



# From shortage economy to second economy: An historical ethnography of rural life in communist Albania



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## ABSTRACT

Few accounts exist of the nature of everyday rural life in communist societies, such as those which existed in Eastern Europe between the end of World War Two and *circa* 1990. In this paper we use oral-history testimonies from older people to reconstruct an 'historical ethnography' of rural life in Albania, the most isolated and repressive of the East European socialist regimes. We build our analysis around the dialectical relationship between the 'shortage economy', which was all-pervasive and derived from the Albanian regime's Stalinist policy of prioritising mining and heavy industry over consumer goods and agriculture, and the 'second economy' which developed as a bottom-up strategy to overcome some of the imbalances and blockages in the official or 'first' economy. Fieldwork was carried out in clusters of villages and settlements corresponding to cooperatives and a state farm in four locations in different parts of Albania. Within the symbiotic or 'lubricating' relationship between the shortage economy and the second economy, we examine the 'institutionalised hierarchy of access' that gave some people and groups privileged access to scarce goods, whilst others remained in a marginalised and partially excluded state.

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## 1. Introduction

What was everyday life really like for the people of Albania during the communist era? This was the question that guided the research we did for this paper. Having already carried out a series of interview-based studies of Albanians who had emigrated during the 1990s and early 2000s and settled in Italy and Greece, we were struck by the often ambivalent silences that they drew over their earlier lives, before the country freed itself from its communist yoke in 1991.<sup>1</sup> We had the impression that the 'dark days' – actually more than forty years – when the country was headed by the 'people's dictator' Enver Hoxha, were unspeakably harsh and to be forgotten, but very few details were forthcoming.

This article draws on our more recent research on the everyday experiences of Albanians who lived most of their lives under a regime that was the most closed and repressive of all the socialist

societies of Eastern Europe, ruled by a leader who, by many accounts, mixed vision, charisma, ruthlessness and paranoia in more-or-less equal measure (see, for instance, Hall, 1994: 37–39; Vickers, 1995: 163–209). During 2011–2013 we collected 120 oral-history narratives from older Albanians the length and breadth of the country. Reflecting the fact that the majority of the population were embedded in an economic geography of rural cooperatives and state farms, we concentrate in this paper on the accounts of men and women who lived and worked in settlements that were attached to these collective structures. Our aim was to construct a kind of 'historical ethnography' of everyday rural life during this hidden period. We found that the interviewees were remarkably consistent in their descriptions of the privations and drudgery of rural life before 1990, and in the way they were able to deploy tactics of coping, resistance and even subversion. In order to give a coherent narrative structure to our account, we organise our analysis around two key concepts which have been much discussed in the economic histories of the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, China, and in Cuba and North Korea today: the *shortage economy* and the *second economy*.

Although we can justifiably claim that our Albanian study is unique, it is important to set it within the broader context of a

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<sup>1</sup> See the following studies carried out by the authors: King and Mai (2008), Vullnetari (2012) and Vullnetari and King (2011).

growing literature on rural life in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union during the communist period. Given the Albanian regime's tenacious faith in Stalinist orthodoxy, there are fruitful comparisons to be made with the literature on Soviet rural collectivisation, especially that which follows an ethnographic approach to everyday realities (Fitzpatrick, 1999; Paxson, 2005; Yurchak, 2006). Stepping outside the Soviet realm, there are important ethnographic studies on Poland, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. These use either synchronous (before 1989) or retrospective (oral-history) interviews and fieldwork to build a composite picture of rural life in the socialist period (see, for instance, Creed, 1995a, 1998; Hann, 1980, 1985; Kideckel, 1982, 1993; Kligman and Verdery, 2011; Pasieka, 2012; Swain, 1985; Verdery, 1983). Also very useful are overviews which take a broader historical and geographical sweep across the region (Hann, 2015), as well as more variable-quality edited collections, such as Crowley and Reid (2002) on everyday life in 'socialist spaces', and Todorova (2010) on 'remembering communism'.

Our framing concepts of shortage economy and second economy are not always explicit in the above-cited literature. For this we turn to the definitive papers of Sampson (1987, 1988), or to Kenedi's (1981) more detailed ethnography of the hidden economy in Hungary. But what is remarkable in all of this is the lack of attention given to Eastern Europe's most peripheral and little-known state, Albania.

The article now proceeds as follows. First, we briefly review the social-science literature on Albania during the communist era, noting the impossibility of doing 'proper' investigative field research there during that period. Second, we outline our methods of collecting data. The research results are then presented in three sections:

- how the shortage economy affected everyday life in the rural milieu where most Albanians lived at the time;
- how the operation of this shortage economy was structured, but also subverted, through the 'institutionalised hierarchy of access'; and
- how the second economy emerged and functioned both as a 'lubricator' and a 'social mollifier' of rural economic life.

The conclusion stresses the originality and significance of the research, both in terms of its methodological approach and in its substantive findings, set once again in a comparative context.

## 2. What do we know about Albania during the communist era?

Textbooks on the general geography of Eastern Europe published in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s give Albania short shrift (see Hoffman, 1971; Mellor, 1975; Rugg, 1985; Turnock, 1989); an exception is Pounds (1969: 814–858) but most of his sources and description refer to the pre-communist period. Two scholars, however, have made it part of their life's work to compile detailed portrayals of Albania: Örjan Sjöberg (see his *Rural Change and Development in Albania*, 1991) and Derek Hall (*Albania and the Albanians*, 1994). These two monographs, along with many articles by these authors on more specialised economic and demographic themes, are indispensable resources for an understanding of communist-era Albania. Based on a thorough knowledge of Albanian statistics and other sources, together with guided visits to the country, these books synthesise all there is to know about Albanian geography, society and economy up to the early 1990s. Hall (1999) also published a useful review article highlighting some of the key tropes of Albania evident in the extant literature – its 'unknownness'; an Orientalist interpretation, or rather its marginality

to 'the Orient'; and the people's 'elemental' character as 'folk culture' and '(noble) savages'.

More germane to our analysis are some basic economic, social and political facts. An economic colony of Fascist Italy, which coveted its oil, chrome and other mineral deposits, Albania exited World War Two as the least-developed country in Europe. In the chaos surrounding the later years of the war, Enver Hoxha, leader of the Albanian Communist Party, emerged as the dominant political force amongst the partisans seeking liberation for Albania; as a result, Hoxha was able to establish his new government in Tirana in late 1944 (Vickers, 1995: 141–163). Postwar reconstruction was aided by funds from Russia, Yugoslavia and the United Nations Relief and Reconstruction Agency. UNRRA assistance was granted because of the communists' guerrilla operations against the occupying Italians and Germans. But Albania's political and economic allegiances would shift dramatically over the next thirty years: it broke with Yugoslavia as early as 1948 – partly for fear of being incorporated, like Kosovo, into the Yugoslav federation – and with Russia in 1961, following Krushchev's denunciation of Stalin. For the next fifteen years, Albania was economically supported by China, which sent food aid and financed major industrial and infrastructural developments. However, during 1976–1978 Albania–China relations were broken off, partly over questions of ideology connected to China's diplomatic contacts with Western powers.<sup>2</sup> This positioned Albania on a path of political isolation and economic self-sufficiency which it struggled to maintain, leading to deteriorating living conditions during the 1980s (Sandström and Sjöberg, 1991).

Throughout the communist period, agricultural production remained the mainstay of the population's livelihood; most people lived and worked in rural areas. This was despite the regime's avowed policy of increasing mineral output and creating and boosting industries, expressed in successive five-year plans (Schnytzer, 1982). Yet stringent controls on internal migration – a policy dubbed 'rural retention' by Sjöberg (1994) – kept urban growth to a minimum. Albania's 'underurbanisation' (Sjöberg, 1992), whereby the share of the urban population out of the total population remained roughly constant at 30–35 per cent throughout the period 1960–1990, was unique in Europe.<sup>3</sup>

Albania started the communist era as the least-technically developed society in Europe, lacking any tradition of scientific agriculture. The rural population, 80 per cent of the total in 1945–1950, was beset by widespread illiteracy, clan-based traditions and a confused landholding structure based on customary law, which mixed widespread peasant micro-holdings with larger-scale religious lands and feudal-style estates. Land redistribution to the landless peasantry in 1945–1946 was seen as a basic plank of the new egalitarian society but, as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, it was merely an interim step which prefigured the collectivisation of rural life. Following the Russian model of *kolkhoz* and *sovkhoz*, co-operatives and state farms assumed complete control of the means of agricultural production, save for minuscule private plots.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed account of the political economy of Albania during this period, see Hall (1994: 102–140), Schnytzer (1982) and Vickers (1995: 163–203).

<sup>3</sup> Calculations from the population statistics in Hall (1994, 92, Table 3. 13) show that the urban share of total population was 30.1 per cent in 1960, rising to 36 per cent in 1990. More remarkably, the share of total population accounted for by the capital, Tirana, actually declined, from 8.4 to 7.5 per cent over the same period. It seems, therefore, that even in an East European context, where rural-urban migration was in general tightly managed at this time, the degree of underurbanisation in Albania was extreme (see Turnock, 1989 for comparative perspectives).

<sup>4</sup> Except where otherwise stated, the account below is based on Hall (1994: 119–124), Pata and Osmani (1994) and Sjöberg (1991: 81–165).

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