

Locality, space and the state in an Alpine valley

Locality, space and the state in an Alpine valley: local community and the high-speed rail (TAV) construction project in Val di Susa



Val di Susa is an Italian Alpine valley, located west of Turin, stretching towards the French border. According to a project promoted by the French and Italian governments, a new high-speed railway (It. *treno alta velocità*, TAV) is to run through the valley, to connect Turin and Lyon. However, as soon as the initial plans had been announced, back in the 1990s, the project was met with resistance by local residents, environmentalists, various, mainly left-wing political groups, and independent experts. They highlight the dubious economic rationality of the new railway, whose construction and subsequent maintenance would be costly, and which would double an existing underutilized connection. They also protest against the project's destructive impact on local landscape, livelihoods, and natural environment in Val di Susa. Born from these protests, the No TAV movement, during its long history, has linked these local concerns to a complex critique of the neoliberal political economy, in particular with regard to infrastructural development and the uses of space. Moreover, the movement articulates a critique of liaisons between governance and powerful financial and industrial actors. The No TAV movement has become a blueprint for a new kind of resistance to neoliberal globalisation—resistance drawing force from being rooted in the specificity of local territories and communities. Similar movements have spawned across Italy, while the No TAV activists maintain active links to numerous other protest and resistance movements all over the world.

Dr [Mateusz Laszczkowski](#) [1]'s research project 'Locality, space and the state in an Alpine valley: local community and the high-speed rail (TAV) construction project in Val di Susa', was carried out in 2013–2016 (National Science Centre grant from the 'Fuga 2' programme) and included over a year of intensive ethnographic fieldwork among No TAV activists in Val di Susa (2014–2015). The research, based primarily on participant observation, highlights the great internal heterogeneity of the No TAV movement, and describes the movement's practice of direct democracy, free from hierarchies or leadership structures. The research elucidates how stressing the local dimension of the conflict, disseminating expert knowledge—from engineering to ecology and economics—among the population, and linking local issues to broader politico-economic and environmental concerns, the movement has succeeded in bringing together Catholic and pacifist groups, for instance, with radical communist militants and various brands of anarchists. It has also achieved an alliance beyond class divides, linking liberal intellectuals with



workers and highland farmers. Thus the No TAV movement has become something more than just a protest movement—it has become the start of an emerging new kind of broad local community, one open to diversity and change.

Participating in numerous discussions, meetings, action-planning, demonstrations, direct civil disobedience actions, as well as feasts and moments of conviviality organized by the No TAV activists, Dr Laszczkowski has managed to cast in sharp relief the deeply personal and affective aspects of political engagement. Dr Laszczkowski explores the construction of Val di Susa as a territorial reference for the community that emerges from the involvement in conflict. He considers how the apparently purely ‘technical’ high-speed rail project becomes a matter of political and social concern. He follows the subjective transformations that residents of Val di Susa undergo due to their participation in the protest. Furthermore, the research underscores the inherent multiplicity of ‘the state’ as a promoter of ‘progress’, a symbol, an ideal, but also an enemy and a threat.

The research contributes to the recently growing anthropology of new types of resistance to capitalist globalization, and studies of infrastructural conflicts and spatial transformation. It also adds to the ongoing interdisciplinary and public debate over the possibilities for renewing democracy through citizens’ direct engagement beyond conventional division lines and identities.

Within the framework of the National Science Centre-funded project, Dr Laszczkowski has prepared four research articles, submitted to leading anthropological journals. He has also made a feature-length documentary film, *The Site: Building Resistance*, available in English, Italian and Polish.

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Links

[1] <https://dev.etnologia.uw.edu.pl/instytut/ludzie/pracownicy/mateusz-laszczkowski>