

Informality on Wheels: Informal Automobilities Beyond National Boundaries

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Abstract

This article unpacks informal practices related to modernity's quintessential mobility machine: the car. Based on ethnographic fieldwork among low-wage Romanian immigrants in Spain who maintain transnational connections with their regions of origin in Romania, this paper addresses the role of the automobile system and of informal practices in migrants' daily work and life mobilities. I contend that informal automobilities are a set of livelihood strategies and infrapolitical activities that use cars to confront the constraints of geographical and social mobility regimes. The result is a heavily controlled car system that also provides the flexibility to move informally between formal rules in order to make a living. The transnational approach allows us to go beyond earlier accounts of informality that focus on the local and/or national scale by treating the car as a translocal object embedded socially and economically in transnational relationships. These conclusions contribute to increasing our knowledge of post-structural informality and mobility, but they are also relevant to understanding how a future carless or post-car world would impact on the populations that need, or exploit, the automobile system to survive and would oppose unequal mobility regimes.

Keywords: *informality; mobilities; automobility system; informal automobilities; regimes of mobility; transnationalism*

Introduction

I arrived late at night at Bucharest airport. Advised by a colleague, I went to the machines and ordered a taxi following the steps outlined on the screen. The machine gave me a piece of paper with the taxi's number. Outside the arrivals hall, a dozen taxis were waiting, and some people approached me saying "taxi." I easily avoided these "pirate taxis," called *rechin*, literally "shark," that might be either legal (but have high rates) or illegal, and found my taxi. On the way, the taxi-driver told me he was a subcontract labourer for a big transportation company. He was not the car's owner, but he was proud of driving the "national car brand," the cheap, rugged design and fuel-efficient Dacia Logan, an example of Edensor's dictum that "cars continue to be loaded with national significance throughout popular culture" (2004: 104). At the end of my journey, I encountered a driver working for Uber in precarious conditions using a rented Dacia Logan. Then one of my interviewees told me that he had spent the money he had saved working informally in Spain and Italy to return to Romania and buy a Dacia Logan and a taxi license.

These banal autoethnographic encounters not only provide glimpses of the informalisation of labour, they also position the car, the archetypal mobility machine, as an entry point in order to explore the relationship between informality and mobility. The car system is of crucial importance in modern societies because of the car's central role in contemporary mobilities. While the car is one of the most highly controlled and regulated objects in the world, it also

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offers the flexibility and freedom to move beyond its own coercive constraints (Sager, 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2000; Urry, 2004). Informality is a similarly global and complex phenomenon that happens outside the institutional presence or control and penetrates economic, social and political practices (Ledeneva, 2018; Polese, Williams, Horodnic, & Bejakovic, 2017) as an intrinsic element of formality, “regardless of the economic status of a citizen or country” (Morris & Polese, 2014: 14). Bringing together informality and automobility, this article analyzes the elusive potential of the car to deal informally with mobility regimes that operate on a transnational scale within the European Union (EU). Thus, this paper contributes to our understanding of informality beyond state, local, urban or regional viewpoints and situates informal practices in relation to the car as the quintessential object of modern mobility.

The *system of automobility*, defined as “a self-organizing autopoietic, non-linear system that spreads world-wide, and includes cars, car-drivers, roads, petroleum supplies and many novel objects, technologies and signs” (Urry, 2004: 27), was not initially my central interest. Nevertheless, repeated encounters with automobility during my ethnographic fieldwork observing informality among low-wage Romanian immigrants in Spain prompted me to reconsider it as a productive arena of informal practices. These are regular strategies people follow to manipulate or exploit formal rules, social obligations, and the knowledge to navigate between formal and informal constraints (Ledeneva, 2008).

Car governance produces regimes of automobility (Ananchev, 2016; Böhm, Jones, Land, & Paterson, 2006; Lutz, 2014) managed by institutions that are dependent on local and regional authorities, states, and supranational organizations, such as the EU in conjunction with the car industry, including the automotive industry and the maintenance sector. These institutionalized actors define the policies, surveillance technologies, and coercive measures that govern and police car mobilities. Moreover, I argue that the car also operates in broader and more unequal regimes of mobility that control not only the car but the mobility of people, capital, knowledge, resources, and things. Regimes of mobility are uneven social, economic, and political power structures that shape the mobility and stasis of individuals (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013) and are composed of norms, policies, regulations, and forms of infrastructure that govern movement (Jensen, 2013; Kesselring, 2014; Koslowski, 2011).

This paper treats *informal automobilities* as a concept delimiting a set of imbricated informal practices that use, exploit or manipulate cars in order to navigate between the formal and informal constraints of unequal mobility regimes. These informal practices are mainly of two types: livelihood strategies that facilitate the production, trade, and consumption of cars through informal labour and social networks; and infrapolitical actions that indirectly defy the mobility control and governance of things, knowledge, and people. In order to develop these arguments, the article is organized as follows. Section 2 assembles the main theoretical conceptualizations of automobility, informality, and transnational mobilities, while section 3 explains the methodology followed in the paper. Section 4 shows ethnographically the empirical evidence supporting the arguments and is followed by the conclusions in section 5.

Assembling theoretical pieces: automobility, informality and transnationalism

Dissatisfied with theories put forward by transport studies, the concept of automobility started to attract the attention of the social sciences at the beginning of the 2000s. Sociologists of mobilities conceptualized the car as a central mode of modern mobilities and urbanities (Featherstone, 2004; Sheller & Urry, 2000; Urry, 2004), anthropologists focused on people’s

daily and intimate relationships with cars (Miller, 2001), and cultural studies explored car consumption and imaginations (Carrabine & Longhurst, 2002). The automobility system was found to be contradictory, as it increases both individual freedom and ecological destruction (Böhm et al., 2006), so a transition to a similar sociotechnical regime with greener vehicles was anticipated (Geels, Kemp, Dudley, & Lyons, 2011). Recent research previews the forthcoming transition to a carless and *autono-mobility* future that is resulting from the environmental crisis (Hildebrand & Sheller, 2018; Manderscheid, 2018). Nevertheless, as greener or carless futures have not yet arrived, the current system remains vital in the daily working lives of large parts of the human population. Indeed, in the EU, the number of personal cars has increased in the last five years, though cars powered by alternative fuels accounted for only 2% of new registrations in 2017 (Eurostat, 2020).

The automobility system and its social, economic, and political consequences are rarely the focus of research on informality, although some aspects are commonly used as ethnographic examples of informality, such as self-appointed parking attendants (Chelcea & Iancu, 2015; Rekhviashvili, 2018), traffic police (Urinboyev, Polese, Svensson, Adams, & Kerikmae, 2018), taxi-drivers (Karjanen, 2015; Kovács, Morris, Polese, & Imami, 2017) or car modifications (Živkovic, 2018). An exception is the post-structural approach to informal public transportation of Rekhviashvili and Sgibnev (2018, 2019), which opposes the dominant literature that analyzes informal transportation as just a market gap-filler (e.g. Cervero & Golub, 2007). Rekhviashvili and Sgibnev demonstrate that informal economic practices of transportation “can be and often are comprised of both, market-like and non-market-like, socially embedded economic exchanges” (Rekhviashvili & Sgibnev, 2019: 2). Following their theoretical framework, which distinguishes between vertical (state-enforced) and horizontal (informal) embedding (Rekhviashvili & Sgibnev, 2019), this article moves beyond informal transportation economies to elaborate on the co-existence of informal, socially embedded public and private automobilities.

In the case presented in this article, the role of the automobile system has emerged as crucial for studying the informal practices that facilitate or hinder geographical and social mobilities and immobilities – hereafter (im)mobilities – at the transnational scale. Informality and automobility both operate beyond national borders, and the transnational perspective decenters the analysis from the realm of the nation state (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002), even though state institutions remain important in regulating migration and consequently transnational social fields (Dahinden, 2017). Moreover, in this case the focus on westward migration and mobilities – from Romania to Spain – goes beyond previous accounts of “transnational informality” that are bounded into post-socialist spaces (e.g. Urinboyev, 2016). Drawing on a multiscalar approach that distinguishes multiple institutionalized structures and networks of unequal power (Cağlar & Glick Schiller, 2018), this paper distinguishes transnationalism *from above*, which refers to actions managed by powerful actors such as states or multinational companies, and transnationalism *from below*, a broad range of activities conducted by grassroots initiatives connecting migrants’ places of residence with their countries of origin (Portes, Guarnizo, & Landolt, 1999; Smith & Guarnizo, 1998). In relation to the case at hand, the paper analyzes two imbricated forms of transnational activities from below that are neither organized nor institutionalized.

On the one hand, there is a set of livelihood practices and household strategies that confront the economic and mobility regulations of cars, people, and things. The dichotomy between

the formal and the informal is transcended by analyzing a borderless continuum of labour practices that range from paid to unpaid, and from formal to informal (Williams & Onoshenko, 2014). Moreover, in some cases these livelihood practices are not individual but household strategies (Pahl, 1984; Wallace, 2002), in which cars are relevant for materializing transnational links (Thieme, 2008) and performing economic activities and labour practices.

On the other hand, there are activities around cars that might produce unintended policies and social change, a sort of *infrapolitics* (Scott, 1990) of transnationalism. The term *infrapolitics* refers to the aggregate of thousands of minor acts of resistance of individuals reacting to institutional pressures (Scott, 1985, 1990, 2012) that might not be political in their forms or contents (Marche, 2012) but are currently performed by global underclasses (Moreno-Tejada, 2019). The car plays various *infrapolitical* roles in acts of resistance. First, it allows everyday practices of control, threat, and suspicion by security practitioners (Boyce, 2018), though the immobilization and criminalization of immigrants is opposed by creative *altermobilities*, “strategies people use to regain their individual and family mobility” (Stuesse & Coleman, 2014). Second, the car permits social remittances, informal trade, and travel beyond the state, being a productive arena for fake documents, scams, and informal trade. Third, the car is a social object with cultural meanings, such as freedom or status, that oppose or promote social change. Thus, the focus on the *infrapolitics* of mobilities instead of the *infrapolitics* of mobilization does not de-politicize the concept but expands its uses in relation to individual actions confronting unequal regimes of mobility that limit or facilitate (im)mobilities (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013).

In order to investigate these informal practices of automobility, the article ethnographically discusses informality in relation to five out of six² components of automobile systems (Urry, 2004: 25-26): (1) the quintessential manufactured object of twentieth-century capitalism produced by industrial sectors and the iconic firms that engendered theories such as Fordism and post-Fordism; (2) individual consumption, which provides status and values; (3) a complex constituted through technical and social interlinkages with other industries; (4) a quasi-private mobility that subordinates other “public” mobilities; (5) the dominant culture that defines what is a good life and citizenship mobility through art and symbols; and (6) environmental resource-use (Urry 2004: 26). Subsection 4.1 explores dimensions (2) individual consumption and (5) dominant culture to demonstrate the importance of the well-oiled informal second-hand car market that feeds Romanian car cultures. Subsection 4.2 analyses dimension (4) on quasi-private mobility that subordinates other “public” mobilities, in order to sketch out how transnational household strategies and *infrapolitical* actions work in this context. Finally, subsection 4.3 links dimensions (1) on the car as a quintessential manufactured object and dimension (3), which is focused on the system as a complex network of industries, explaining how current post- and peripheral Fordism is producing immigration and the informalization of labour.

Methods

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2017 and 2020 in Spain, Romania, and on the routes between the two countries. In this multi-sited ethnographic

² Dimension 6 — environmental resource-use — it is not included due to a lack of space. Likewise, the automobility system is gendered and racialized in particular ways (Hildebrand & Sheller, 2018), but it is not problematized in this paper. These limitations open the floor for further investigations.

fieldwork (Falzon, 2009; Marcus, 1995), I participated in the activities of Romanian churches – mainly Orthodox and Pentecostal – volunteered in Romanian associations, and joined in cultural events. I undertook twelve months of fieldwork in Roquetas de Mar (Spain) between 2018 and 2020, where I carried out participant observation and conducted twelve in-depth interviews, one focus-group discussion, and dozens of informal interviews with Romanian immigrants, Spanish social workers, police officers, business owners, and representatives of political institutions, parties, and associations. Moreover, I completed three non-consecutive months of fieldwork in Romania between 2018 and 2019. I visited people whom I had already interviewed in Spain in their various towns of origin. I also *followed the people* on the move (Marcus, 1995), travelling by car-pooling between Spain and Romania with Romanian families in the summer of 2017, which gave me access to additional information about their transnational mobilities and the role of cars in them.

Furthermore, my study is embedded in the research project ORBITS,³ which aims to understand the social structures that facilitate the transnational connections between two Romanian enclaves on the Spanish Mediterranean coast (Castellón & Roquetas de Mar) and their main places of origin in Romania (Dâmbovița & Bistrița-Năsăud, respectively). This ongoing project has already interviewed five hundred Romanians in these four places using a novel methodology of social network analysis (SNA) called ‘binational link tracing’ (Mouw et al., 2014) to empirically measure transnational social fields; that is, a set of interlocking transnational social networks “through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed” (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004: 1009).

As a team member, I carried out 79 interviews for this investigation – 70 in Roquetas de Mar and 5 in Bistrița-Năsăud – and collected extensive fieldnotes from every interviewee, together with relevant information that was not gathered in this survey. Finally, all the data collected from interviews and fieldnotes were analyzed using a CAQDAS program through content analysis, resulting in various categories of findings related to automobility: labour, networks, transport, repairs, trade, criminality, travel, documents, survival strategies, and control by police and institutions. Interviews were carried out in Spanish in which most Romanian immigrants were fluent, although basic Romanian and English were used during fieldwork as well. All the participants signed informed consent forms, and their anonymity and confidentiality were ensured. In this paper, all personal names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

Ethnographic encounters with informal automobilities

Transnational cultures and second-hand luxury cars

Romania is the country within EU27 with the fewest private cars per person – 261 cars per thousand inhabitants – although the number of people who cannot afford a car decreased from 56% in 2007 to 21% in 2018 (Eurostat, 2020). In the same period, the figure for EU27 fell from 10% to 7%, and for Spain from 5% to 4% (Eurostat, 2020). In 2018, only one out of every four cars registered in Romania was a national brand, despite the efforts of the Romanian state to protect the Dacia, the national brand (Pardi, 2018). In this context, my

³ ORBITS project: “The Role of Social Transnational Fields in the Emergence, Maintenance and Decay of Ethnic and Demographic Enclaves”, funded by the Spanish government (MINECO-FEDER-CSO2015-68687-P). <http://pagines.uab.cat/orbits/en>

ethnographic data confirmed the desire of Romanians to own luxury cars, usually big second-hand German cars instead of new Asian cars or Dacias (Gabor, 2016).

The car provides freedom, mobility, and status. These material and social desires are an integral part of the qualitative desire to “look for a better life” that many of the interviewees expressed and that was one of their motivations for migrating. In more detail, cars are one of the most important objects of consumption in daily life, with high maintenance costs, and are essential for commuting. Some people spend most of their salaries on luxury cars, giving them the potential to signal their higher social class publicly. Indeed, migration success and legitimization are often measured by car size and brand. Here, the economic value of the object circulates in different regimes of value with its own specific cultural, historical, and local situations (Appadurai, 1986). Cars are social objects with varying meanings for people living in different places, but some car brands, such as Mercedes, BMW, and Volkswagen, have a constant, intercultural symbolic value of automobile quality (Koshar, 2004). Within the EU, the closeness of countries enables transnational car mobilities. For transnational migrants going to Romania on holiday by car, the luxury car embodies their success as the perfect transnational object, a fetish that produces novel values when crossing borders (Spyer, 1988).

The desire to own luxury cars and the trading process and its informalities has deep social and economic roots. The following ethnographic vignettes describe how small repair businesses and secondhand traders produce automobile informalities. Mihai is a Romanian agricultural entrepreneur in Roquetas de Mar (see next section). He does not need to buy and sell second-hand cars to make a living, but he enjoys searching the internet to buy cars for less than €10,000, mainly Audi and BMW sports cars and commercial vans. He takes a hard line in negotiations to reduce the price. Then he goes to one of the numerous garages managed by Romanians and spends a little money to fix it or to give it a coat of paint if necessary. Afterwards, he sells it for more money, or uses the vehicle for a year or two before selling it at the same price. Many other Romanians mentioned buying and selling cars, sometimes imported from Germany, as an activity to make some money while having a formal job or to cope with unemployment.

The important point here is that this widespread economic practice produces transnational informality. On the one hand, the second-hand car business sets in motion informal work and networks. Sometimes the car is imported, involving its transport, the mobilization of *win-win* networks, and exchanges of resources. Romanians are well known as *manitas* – handymen – who have experience and a good technical education. Thus, the car passes from hand to hand through networks of trust to be repaired, painted, cleaned, and sold on. A good example is Serbu, a Romanian man in his early thirties living in Spain. He has two jobs, being formally employed in a second-hand car-parts shop, but also running a stable but undeclared informal garage with the permission and support of his boss in the shop. These activities are compatible, and transfers of clients, contacts, car parts, and sharing knowledge about repairing, buying, selling, and exchanging cars occur daily. Indeed, he imports car parts from Romania that friends send him by bus between Romania and Spain.

On the other hand, cars are easily tampered with, providing opportunities for illicit practices. The best example is winding back the kilometers on second-hand cars to sell them at a higher price. In Spain, this practice is usually called *afeitado* – shaving – and has been controlled and

penalized more since the late 2000s, though new cases still occur.⁴ In other countries, such as Romania, it is still easy to wind back the kilometres without fear of negative consequences. In all stages of this *maquillado* or made-up practice, informal and formal work might be undertaken to improve the final price and increase the profit.

These cases illustrate the mobility of people (clients and friends), things (cars and spare parts), and skilled knowledge (about repairing, painting, buying, and selling) through a wide transnational social network of family, friends, and acquaintances. This allows the mobilization of both strong (Tilly, 2007) and weak ties (Granovetter, 1983) in order to undertake economic and non-economic informal activities both locally and transnationally. These activities are socially embedded in more complex ways than a simple dichotomy between formal and informal economies (Morris & Polese, 2014; Routh, 2011) or “the assumption that informal work is only precarious, exploitative and/or casual or short-term” would suggest (Morris, 2019:16).

Furthermore, luxury cars are linked with illicit practices. This imaginary is here reflected in an unsolicited story that participants repeatedly told me about a Romanian mafia boss called Iacob, who used to terrorize his fellow citizens in Roquetas de Mar (Spain) in the late 1990s. In their memories, he passed by the city with his big luxury car looking for compatriots to force them to work and live in slave-like conditions. He is said to have died in a car accident in 1999, which was a relief to the then still modest Romanian community. Iacob’s mafia-like performance was defined by some as *șmecher*, a slang word for a cool, clever, astute man who can trick, dodge, and swindle, an archetypical image which also includes a luxury car playing loud *manele* or Romanian folk-pop music. Although most of my interviewees showed an ideological rejection of the *șmecher* cliché, the persistence of some of its cultural features, such as the luxury car, in tension with new ways of doing things in transnational fields (Garapich, 2016) might be interpreted as an infrapolitics of resistance to social change.

Quasi-private and “public” mobilities: local and transnational informalities on the move

Roquetas de Mar is situated in the so-called “sea of plastic,” a 450 km² area in Almería, Spain, which is devoted to highly intensive farming under plastic. It is also often called “Europe’s farm” because of its capacity to provide out-of-season vegetables to the rest of Europe. Every day before dawn, most of the hundred thousand workers in this agro-industry walk, cycle or drive in their owners’ old vans to the greenhouses. When there is a lack of labourers, foremen and farmers drive by a workers’ pick-up place or *parada* to hire irregularly one of the oversupply of undocumented immigrants – mostly Africans – eager for a one-day work-for-cash deal (Du Bry, 2015). Romanians too used these exploitative systems of daily-paid labour (Hartman, 2008) but gradually obtained work and residence permits following bilateral agreements between Spain and Romania until Romania entered in the EU in 2007, which facilitated transnational mobility as a support strategy (Marcu, 2015, 2018).

In this context, public transportation is nearly nonexistent, while having a car opposes the car and mobility governances that limit immigrants’ access to formal employment and health care (Lutz, 2014). Having a car increases immigrants potential to be mobile – termed *motility*

⁴ “More than 100 people arrested in an operation against fraud in the manipulation of mileage of second-hand vehicles” <https://www.guardiacivil.es/es/prensa/noticias/6778.html> [accessed: 21-4-2020].

(Kaufmann, Bergman, & Joye, 2004) – avoid labour exploitation, and enhance their mobility strategies (Stuesse & Coleman, 2014). One example of these infrapolitical practices was the use of fake driving licenses in the early 2000s, until more modern driving licenses were introduced. Nowadays, transnational mobilities are also increased because many immigrants travel to their countries of origin to pass driving tests in their mother tongue and at a lower cost, as other examples show (cf. Salih, 2003).

To provide information about transnational informalities on wheels, I present the case of Marius and his family. He is a Romanian immigrant in his fifties whom I interviewed in Spain. He works as truck-driver in Spain, and seven of his 25 family members and friends are also truck-drivers. We also met in Romania, where he was spending his holidays with his wife and daughter. He picked me up in his sister's car, a fifteen-year-old Volkswagen Golf that he uses whenever it is available. He used to come every year to Romania by car, but it is exhausting and expensive – Roquetas de Mar (Spain) and Bistrița-Năsăud (Romania) are not well connected by plane. The one-way trip takes two days by car – roughly €400, half petrol, half tolls – or four days by bus, about €80 one way. They only go off the motorways that connect both ends of the transnational corridors to rest at petrol stations and parking areas, which have social and cultural significance (Dalakoglou & Harvey, 2012) as transit zones full of real or perceived danger. The EU projects create safer parking areas, yet cases in which drivers and passengers have been attacked, robbed or even killed are very much on the drivers' minds.

The travel strategies and the option to use cars translocally are varied – travel by car, fly and borrow, or rent a car upon arrival, own cars in both places, etc. – and all migrants with whom I talked needed one. Although the house is usually mentioned as an important feature of transnationalism (e.g. Vertovec, 2009), owning or having access to use a car in both the place of origin and the destination bolsters transnational relationships. The logic of hyperindividualism makes car ownership an important feature of personal independence (Lutz, 2015). However, here the car is also a social object that entails social obligations and can be used by family members when they need it as part of the household (Pahl, 1984; Wallace, 2002) and moral economies (Palomera & Vetta, 2016). Moreover, Marius emphasized the importance of cars in family relationships when he showed me a rotten Dacia 1300 that had not been moved since his father died in 2003: “I have to take it to the junkyard and also take down the garage roof, but my mother does not want me to,” he told me. Also, Marius used to make a living as a truck driver and showed me some parts of his old truck scattered around the garage: “I had my job with the truck, but I also had room to do other things, load and deliver...now everything is already controlled, and you cannot make a living as before,” he told me, with nostalgia for the informal times he had left behind.

Here, the brokerage role of transnational drivers deserves attention because they can move across various social fields, such as the transnational field of truck-drivers (Alvarez, 2005). In the first phase of Romanian migration to Spain, in the late 1990s to 2004, before Romania's entry into the EU, some early migrants created informal transportation businesses, while others later became bus companies, facilitating the arrival of hundreds of their compatriots. Transnational bus drivers supported the newcomers but also benefitted from them, lending them money to pass the EU's borders, bribing border officials or taking alternative routes to avoid border controls (Elrick & Ciobanu, 2009), although as Spanish police officers told me, Romanians quickly learned that trying to bribe police officers in Spain might worsen their situation. Unlike the examples of the informal transportation of small vans and buses that

operate in urban settings (De Soto, 1989; Rekhviashvili & Sgibnev, 2018), in this case, transnational informal transportation preceded informal accommodation and trade.

Nowadays, transnational drivers between Spain and Romania are facilitators of economic and social remittances. An extended practice among Romanian migrants in Spain is to send money under-the-radar through bus drivers, who carry the cash in both directions and give it personally to the destined recipient. These transnational buses and courier companies also transport boxes in both directions for €1 a kilo in 2019. Homemade food and liquor – *tuică* or *palinka* – are the most common goods to be transported by bus or car, although Hungarian border officials “were looking at these products to confiscate and keep them,” as a Romanian car-pooling participant told me.

An extreme example of how these informal remittances worked occurred during a recent Christmas. At that time, the east of Romania was suffering from an outbreak of swine influenza, and my Romanian participants in Spain were very worried that they would not receive the typical national pork products hand-made by their relatives for the celebrations from northwest Romania, which was not affected by the outbreak. Ultimately, some managed to receive pork products through informal transnational entrepreneurs who avoided the border controls. These findings are in line with the literature on smuggling and small-scale cross-border trade across the eastern borders of the EU (Bruns, Miggelbrink, & Müller, 2011), but they also extend it to the soft, internal borders within the Schengen area. National borders have not disappeared but have been transformed, producing informal and contested (infrapolitical) practices in which car and bus drivers challenge EU regimes of mobility. In sum, here, informal automobilities practice a licit but illegal trade and symbolic exchange across borders, although the sending and receiving of social remittances are performed as an essential exercise that maintains and renews transnational social ties (cf. Glick Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton, 1992).

The “national” car and the informalization of labour

The history of the car-maker Dacia and its low-cost car the Logan illustrates how peripherality and post-Fordism in car industries produces cheap and/or informal labour. Dacia, named after the ancient land of the Dacians, commonly cited as the origin of the Romanian nation, was founded in the 1960s to develop the national automobile industry. After suffering difficulties during the post-socialist transition, in 1999, Dacia was bought by the French manufacturer Renault, which led to the diluting of its nationalist roots and a reduction in its workforce from 27,000 to 13,000 employees. Now Dacia-Renault is one of the biggest companies in Romania, with more than 15,000 employees (Automobile Dacia, 2018), due to its success in selling low-cost cars to the rich countries in EU27 (Pardi, 2018). Thus, Dacia is a paradigmatic example of peripheral Fordism: control, skilled labour, and consumers remain in the central country (France), while the peripheral country lost its institutional control, and the manufactured object is not easily accessible to ordinary workers (Delteil & Dieuaide, 2008; Pardi, 2018). As Walks (2015) demonstrates, *automobile Fordism* is at the roots of neoliberalism, flexible accumulation, and post-Fordist economies.

Dacia is a clear example of the decline of industrial labour in the 1990s that led to labour informalisation. The privatization of large-scale manufacturing resulted in a fragmentation of labour (Kideckel, 2008; Verdery, 2009) that reinforced the informal economy and informal activities as economic survival strategies (Ciupagea, 2002, and pushed millions of Romanians

into international migration (Marcu, 2009). The Romanian population living in Spain grew from a few thousand to 900,000 people in the year with the highest numbers over the last two decades (National Statistics Institute, 2019). They were attracted by formal and informal labour markets,⁵ and their migration was supported by social and institutional networks. Nowadays in Spain, the continuum between formal and informal labour (Williams & Onoshenko, 2014) is defined by the precarity, exploitation, flexibilization, and informalisation of formal labour (Likić-Brborić, Slavnić, & Woolfson, 2013). Moreover, low-wage Romanian migrants have access to a limited spectrum of jobs in sectors such as construction, domestic service, agriculture, and transportation (Martinez Veiga, 1999). Iona's family is an excellent example of this process.

Iona is a Romanian woman in her forties who arrived in Roquetas de Mar in 2001 with her husband. She has been employed – sometimes formally but mostly informally – as a cleaner, childcare worker, waitress, greenhouse worker, vegetable packer, and sales assistant, and her husband works as a formal driver. They send money through informal channels to her mother in Romania, where retirement pensions are too low to survive on. Also, they supported Iona's brother in his coming to Spain, but he was not able to learn Spanish, nor could he withstand the hard work, Iona told me. He returned to Romania and is working in Bistrița, their city of origin, in a car components factory owned by the German international company Leoni. With 9,000 employees from the city and commuters from nearby towns, this is the biggest plant in the industrial zone, producing components for the European automobile industry.

Our project data show that Romanians living in Roquetas de Mar have friends or relatives working in car factories, as well as some in textile plants. In 2019, the Romanian monthly average wage was 5,465 lei (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2020), and the salary in Leoni and similar factories is approximately 2,200 lei per month – around €460, which, according to my research participants, only permits a hand-to-mouth existence. These examples show how peripheral and post-Fordist industries – here, car and passenger transportation businesses – create low-wage labour contexts in which precarity and the informalisation of labour prevail, as the opening vignette of this article about taxis shows, opening the floor to immigration and temporal mobilities. These are individual and/or household strategies to diversify livelihood practices among transnational social fields, as they earn twice as much in their jobs in Spain than they can in Romania.

Conclusion

Taken together the set of informal practices that revolve around the automobility system, this paper has shown the elusive potential of cars in moving beyond the inequalities and limitations of formal and informal mobility regimes at multiple scales. Defined here as “informal automobilities”, these practices use, exploit, and/or manipulate cars in order to circumnavigate, confront, and reverse unequal situations, and they are of two interconnected kinds: livelihood activities that face economic constraints producing, trading, and consuming cars through informal labour and social networks; and infrapolitical actions that indirectly challenge the mobility governance of things (cars, remittances, infrastructures, etc.), knowledge (licenses, expertise, values, etc.), and people (drivers, passengers, workers, etc.).

⁵ The formal-informal labour continuum has a long tradition in Spain, illustrated by off-the-books workers in industrial development (Benton, 1990).

This article has drawn on the case of low-wage Romanian immigrants in Spain who maintain their transnational connections with their regions of origin in Romania. The focus on transnational processes allows us to unpack the social strategies, inequalities, and boundaries that are not only attached to national or local contexts, going beyond earlier accounts of car informalities that stress social processes and regulations at the local and/or national scale. Indeed, the automobility system smooths transnational connections because it allows physical presence, enacts the motives and success of migration, facilitates informal economies, and reinforces informal networks at a distance. Thus, the paper offers new insights about informal practices that respond to intra-EU mobilities governances, adding to post-structural research on informal transportation and expanding our understanding of the interdependent relationship between mobility and informality.

Low-wage migrants' access to automobility provides the autonomy and flexibility that increases their agency, both individual and family, to make a living. This paper does not advocate maintaining a central role over the automobility system in the current overheated world, observing only that "the road to any imaginable future is paved with unintended consequences" (Eriksen, 2016: 481). Thus, it is necessary to consider the possible impacts of a carless or post-car world on these informal practices and the consequences for those who rely on them to make a living or to confront mobility inequalities on the local and transnational scales. Bearing this in mind, it is important to continue analyzing informal automobilities in order to determine how they shape the daily work and lives of millions of people.

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