

The Social Lives of Infrastructures. Everyday Practices and Transforming Landscapes in Postsocialist Romania

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The present habilitation thesis, *Social Lives of Infrastructures. Everyday Practices and Transforming Landscapes in Postsocialist Romania*, synthesizes the main scientific, professional and academic achievements developed after obtaining my PhD degree in Anthropology and Ethnology from the University of Perugia and argues for my capacity to supervise doctoral research in Sociology. The thesis brings together more than two decades of ethnographic research, teaching, editorial work and interdisciplinary collaborations carried out within universities, museums, research institutes, local administrations, NGOs and cultural organizations. It highlights the main research directions that have structured my academic trajectory and outlines future research, teaching and institutional development plans.

Throughout the last twenty years I have participated in more than twenty-five research and cultural intervention projects as researcher, coordinator or expert. These projects have revolved around several interconnected themes: postsocialist transformations of work and material culture; housing, urban space and everyday infrastructures; rural landscapes, environmental change and agricultural practices; heritage and social memory; and the development of visual, collaborative and multimodal research methodologies. A constant feature of my work has been the attempt to understand how large-scale political and economic transformations become visible through everyday practices, material environments and infrastructures. Equally important has been a commitment to collaborative and public forms of sociology and anthropology inspired by the work of Vintilă Mihăilescu and Cristina Papa, who emphasized that social research gains relevance when it generates dialogue, participation and engagement beyond academic institutions.

Methodologically, my research has relied primarily on ethnographic approaches, including participant observation, situated interviews, walking interviews, place-based elicitation, household tours, participatory mapping and, more recently, collaborative and co-produced forms of knowledge production. These methods have allowed me to connect individual biographies, social memory and everyday practices with the material and infrastructural environments in which they are embedded. Over the years, I have increasingly worked within interdisciplinary teams involving architects, artists, biologists, environmental scientists and heritage specialists, an experience that has shaped both my research agenda and my approach to academic mentoring and institutional development.

The thesis is organized into two major chapters. The first chapter presents my main scientific, professional and academic contributions, while the second outlines future research plans and the potential contribution I intend to bring to doctoral education and research development. Within the first chapter, the discussion is structured around four major domains: urban sociology, rural sociology and historical ecology, visual anthropology and ethnographically informed artistic collaborations, and

coordinated volumes that reflect long-term commitments to collaborative research and academic network-building.

A first major research area concerns urban sociology, housing and everyday infrastructures. My work in this field examines how postsocialist transformations become visible through domestic environments, material culture and urban space. One of my earliest contributions explored the rapid spread of PVC windows (*termopane*) in Romania after 1989. Rather than treating them as merely technical objects, I analysed them as markers of new forms of domesticity, social distinction and aspirations toward Western modernity. This research demonstrated how apparently mundane objects can reveal broader transformations in consumption, social status and everyday life. Subsequent work shifted attention toward the infrastructures of comfort, examining thermal rehabilitation programmes, energy efficiency policies and the tensions generated by interventions into domestic space. These studies highlighted the complex relationships between housing, infrastructure, state policies and residents' understandings of autonomy, ownership and comfort.

Another important strand of research focused on housing insecurity, property restitution and urban displacement. Through ethnographic research conducted in Bucharest, I investigated the social consequences of nationalization, restitution and eviction, showing how postsocialist property reforms generated new forms of inequality and precarity. This work emphasized that housing is not simply a legal or economic issue but also a field shaped by memory, belonging and social relationships. The analysis of contested housing spaces revealed how restitution policies often collided with long-standing forms of social investment, attachment and everyday dwelling.

More recently, my research has explored informal urban gardening practices in socialist housing estates. Conducted in collaboration with Alex Axinte and Carmen Rafanell, this work examines the gardens located between apartment blocks as fragile forms of urban commoning. Rather than interpreting them solely as remnants of socialist survival strategies, we argued that these gardens continue to function as infrastructures of sociability, care and environmental stewardship. The research contributes to debates on urban commons, everyday sustainability and the social life of infrastructures by showing how residents collectively negotiate, maintain and reinvent shared urban spaces in the context of neoliberal urban transformations.

A second major domain of my work concerns rural sociology, historical ecology and infrastructural transformations. This line of research investigates the relationships between communities, landscapes, agricultural practices and environmental change in postsocialist Romania. A first set of studies focused on traditional ecological knowledge, haymaking practices and semi-natural mountain meadows in the Romanian Carpathians. These projects explored how local ecological knowledge is transmitted, adapted and challenged in contexts marked by agricultural modernization, demographic decline and changing environmental policies. The research also contributed to debates on biocultural heritage and the preservation of rural landscapes.

A second cluster of contributions examines processes of lifestyle migration and rural transformation in mountain communities such as Fundata. These studies analyse how newcomers, tourism development and changing forms of mobility reshape local economies, identities and landscapes. Particular attention is given to the interactions between long-term residents and amenity migrants, the reconfiguration of property relations, and the emergence of new forms of rurality that challenge conventional distinctions between urban and rural life. Rather than presenting these processes as either entirely beneficial or detrimental, my work emphasizes their ambivalent character, highlighting both opportunities and tensions generated by demographic and economic change.

The most recent and arguably most ambitious contribution within this research area concerns the study of the Sadova–Corabia irrigation system. Based on long-term ethnographic research, archival work and interviews with engineers, farmers and former administrators, this project investigates the transformation of one of the largest hydraulic infrastructures built during state socialism. The research analyses the fragmentation of irrigation systems after 1989 and proposes the concept of irrigation citizenship to understand how infrastructures shape rights, obligations, social belonging and access to resources. Drawing on political ecology, hydrosocial studies and infrastructure studies, the project demonstrates how large-scale hydraulic systems continue to influence social life long after their original political and economic context has disappeared. More broadly, it contributes to emerging debates on the social lives of infrastructures and environmental change in postsocialist societies.

A third domain of activity concerns visual anthropology and ethnographically informed artistic collaborations. Throughout my career I have been interested in the potential of visual methods to complement conventional ethnographic research. This interest has informed both my teaching activities and my collaborations with filmmakers, architects, artists and cultural institutions. My work in this field is inspired by traditions of collaborative and participatory visual anthropology that seek to move beyond extractive forms of representation and recognize research participants as active contributors to knowledge production. In recent years I have also become increasingly interested in graphic ethnography, documentary comics and multimodal forms of ethnographic communication capable of reaching wider audiences while maintaining analytical depth and methodological rigor.

An important component of my academic activity has involved the coordination of collective volumes, conferences and research networks. Many of these publications emerged from the annual conferences of the Romanian Society for Social and Cultural Anthropology and were conceived as platforms for interdisciplinary dialogue and collaborative knowledge production. These editorial projects reflect a broader commitment to building academic communities, supporting younger researchers and creating spaces where sociologists, anthropologists and scholars from related disciplines can engage in sustained intellectual exchange.

The second chapter of the habilitation thesis presents future research directions. Building on previous work, I intend to further develop research on infrastructures, water, environmental change and everyday forms of adaptation to ecological uncertainty. Ongoing projects include comparative research

on bottled water cultures, studies of hydrosocial relations and water citizenship, and investigations into the social consequences of environmental transitions in both urban and rural contexts. At the same time, I plan to expand research on visual and multimodal methodologies and to strengthen international collaborations developed through European research networks and interdisciplinary partnerships.

Finally, the thesis outlines my prospective contribution to doctoral education in Sociology. Drawing on extensive experience in teaching, research coordination and interdisciplinary collaboration, I aim to support doctoral students through their integration into international research projects, collaborative networks and publication initiatives. Particular emphasis will be placed on ethnographic research, visual and multimodal methods, infrastructure studies, environmental sociology and the sociology of everyday life. Through these activities, I hope to contribute to the development of a research environment that combines methodological rigor, theoretical innovation and public engagement.

In conclusion, the habilitation thesis demonstrates the coherence of a research trajectory situated at the intersection of sociology and anthropology and organized around a central concern: understanding how infrastructures, material environments and everyday practices shape social life in postsocialist Romania. By bringing together studies of work, housing, rural transformation, environmental change and visual methodologies, the thesis argues for an approach that places ordinary practices and material worlds at the centre of social analysis while remaining attentive to broader political, economic and ecological transformations.