

*Nema Rabota:*  
Korzo and Youth Unemployment  
in Skopje, Macedonia

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Becoming socialized to the summer nightlife in Skopje was harder than I first expected it to be. The city was, and is, full of bars, clubs and cafés, each identified to some degree with the generation, class, clique or ethnicity of its regular patrons. However, to be at the center of Skopje's nightlife life, and therefore, to be truly young and hip, one discovers that roughly each year, particular locations emerge as indisputable hot spots, around which those seeking to see and be seen congregate. During my time in Skopje, I have seen these places move. In 2000, a café named *Flok* reigned, the next year, *Van Gogh*, and during the summer of 2004, I found myself frequently agreeing to meet friends and acquaintances outside *Ljubov*, which in Macedonian means "love."

I do mean, outside *Ljubov*. What made hot spots stand out among other establishments was that most of the people who went there actually spent very little time inside the place itself. Rather, numerous groups of friends stood or sat in the area around the bar, coming and going, chatting, mingling, smoking, perhaps drinking a beer bought from a corner store or kiosk, exchanging gossip and stories about friends, family, movies, music and plans. There always were people inside *Ljubov*, but that represented a different sort of commitment. To enter into the establishment implied that you would sit and socialize awhile with your party, and, significantly, that you would *buy* drinks. Many Skopje youth would simply not have the spare cash to purchase the more expensive drinks of a café, and so the bar's entryway marked a socio-economic border. Indeed, one can conceive of the hot spot in terms of two concentric circles: at the center, inside the bar, was a generally older, wealthier clientele with various signs of their social and cultural capital manifest to prove it. Toward the periphery, the crowd transformed into a younger, poorer and shiftless group of students and the unemployed: youth "hanging out," escaping the familial home, as well as its burdens and obligations, to pass time with friends and scope the action on one of Skopje's warm summer nights.

This article is about these youth. Faced with mass joblessness (throughout my fieldwork in 2003 and 2004, Macedonia's official unemployment rate hovered around forty percent) many young people — most often would-be middle class twenty-somethings, who found themselves lingering on as students or among the perpetually unemployed or underemployed — became mired in the daily activity of doing nothing, of passing time over unstructured days, but also of constructing social identities outside of work-mediated environments. Instead of the discipline of office work, unemployed urban youth struggled to fill empty time, variously pursuing small opportunities, socializing with friends, inhabiting public spaces or “resting” at home.

This article examines the temporalities and spatialities that emerged in urban youth's practices of passing time in the post-conflict period (*i.e.*, after the ethnic Albanian insurgency of 2001), especially as manifested in one cherished institution of urban sociality in Macedonia, the evening stroll (*šetanje*). I argue that the spatio-temporal logics revealed in youth's movement through the urban spaces of Skopje participated in a deep renegotiation of Macedonian governmental forms at a time erratically marked by neoliberal reform, gaping holes in the social safety net, international intervention and the overpowering rhetoric and demands of Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

*“Nema Rabota”: The Walk, the Family and Doing Nothing*

Since independence in 1991 and throughout the post-conflict period, unemployment was a total social fact in Macedonia, affecting the vast majority of families in the country and changing the very meaning of work itself. Jobs of any kind were scarce, and good jobs were all the more rare. Most of the youth I knew, whether holding or working on degrees in law, engineering or literature, often hoped to find a job in an NGO or local firm, but in practice most knew that without the right connections (*vrski*), chances were scant.

Furthermore, beyond the lack of jobs, Macedonia's economic woes had also degraded the quality of the positions that were available. Firms would commonly pay their employees late, even by several months, or “ask” employees to work for free in order to secure their position in the firm with the promise of regular pay at a later date. At other times, work itself came with no wage at all. Given this situation, the prospects for employment that awaited young people looking to enter the labor market were (and, unfortunately, still are) pointedly bleak.

The dreary scenarios awaiting most college graduates in post-conflict Macedonia marked a significant generational change from the days of state socialism when finishing university at least coincided with the expectation of taking a position in a state-run firm. As Woodward argues in *Socialist Unemployment* (1995), although wide-scale unemployment became a structural problem in socialist Yugoslavia, its political and social effects remained invisible to the society at large. The possibility of absorbing the unemployed into broader familial or kin networks, or the private or agricultural sector yielded a collective picture that unemployment was, at worst, a temporary problem or an individual choice, and thus the moral authority of the Yugoslav state never came under attack in terms of its failure to provide work. However, the combination of Macedonia's long-term economic stagnation and state withdrawal from guaranteeing economic security altered the valances with which unemployment was conceived. Rather than being a question of individual choice, in the post-conflict period, unemployment (*nevработenost*) came to be portrayed as a social epidemic.

Although other social groups were affected by unemployment in Macedonia — few remained unaffected by it — in terms of sheer quantity and social position, the effects on the urban youth were perhaps most noticeable. Adult youth at this time constituted an entire generation that was brought up and educated in Macedonia with very few employment opportunities and with career expectations untethered from an explicit state project of provision. Furthermore, the unemployment of adult youths shook up family-life as well as their own life-cycle progression. The lack of employment and a self-sustaining salary therefore resulted in youth's deferral of marriages, prolonged cohabitation of parents with adult children, and often shifting dependencies in parent-child relationships (Thiessen 2007; cf. Dimova 2006). The greater impacts of widespread and long-term unemployment in post-conflict remain to be told.

Indeed, if the collective problem of the country's mass unemployment and its effects is not visible to you as a visitor, you will be literally introduced to it. During my year and half spent in Skopje, and without regard to my increasing linguistic and social competence, almost every introduction that I participated in, from those provided by friends or colleagues, to the informalities of driving with a cab driver, followed a near formula that always returned to the lack of work in the country.

The formula progressed as follows: after being identified as a foreigner — by my appearance and accented Macedonian — I would always be asked where I

was from, and what I was doing in Macedonia. Inevitably, the next question in the progression would be whether I liked it in Macedonia. I would always answer truthfully in the affirmative. This answer, however, would then mark a transition from conversation to monologue, as my interlocutor would then provide me his or her unsolicited opinions about the country. These were typically voiced rather negatively, in a litany of complaint (see also Jung 2003) and the complaints generally began with a phrase I heard again and again and again during my research: “*nema rabota* [there’s no work].”

So, what do you do when there is no work? Well, when I would telephone friends during the day who were not at work — usually because they lacked a job, but also if they had a day off — the answer I heard most commonly to the casual question, “what are you doing [*šo praiš*, in Skopje slang]?” was, “nothing, I’m relaxing [*ništo, odmaram*].” The Macedonian verb *odmori*, to rest or to relax, is linked to the noun, *odmor*, rest or vacation. Regardless of what one might be up to, days without work were thus often described as perpetual resting, a de facto leisure time without a clear end.

In practice, I found that “resting” encompassed a wide variety of activities that could be marshaled to pass time during the empty hours of the day. Television or movies would be watched; the internet surfed (and chat rooms frequented); books read; music listened to; visits paid; trips taken; and small opportunities pursued. One might help out a friend with a temporary project or search for study, work or travel prospects abroad and so on. The prolongation of university was also used to structure time when classes were in session. The unemployed and underemployed might attend class lectures or spend their time at home or at a library studying for the comprehensive final exams that were required to pass a course.

However, it was a chance encounter in a taxi, in fact, that started me in trying to answer this question in earnest. On one otherwise unexceptional day, bad weather led me to forsake my bicycle and to hail a cab in order to make a morning appointment. The driver and I struck up the formulaic conversation described above. As was typical, I began explaining how I enjoyed Macedonia and its beauties, and at this point, the taxi driver interrupted me, commencing with his litany of complaint:

Arno ama, nema rabota ovde. Nikoj ne raboti. Lugjeto samo šetaat.  
Toa e problemot.  
[OK, but there's no work here. Nobody works. People only walk  
around. That is the problem.]

And so it entered my consciousness that when you don't work, you walk.

Talking a walk or stroll (*šetanje*) is in fact a long-standing institution of city life in Skopje, as well as in many other Balkan and Mediterranean cities (see Vučinić-Nešković and Miloradović 2006). Every town in the country has what is known as a *korzo*, the main pedestrian drag or promenade where residents of all ages will go in the afternoon, evening or on weekends to take a stroll, expecting to encounter friends and acquaintances, to pass news, gather gossip and maintain connections. Indeed, walking is perhaps the consummate form of urban sociality and the leisure pastime *par excellence* of urban Macedonia, enlivening various public spaces throughout the city during the evening hours. In Skopje, most of these places are well-known: the quay alongside the river Vardar, the city park, the city square and *ulica Makedonija* (a central pedestrian strip).

At its center, on a *korzo*, *šetanje* was a form of public presentation by which individuals could spatialize their status according to where they walked and how they interacted with others (Goffman 1959). In most cases, urban youth in Skopje saw this aspect of *šetanje* as rather enjoyable: the practice provided persons with a chance to project their own social identity before known and unknown others through public presentation and interaction, and to engage with others doing the same (see Vučinić-Nešković and Miloradović 2006). The interactions associated with *šetanje*, or at least their ideal manifestation, were regularly desired, and the call, “*Aj, da prošetame* [Let's go strolling]” was a typical suggestion when friends would consider what to do on any given night. Given the compounding of Skopje's relatively small size and the importance of extended kinship and neighborhood networks, during the course of a walk, one is bound to run into various acquaintances from different points in one's life and to be variously identified as friend, friend-of-friend, (former) classmate or someone's daughter, son, cousin, etc.

While the length, depth and topic matter of the chance meetings that comprised the walk could and would vary — encompassing gossip, joking around, discussions of pop culture and so on — at the center of this form of social interaction was one's plan, that is, how one narrated his or her future course from

the present. Unlike complaining, which was present-oriented and marked by negativity, the plans privileged in *šetanje* encounters were future-oriented and generally voiced in positive terms.

Minimally consisting of one's agenda for the night, more often than not one's plan extended into the upcoming future. Depending on the nature of the relationship between those meeting during a stroll, one's plan would be offered early on in the interaction, and would generally (and seemingly ideally) consist of positioning oneself in line with favorable future trajectories relative to the interlocutors, whether these trajectories were mapable on Skopje's urban geography or fixable within salient narratives of success. Thus, in response to questions such as "what are you up to? [*Šo praiš*]" or "what's new? [*Šo ima novo*]," individuals on a stroll would respond by outlining either those present activities that pointed to future opportunity (e.g., "I've been studying for exams [*spremam izpiti*]") or name upcoming, exceptional activities that indexed one's social achievement or, again, one's future opportunity ("I'll be off on vacation [*idem na odmor*])."

Framing one's present in terms of possible futures, however, was always a negotiation. The plan demanded that one project his or her self within a future set of opportunities when the substance of these opportunities (or the lack thereof) was often well-known to one's interlocutor(s). A plan was therefore subject to degrees of affirmation or suspicion as well as passive ridicule (in Macedonian *fati seir*, literally 'catch a spectacle,' an idiom denoting the enjoyment that one gains while people-watching and witnessing others' gossip-worthy follies). Thus, while the chance encounters of *šetanje* were often sought and enjoyed, more than once I witnessed or heard reports of negative experiences of walking, usually when interlocutors would challenge one's plan, and by extension, one's public front.

Whether viewed positively or negatively, however, walking was a vital institution in the city, crucial to the production of status (which could be translated into things like jobs or romance, for example) through the successful mobilization of information about oneself and others. In turn, the practice marked the city's landscape in significant ways, creating points of what Michel de Certeau has called "local authority," spaces of polysemy and popular negotiation that break the panoptic logic of so much urban design (1984: 105ff.). Indeed, outside of places like Ljubov, walking was spatially condensed. The youth congregated on the spot, exchanging plans and stories, looking for the next thing to do.

The practice of *šetanje* thereby spatialized social logics across the fabric of

the city. *Šetanje* marked Skopje's landscape in significant ways as centers and peripheries of the promenade or the congregation were demarcated, negotiated and occasionally transgressed by the repetition of *šetanje*-sociality manifested in its interactions. In becoming mobile, however, the play of self-presentation in the walk transposed descriptions of desired futures onto social space, whether onto the entire map of the city or the narrow courtyard before Ljubov. Walking, by its nature, was dialectical, telescoping larger categories of meaning and value, while remapping them across ever shifting social terrain.

In some sense, then, reporting one's immediate plans about how or where to spend the evening and reporting one's plans for the "future" were congruent. Where one was headed for the evening would echo one's future plans, with aspirations, concealments and ambivalences all condensed and subject to scrutiny. And, indeed, because the walk in its essence was always temporary and therefore passing, one must have plans, as one could not walk indefinitely. The strategies of narrating one's "plans" were therefore integral to the temporality of the walk, which always pointed to its conclusion within an implied moral geography.

The remark of frustration voiced by the cab driver above speaks to this point. His criticism of Macedonia was that at the present *people only walked*. That is, walking, to be normatively significant, needed to be bracketed by other activities, such as those that would be relayed or indexed in narrating one's plan, *e.g.*, some form of productive enterprise (studying, working) or signs of the rewards that accrue to those with jobs (holidays). In post-conflict Macedonia, with unemployment epidemic, productive, much less lucrative, counterpoints to walking were scarce, and the activity could thereby be portrayed as pathological. The cab driver's remark was the ultimate indictment of "the plan" collectively broadcast by those walking. From his perspective, walking became the sick response to the problem of unemployment, as walking without the balance of work was itself aimless, unproductive, empty, infecting the society at large.

### *Plans, Time, Space and the State*

Rampant unemployment and the bind of doing nothing thus struck at the heart of urban sociality in post-conflict Skopje, and the tensions and ambivalences that emerged while walking, and about walking, indicated a greater categorical disarray as a socialist political economy had long been displaced by a sense of no economy at all. Walking as a practice and as an object of public discourse in the post-

conflict period presupposed specific moral temporalities of being that were increasingly strained by the lack of work. Self-presentation in terms of plans may have compensated for the lack of employment, obscuring the present in terms of future productivity, but as such it pointed to an everyday anxiety about relaxation (*odmaranje*) unbound. In a country that was once part of a successful worker's state, this was no small matter.

In this last section, then, I contextualize the post-conflict institution of the walk and of doing nothing within broader social and political frameworks. On one level, this era of unemployment has resulted in demonstrable social effects on one's lifestyle progression and concomitantly utilized kinship and friendship networks as a means for ensuring family survival. The walk and recurrent "plan" should be seen in this light. The walk animated these connections and functioned to transmit both valued information about opportunities and developments as well as to forge social identities in terms of them. However, on another level, unemployment, the declining purchase of a language of entitlement, and practices of survival in which the state has no place have altered the everyday practices through which state relations were manifested and a state effect achieved.

During socialist Yugoslavia, work was at the center of the institutional and practical mediation of political subjectivity and claims to state legitimacy. Indeed, epitomized by the system of self-management, which integrated workers into the decision-making processes of state firms, one's employment was not only a source of financial security and social identity, but also, a key site of one's political citizenship (see Woodward 1995). Similarly, state-guaranteed and workplace-supported holidays and resorts were considered foundational to Yugoslav society and the horizon of socialist modernity that girded governmental legitimation. Thus, if at one time the state and expectations of public sector employment had grounded a distinction between work and leisure (and correspondingly, between the worker and unemployed), the reduction of the state as such an economic actor has significantly shifted the meanings of these terms.

While good employment is still a fertile source of social prestige, the depletion of wages accompanying privatization and state financial crisis has often turned "work" into a foolish category, especially among the youth. Work becomes a side activity, a way of passing time, and often, worse than "doing nothing" itself, an avenue without a future, attuned only to the logics of the present and everyday getting-by. More than once, I had friends relate stories of how they worked eight hour days only to be rewarded with around \$1.50, enough to buy a pack of

cigarettes and a bus ride home. What counted as work and leisure therefore blurred, and with this categorical confusion, the value of *šetanje* was unmoored from the respectable leisure of an ideal urbanite and became a deviant practice of the young and unemployed.

This emptying out of categories of work (*rabota*) and leisure (*odmor/odmaranje*) has had practical effects. On an experiential level, the rise of “doing nothing” entails its own form of disciplining. One must adapt to the repetitive, cyclical time not of the factory-floor (Thompson 1991), but rather of the empty day, spent “resting” or in the pursuit of “action,” that is, to the dolorous labor of having nothing to do. Compared to Yugoslavia, where work and leisure were both inextricably categories of the state, the endless work of resting in post-conflict Macedonia has been personalized and depoliticized. People are chiefly to blame for the problem of walking and one’s plans — most always personal — foregrounded this shift in responsibility, indirectly compensating for a countrywide lack of opportunity. These practices of passing time thus only make sense in relation to an emergent governmentality defined by new dimensions of the spatialization and temporalization of power and responsibility, one marked as much by neoliberal logics as by exceptions to them (Ong 2006). The restless leisure — the waiting, walking and planning — of *šetanje* demonstrated the ambivalent labor of getting-by in post-conflict Macedonia.

In this context, the narration of one’s plan, as done in the chance, public encounters of the walk, became so important precisely because plans set temporal frames in motion: they place the present in terms of possible futures great and small. Significantly, though, in the spatial and temporal framework projected out most commonly in the plan, in this centerpiece of doing nothing, the state — either as a site of activity or as an object to which claims are addressed — was noticeably absent. Quite to the contrary of socialist Yugoslavia where the political system was justified by economic claims to represent the social interest — to provide — the post-conflict government in Macedonia was depicted as the limit to economic life. That self-presentation during the walk combined apoliticism with elsewhere futures underscores how, on an everyday level, the state was framed as an agent that does nothing. In the context of a walk, where idleness was often a condition of sociality, but one to be concealed, the impotent state logically could not appear.

Although the state (*država*) may have been receding within categorical logics of everyday sociality and self-presentation, this, of course, does not imply “state failure,” a concept that relies on a static, empiricist notion of the state, but

rather a shift in governmental technologies (Foucault 1991, 2009). Walking points to a redistribution of responsibility and aspiration that blurs the border between points of neoliberal uptake and those who are excluded from it. And so, urban youth labor to pass time, and in doing so, they carve out social worlds in the city that are at least momentarily autonomous from Macedonian politics and the economy, in which plans are not merely performed but enjoyed. Aimless walking literally mobilized a political subjectivity anchored not in terms of work and leisure as guaranteed by the state, but one where demands to the state were quieted by hopes of European modernity at last fulfilling its promises. State processes in Macedonia were thus not absent, but integrated at another level in relation to political subjects, and the emergent state form was one where entitlements gave way to aspirations and promises. The movement and self-presentation of walking thereby participated in a new conception of polity within Skopje's public spaces.

The anxiety I encountered about endless walking in Skopje, I contend, reflects a fundamental crisis in political categories of Macedonian state authority that, in turn, was (re)deployed across Skopje's urban spaces. Unlike other state projects that focus on the control of space and time to control populations and reign in political subjects (*cf.* Verdery 1996), post-conflict Macedonia faced a different mode of governmentality. It is not that walking was suffering under an intensified disciplining of space, but that the cultural effects of Macedonia's political and economic situation led to a revalorization of "the walk" just as it had "the state." No longer the leisurely stroll of a socialist worker's state, walking as doing nothing dialectically informed a constellation of power beyond the logic of entitlement and instead tethered to the normalization of market processes despite their exclusionary application. The social activity of doing nothing can thus be viewed as an ideological state apparatus to use Althusser's term (1971) or a technique of governmentality to use Foucault's (1991): an institutional reproduction of certain subjects within a set of power relations, here marked precisely by the state's inexplicitness, which nonetheless is productive of a particular state form (*cf.* Dunn 2008).

One may recall Verdery's (1996) answer to why it took so long for the state-socialist regimes of Eastern Europe to collapse given their structural weaknesses. She argued that although socialist states confronted continual crises of legitimacy, their survival relied on forms of social fission, through surveillance or competition of subjects dependent on the state for redistributed goods, and beyond this, of tolerated institutions of grey and black markets. Correspondingly, the persistence

of an apparently weak state in postsocialist Macedonia cannot be separated from the minutiae of everyday activity and inactivity. Doing nothing, and its economy of futures, creates the bases for an apoliticism that is productive precisely for an uneven neoliberal “transition” that not only includes and excludes, but also abandons.

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