. Contrary to Zenel's claims to familiarity and influence over her, the young woman refused to make any exceptions from the rules, stating accurately that she had no power over her superiors. In other words, Zenel did not possess the social capital necessary to fulfill the promised mediation. This was an example of a failed mediation due to a series of misunderstandings and miscalculations for all parties involved. This scenario is not, however, an anomaly.

Relations of gift-exchange, as Pierre Bourdieu (1997) has emphasized, inevitably rest on unstable grounds. They follow shared informal codes of expectation and exchange. They also involve elements of calculation, risk-taking, and performativity. The threat of uncertainty, of miscalculation, and of failure is always already present. Instead of forcing one to give up, however, any one of these failures sparks a new search for other intermediaries, just like the chain of phone calls described by Ledeneva's informant. Yang characterizes the tactics of working through intermediaries as a domino effect. In addition to using already existing familiar contacts, this search also contains a performative element—by seeking new connections, one also generates new relations: "The role of intermediaries," says Yang, "also shows that the art of *guanxi* is not restricted to ascribed relationships, but also depends on what can be called 'achieved familiarity'" (Yang 1998: 125).

It was precisely the principle of "achieved familiarity" that motivated my relatives to pursue someone who "knew" someone at the Precinct Police Station. My initial instinct of bypassing this whole business and going directly to the Precinct Police Station only intensified after Zeneli's fiasco. Yet, I was pulled instead into another search for *të njohur* despite my

protests. My arguments against this tactic were dismissed as naïve and as coming from a lack of experience with reality in Albania. This situation left me at first with a sense of irritation and incomprehension. In time, however, I came to see this experience from a different perspective. It appears to me now that the element of "familiarity" necessary in these transactions is a form of intimacy not confined to private circles but opened to possibilities of forging new relations. Further, these relations are not bound to a given social structure but represent a form of sociality in the making.

In the middle of four streets

For a moment, after discovering that we could not count on Zenel, we felt at a loss. We were, as a local expression would have it, *në mes të katër rrugëve* (stranded in the middle of four streets). Not only because we were literally standing at the intersection between Rruga e Durrësit (Durrësi street) and Rruga e Fortuzit (Fortuzi street), but also because we felt every bit as abandoned as the connotation of this metaphorical expression suggests. We felt hopeless, powerless, and most importantly, unconnected. The image of the street as the unknown jungle where one is treated like "a nobody" echoes a similar trope repeated in many of Ledeneva's informant accounts. The contrast between the privileged treatment received when using a trusted connection and the dismissive response given to those who are merely "from the street" is a recurrent theme from these accounts.[10] Yet, as I was soon to find out, the street is also a space of improvisation, a space where different tactics emerge, tactics that escape formal structures.[11]

We were thus standing at the intersection. My aunt happened to work right on Rruga e Durrësit so she joined our brainstorming session about people we knew that could help. I, of course, was of no use, as I did not "know" anyone important given my years abroad. As we were talking, an acquaintance of my aunt, Besnik, happened to be walking by. Despite my resistance to sharing my personal problems with strangers, my relatives were quick to describe the situation to Besnik in the spirit of asking as many people as possible in order to chance upon some dormant connection. Even more surprising to me was Besnik's response: he immediately exuded competency on the situation. Very quickly, a name came to his mind. "Tahir," he said, was the person to talk to at the Precinct Police Station. He was the person who processed the criminal record check before approving the new passports. He was the one to ask to expedite this routine procedure. Besnik did not recall Tahir's last name. "Just go to the guard," he said, "and ask for Tahir." That was sufficient for my relatives to regain confidence and proceed to the police station. The name "Tahir" had injected new hope.

I walked with one of my relatives, I'll call her Manjola, towards the Precinct Police Station. We argued on our way over whether this made sense or not. I was skeptical of this "Tahir." I argued that we did not even know him or anything about him, so how could we rely on his name? What I refused to understand was that in both cases, that of Zenel and Tahir, it was not so much the actual competence of the person that counted as much as the level of familiarity one felt towards them. The way Besnik had named Tahir, using his first name with confidence and

expressing a genuine desire to help, expressed a level of familiarity that generated comfort and trust. Most importantly, naming an insider in an office with convincing familiarity is supposed to provide special access in an otherwise hostile institutional culture. The display of trust towards these intermediaries—one turning out to be false; the other still imaginary—was based on a very broadly defined notion of "knowing" but also on the performative skills of these intermediaries. Both Zenel and Besnik spoke with extreme confidence, exuding an air of inside knowledge about these institutions so unfamiliar to us. In both cases, the actual connection was weak but their body language was quite convincing. Further, the encounters occurred in places where the words said were trusted more than those said in formal places such as public offices. And that was what mattered most.

Private public places

It was precisely my discomfort with the places where these informal interactions took place that led me to be skeptical of Besnik and Zenel. The brief interactions with both of them had taken place on the side of the road. I had not met either of them before, and a simple conversation on the street seemed very insufficient for my unquestionable trust. Yet, for all other actors involved, the street seemed to be the most trusted space of interaction, certainly more trusted than the office. The relationship between these mediated transactions and the places where they occur demands closer observation.

Philosopher Edward Casey has put forth the notion of "cultural implacement" to suggest that place is "permeated with culturally constituted institutions and practice" (1997: 46). Rather than existing prior to culture, Casey argues that place is always already cultural. Further, he describes how the anthropological notion of "local knowledge" is constituted both through an implacement of the body in the particular locality as well as an embodiment of certain cultural knowledges, reminiscent of Bourdieu's "durable" and "embodied" dispositions.[12] It is through this perspective on place and its relation to the body that we need to assess how the interactions on the side of the road in Tirana unfold. In addition to cultural implacement, I would also add the notion of a historical implacement, as places are also imbued with historically specific customs and practices that change over time. Having lived abroad for a while, I had become somewhat foreign to the local knowledge needed to make sense of the interaction with Besnik. However, everyone else around me seemed to be reading the same signs and speaking the same language. Thus, my physical absence from this locality during the crucial years of transition (1995-2005) had made me an outsider to particular forms of local knowledge.

The street is a paradoxical place. It is on the one hand utterly impersonal. In their interactions with state authorities people are often stranded in the streets, in long lines outside the offices. The experience of socialism has turned streets into a space of surveillance. One's individual behavior in the street was constantly under the gaze of the Party. Paradoxically, the street was also a space where people spent an enormous amount of time while waiting for milk at 3 a.m., in obligatory Party celebrations, or at block cleaning days, among others. The constant

demand to be on the street out of necessity rather than choice contributed to what Susan Gal and Gail Kligman (2000) have rightly described as a fractal of concepts of public and private. These constant mutations and substitutions of public/private demarcations have been described as a main source of the systemic violence of socialism.[13]

The street, however, can also be a site that offers more possibility for improvisation. The interactions with Besnik and Zenel speak of the advantage that informal public places have over formal ones. These spaces are places where personalized forms of transactions generate trust. Ethnographers of the public/private divide during socialism also note the creation of "private publics," trusted circles of friends and acquaintances mediating informal exchanges. These private publics constituted a parallel world for cultivating real friends and real trust.[14] When stranded in the streets, away from the centers of power, people sought inside information in those same streets of abandonment. Our encounter with Besnik was an example of the appropriation of the street as one's own private public. Such appropriation of a public space as a prime source of reliable knowledge is part of a new repertoire of tactics of challenging and negotiating with official power. These conversations were, to borrow an expression from Kathleen Stewart, "a space on the side of the road" (Stewart 1996:32), not just in the sense of the physical space they occupied, but most importantly in the distinct and palpable cultural place that they carved out. They constituted a social imaginary, a world very much felt and inhabited. These conversations and strategizing were thus part of the daily practice of imagining and engaging with power and the state despite its illegibility.[15]

From the street to the café

Approaching the detention center around midday we did not aim for the main gate but for a backside window. A policeman was sitting behind the iron bars. With extreme confidence, Manjola asked to speak to Tahir. After some back and forth questions and negative answers, the policeman directed us to the guard at the public entrance. We asked the guard the same question and he also showed no knowledge of anyone by the name Tahir. To our dismay, "Tahir" turned out to be a fictional character. Manjola, then, asked directly for the person who signed off on the passports. At first, the guard was hermetic and inaccessible, providing formal replies and anxiously trying to send us away, saying that everyone currently was out on inspection. All police officers would be on field-duty until 3 p.m. With only two days left to complete this procedure, our time was quickly running out. Once again, our initial hope and enthusiasm withered away and we were both more aware than ever of the damp winter cold of Tirana, penetrating our bones, despite the deceiving blue sky and a golden sunlight washing over the brightly colored low-rise apartment blocks.

We kept lingering around the main entrance more out of despair than hope. Eventually, the guard took sympathy on us and dropped the formal guise. Speaking very inconspicuously and somewhat nervous about getting himself in trouble, he suggested that we go to the café across the street. "That's where the chief hangs out," he said, and where we could possibly try to talk to

him about speeding up the process. The guard seemed to imply that if we were looking for a procedure that bypassed the formal ones, the café was our best hope, a place where anything "off the books" could take place. The suggestion also implied that this strategy—asking for a favor at the café—was a common routine, a kind of a public secret. Only then was I convinced that the people I had encountered throughout this short journey had been playing by the same rules as everyone else, including public officials. They were very much aware of an alternate reality of getting things done and were simply seeking for the way to access it. The official authorities were likewise aware (and perhaps took advantage of) these informal places of transactions where the rules of the game were suspended and opened up to improvisation, where negotiation with official power was possible.

Informal socializing in cafés

What is it about cafés that enables the different relations and negotiations with state power in contemporary Albania? Cafés are interesting in-between places of interaction and transaction. In Albania, cafés are not transitory places where people stop for a quick shot of caffeine. (There are no "to go" cups in Albania.) People in Albania spend long stretches of time lingering in cafés. They are places for socializing with others, places that enable multiple kinds of interaction.

Many ethnographers of socialism, especially those studying the former Soviet Union, have also noted a different kind of sociality that had emerged in spite of the socially controlled places of the public. In the Russian context, ethnographers speak of *svoi (us/ours)* as a separate public, a "privately public sphere" (Vite, cited in Yurchak 2006:118), which was neither the official public sphere nor the dissident one. This public was contained within the socialist state but it also functioned according to different rules and norms of interaction. Further, Yurchak discusses a distinct form of sociality that took place among *svoi* (public): *obschenie*, a form of sociality outside official realms of the public that created a separate trusted space of endless conversation amongst people.[16] Yurchak observes that *obschenie* "was not limited to friends and acquaintances but could also include complete strangers" (2006: 148). In fact, by partaking in *obschenie* one became *svoi*, or part of a private public. Thus, spending time together through deep conversation was a sort of a rite of passage into a private public. Yurchak further elaborates on the intrinsic connection between *obschenie* and the economy of favors:

> Soviet citizens also sped up time by cultivating networks of *blat* and arrangements such as those in the Komsomol committees […] to avoid spending time in lines, on waiting lists, or on 'pro forma' mandatory activities; turned time into an expandable and exchangeable resource; rendered time indeterminate by engaging in *obschenie* in all professional contexts (Yurchak 2006:156).

In Albania also a similar kind of private public came into being through networks of *të*

njohur. It is perhaps this relation between trust and activities of spending time together that explains the double meaning in *të njohur* and *mik* as both connections and close friends. In Albania today, cafés are a crucial place where these multi-purpose private publics continue to come into being.

In addition to being culturally configured, the café as a place of creative improvisations also has a particular historicity. Drinking coffee collectively has a long history of formal and informal interactions in Albanian culture. Taking after habits of coffee drinking from the Ottoman times, all throughout the socialist period people continued to make visits to one another's houses *për kafe* (for coffee). On these occasions, homemade Turkish coffee was served in a semi-formal manner, usually served on a *tabaka* (the Turkish word for serving tray). These occasions ranged from informal daily meetings with close friends and neighbors to more formal occasions of making visits to distant acquaintances on occasions of celebration or mourning. The Italian-influenced espresso drinking in public cafés or hotels was also present during socialism. However, such practices were also in tension with the socialist ethic of labor as leisure and of the café culture as bourgeois culture.[17] The latter ritual of coffee consumption was usually more limited to certain professions, such as bureaucrats or intellectuals, and to gender—men were (and still are) the major presence in cafés. After the 1990s, but especially during the pyramid scheme boom in 1995-1996, an explosion in cafés also took place. The boom had a visual presence. Parku Rinia, for instance, one of the only parks in Tirana, was covered in cafés within one year. When I returned to Albania during summer 1996 after my first year in Canada, I could not recognize the once familiar landscape of the city. Kiosks and cafés had mushroomed wherever there was free space. My high-school friends had changed their daily meeting spot from the outdoor site at Blloku to one of the cafés in Parku Rinia. As I gathered interviews on the pyramid schemes in 2008, many of the informants recalled the mid-1990s as a period of decadence when everyone "spent hours in cafés rather than working."[18]

While the cafés at Parku Rinia have been demolished and the park restored, the café culture has only shifted locations to the more glamorous spaces of Blloku, invading the once forbidden villas of the former socialist elite. Cafés are currently such an embedded social institution in contemporary life in Albania, and especially in Tirana, that it is impossible to avoid spending time there on a daily basis. During my fieldwork, the cafés were often a place for my interviews. They constituted an appropriate neutral space for talking to people I was meeting for the first time. They were a necessity for conversation.

Cafés have also become places for conducting business interactions. In this circumstance, the generosity of giving someone a coffee also implies an act of persuasion and influence over the other person's decision. This aspect of cafés is equally well known by people with official authority and by those in need. It is because of this struggle for power over the other that cafés also have come to represent shady deals among exclusive groups. Many complain about the lack of professionalism of today's bureaucratic as well as business transactions, most of which take place in cafés. During another trip to Albania I was waiting at the Lobby of the Ministry of Justice for a friend who worked there. An older man from outside Tirana was talking to the

receptionist, requesting to meet with one of the Ministry's high officials. The receptionist told him the official was not in office at the moment, and added that he might be having his coffee outside the premises of the Ministry. The old man exploded in anger making loud accusations about the degenerate official culture where most "deals" take place in cafés. In this context, cafés are also places of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion. Thus, moving from the street to the café also implies moving from the outside to a possible inside. By pointing us to the café across the street, the guard at the Precinct Police Station hinted at this possibility. Yet, it was well understood that one either needs a connection to initiate a meeting with the authority in question or to be, in the local idiom, *i/e shkathët*, (skilled/entrepreneurial). Manjola and I had neither of these properties.

An unexpected opening

Despite all the run around, we eventually met the chief of police that same day, not in the café, as the guard had suggested, but in his office at the Precinct Police Station. The mere explanation of why I needed the passport to be expedited sufficed to receive a positive response. In our interactions, the chief of police was very professional. Manjola, however, still thought that we were expected to give a cash gift as a thank you. Alas, she did not know how or how much. Guessing how to give this gift with grace turned into a new kind of anxiety for her. In retrospect, her hesitation and guessing game recalls once again the discussion about the calculations and anticipation that goes on behind a challenge and riposte (Bourdieu 1977). It highlights the risk that always lies behind such interactions and the constant possibility of failure or misunderstanding.

In my later research and conversations with residents, I understood Manjola's clumsiness in this situation not as an exception to the norm but as a common occurrence. Talking in 2008 about bribing or gift giving for medical services, for instance, Florian confessed that, although he thinks it was more than fair to give a gift of cash to a doctor for saving one's life, he personally does not know *how* to give it gracefully. He described a few situations where he felt it was necessary to give cash to the doctor who helped his mother.[19] Like Manjola, Florian had acted with clumsiness and had failed to find the right moment or estimate the right amount to give. While everyone seems to think that it is necessary to bribe or give cash gifts to officials, not everyone has the necessary *know-how*. The rules are not explicit. While bribing and gift giving are supposed to establish a common ground, they always involve a process of speculation on the part of the giver.

In this moment of confusion, I saw Manjola making a gesture towards her purse. The chief understood and refused emphatically, almost implying that this was offensive to him. We were embarrassed to have misread the situation but were relieved to know that this did not cancel out his earlier promise. With the genuine help of the Chief of Police and other staff at the Regional Police Station, I was able to expedite the procedure for the criminal check and receive my passport in time to apply for my U.S. visa. After the fact, I kept asking myself whether the

anxiety that accompanied us all along was justified. Was this anxiety an imaginary residue of socialism or were public institutions continuously generating uncertainty? Later on when I became increasingly interested in the subject of corruption and legitimacy, my mind kept returning to this episode as a template for generating new questions.

During my fieldwork I would often describe the story to friends to ask for their opinion and to elicit other similar or contrasting experiences. Once, a friend suggested half-jokingly that perhaps the chief of police had refused to accept a bribe because the transaction took place in his office rather than the café. While I do not doubt the ethical stance of this particular police chief and I am certain that he would not even accept a coffee from us, I am interested in my friend's comment for other reasons. The comment suggests that local residents truly see different places as enabling different kinds of interactions. In fact, our own bodies act differently in these different places. Thus, public offices still represent opaque nodes of power while cafés constitute a space of possibility and improvisation. As I repeated this story to other family and friends, the fact that I was able to get my passport in three days without the help of any intermediaries, bribes, or cash gifts seemed to have no consequence on the shared distrust of formal institutions. I had for a long time thought this response mirrored, perhaps, an exaggerated cynicism towards authorities in Albania. My perspective changed, however, following many failed attempts at obtaining public information and services from government offices during my fieldwork in 2008. I also came to think of this journey in a different light after watching a sting operation by the notorious local investigative show, *Fiks Fare,* in September 2008.[20] Watching the show I felt as if I was experiencing *déjà vu*. The episode staged a journey uncannily similar to the one I have described. The narrative of the television show, however, would have a different ending.

A young woman working as an undercover journalist for *Fiks Fare* had appeared at the new offices of passports and later at the Precinct Police Station. Like other similar sting operations from the same show, the woman was carrying a hidden camera that filmed the interactions with public officials. The woman pretended to be representing an immigrant from Italy who needed a new passport on short notice. While at the Precinct Police Office, the journalist asked to expedite the process. On the other side of the counter and unaware of the undercover operation was an older policewoman who, at first, resisted the request claiming this was out of her competence. The young journalist insisted and requested to meet the policewoman at a café. The implicit message of this seemingly casual request was that the journalist was willing to pay a bribe to the officials involved.

The next footage shifted to the café where the two women were negotiating the exchange. The policewoman had obviously agreed to the arrangement even though she was constantly nervous and unsure of the whether she could trust the journalist. She repeatedly stated that she was only doing this as a favor to the young woman and that "they"—hinting at her superiors—were very careful about these kinds of exchanges because they would get into trouble. In an unintended gesture of intertextuality, the policewoman even lamented about how difficult it was nowadays to do such favors for people in need given the constant provocations from *Fiks Fare.*[21] While talking reluctantly to the undercover journalist, the policewoman simultaneously

communicated through her cell phone with staff from her office that were helping her expedite the process. As per the cash, the trained journalist repeatedly asked how much she was required to pay. The policewoman once again was reluctant to name a price, insisting on this being a favor on her part but also implying that a cash "donation" was required for her superiors. The scenario was quite similar to the one I had experienced a few years earlier while renewing my passport, with the crucial addition of the café interaction. However, the temporality of giving the cash, its upfront presence *prior* to the completion of the service, and the explicit eliciting of cash from the public officer place this instance under the rubric of bribing rather than gift giving or *bakshish* (tip). *Fiks Fare*'s intention was to create the conditions for this other realm of transactions to become visible. The episode forces me to reconsider the scenario of what would have happened if my interaction with the police chief had shifted to the café or if I had encountered another police authority. In the end, however, the episode helped me understand better the reproduction of the persistent cynicism towards bureaucracy in Albania.

Conclusion

Exchanging favors and using connections to procure public services in postsocialist Albania has certainly changed from the socialist days. One key transformation has been the availability of goods previously on shortage. Another change involves what Ledeneva describes in her more recent work as a displacement of the principle of mutual help in *blat* networking by a more exclusive form of market corruption (Ledeneva 2006, 2009). In Albania also I noted how public concern with corruption targets state capture while the use of connections and gifts in cash in exchange for social services is often tolerated as a necessary tactic of dealing with bureaucracy. Based on my conversations with Tirana residents who have to engage with public institutions on a regular basis, the story of issuing a new passport in 2005 belongs to a realm of the locally condoned exchanges.[22] In the said case, the whole network of connections was called into action because of a need to expedite the otherwise long but routine procedure of issuing a passport. Similar tactics continue to be prevalent in procuring other forms of public services, especially medical services, licenses, or personal documents.

My reflections about this journey speak to the realm of these transactions through *të njohur* and through exchanges of cash gifts during postsocialism. Although there is perhaps a quantitative decline in the need for connections as some institutions have improved on the efficiency of their services, the need for the network of *të njohur* persists today. Most importantly, people still are apprehensive of bureaucratic institutions and trust informal networks and informal transactions. I described this tendency as a legacy of the socialist informal network. But while the political and economic institutions in postsocialist Albania have changed, what seems to persist is an illegibility of the power of state and public authorities.

Further, writing about this journey allowed me to reflect upon the changing nature of making and using *të njohur*. On the one hand, I focused on the tactics of socializing, of creating *të njohur* as a process of social creativity. The elements of obligation and gratitude, of existing or achieved familiarity are not to be understood as rigid structures but as sociality in the making.

One important change in using *të njohur* in Albania as in other former socialist countries is the increased monetization of these mediations. Yet, the increasing use of money in these exchanges raises further questions about the ethics and legitimacy of such "gifts." In a few of the instances described here cash given to the intermediary followed the temporal rules of a gift or *bakshish* (tip); it was meant to be given after the service, out of gratitude, and the amount was not subject to negotiation. As the scenario on *Fiks Fare* suggests, however, cash is often given as a bribe, negotiated and promised in advance rather than given voluntarily after the fact. In this case, there is a hierarchy of status that comes into play. In conclusion, I want to suggest that these two scenarios are not mutually exclusive because they both belong to the multiple possibilities of formal and informal interactions with bureaucracy in Albania. Neither of them is more representative than the other; instead, they both belong within the same realm of possibilities.

Finally, I drew attention to an aspect of these exchanges that requires further research and thinking: the role that space and place plays in enabling or disallowing alternative possibilities and outcomes of negotiating with state authorities. I argued that these multiple possibilities materialize differently in different places. My own awkwardness within some of these once-familiar places such as the street and the café, however, pointed to the specificities of cultural and historical implacement. In my journey through the different offices processing my passport, I became aware that particular places, such as the street and the café, present local residents with different possibilities for action. In contemporary Albania, both places carry ambivalent connotations. They both enable actors to improvise, negotiate relations with power, and to reconfigure their own place within formalities.

Notes

[*] This article builds on ethnographic research during preliminary fieldwork trips to Tirana, Albania in 2005, 2006 and 2007 and dissertation fieldwork from 2008-2009. Research was made possible with funding from the Society for the Anthropology of Europe and Council for European Studies as well as the Social Science Research Council, the National Science Foundation and the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (Canada). I thank Diana Blank for comments on earlier drafts of the paper as well as Matthew Rosen and the editor of *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, Sarah D. Phillips, for their insightful suggestions.

[1] At the time of my trip I had already started my doctoral studies in Anthropology at New School University. While the focus of my dissertation research—*When and What is Corruption in Postsocialist Albania*—touches on topics that I explore in this paper, during the 2005 trip I was actually in Tirana not officially for research purposes but for personal reasons (renewing my visa and passport). I was born and raised in Albania and have been studying abroad since 1995.

[2] In trying to place this kind of embodied knowledge and familiarity with a particular way of feeling, Caroline Steedman's rich description of her knowledge of class through particular sentiments is exemplary. In *Landscape for a Good Woman* (2003[1986]), Steedman accessed untold stories of working class women through her memory of certain smells, dreams, and wants.

Childhood memories and sensations for Steedman, are one form of unarticulated and 'subjugated knowledges' (Foucault 1980).

[3] For political history of Albania during communism, see Miranda Vickers (2001), Misha Glenny (2001) and Berndt J. Fischer (2008) among others. Unfortunately, there are very few accounts of the social history of Albania during the 50 years of the communist regime. Among others, Isa Blumi (1999) emphasizes the cultural dimension of the so-called "class wars" of the late 1960s-1970s. Public intellectual Ardian Vehbiu (2003) also captures some of the social transformations in the social life of the capital Tirana.

[4] See Heidenheimer (1989).

[5] In order to protect their identities all names of Tirana residents mentioned in this article are fictional.

[6] The other Albanian word for friend, *shok/u/shoqe*, is a closer translation to the English "friend." The difference with *mik* is that the latter carries along more depth of sentiment and obligation.

[7] *Kanun* stands for common law, unwritten law. During the Ottoman occupation, many parts of Albania refused to abide by the law of the Ottoman Empire and followed instead these parallel legal systems that regulated relations of property, of blood feuds, marriages, etc. There were different *kanuns* in different regions. One persistent element of *kanun* was the law of hospitality and protection extended to *mik* where *mik* stood for friend as well as guest. See especially Robert Elsie (2001).

[8] Gregory (1982) articulates what has been a continuous trend in economic anthropology: gifts as "inalienable objects" mediating exchanges between subjects versus commodities as "alienable objects" exchanging amongst themselves in a realm that appears as independent from human relations.

[9] This monetization of gifts permeates other areas of social life. For instance, during my fieldwork in 2008 in the cities of Tirana and Vlorë, I noticed on several occasions that people gave cash at funerals and weddings—two social institutions where, prior to the 1990s, giving cash was neither affordable nor ethical.

[10] For instance, one of Ledeneva's (1998:123) informants says: "You may have to pay anyway, but you won't be treated as someone 'from the street' and you will know where to go."

[11] My notion of tactics here takes after Michel de Certau's (1984) use of tactics as creative ways of walking through the city grid.

[12] See especially the chapter "Structures and Habitus" in Bourdieu (1977).

[13] See for instance Verdery's (1996: 39-57) description of the biopolitical power of the socialist state in Romania as a seizure of one's body through the routine demands on personal time in queues.

[14] For a review of the concepts of public and private during socialism and after, see especially Gal and Kligman (2000), in particular their analysis of the separation of moral space through public and private: "the private 'us' and 'them' was understood to operate according to different moral principles. The cultural imperative to be honest and ethically responsible to those who counted as private 'we' contrasted with distrust and a tolerance for duplicity and interpersonal manipulation in dealings with 'them'" (Gal and Kligman 2000:51).

[15] I am inspired here also by Akhil Gupta's (1995) approach to narratives of corruption as ways of understanding and engaging with the state in rural India.

[16] Yurchak translates *obschenie* as "'communication' and 'conversation' but in addition involves nonverbal interaction and spending time together or being together […] it always involves an intense and intimate commonality and intersubjectivity, not just spending time in the company of others" (2006:148).

[17] Public intellectual Ardian Vehbiu captures a similar tension around *koha e lirë* (free time): "It was the time when, still under the influence of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, free time was seen with suspicion, as a unnecessary remainder of a bourgeois conception of work as struggle" (Vehbiu 2003:46).

[18] From interview with Fatmira, a woman in her late forties, Vlorë, September 2008.

[19] From personal communication, March 2008.

[20] *Fiks Fare*, September 9, 2008, Top Channel, Tirana.

[21] Given the cynical style of humor characteristic of the show, in exchange for this inadvertent publicity, *Fiks Fare* made an exception for the policewoman, camouflaging her face at broadcast, something that goes against their usual practice of shaming corruption.

[22] This, however, goes against official definitions and indexing from international anti-corruption watchdogs such as Transparency International. See Transparency International (2009).

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