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**Transgressing Modernization (or how to become Visible):¹
The Taming of Nature and the Responses in the Countryside
in Interwar Era Albania**

The early morning of July 11, 1927, crowds gathered at the center of the city of Korça, the main urban center of southeastern Albania and one of the major cities of the country. At the event were also present prominent politicians, businessmen, and other representatives of the cultural life of the interwar era. It was an important moment because that Monday the private company *Maliqi*, whose head office was in Korça, started the draining of the shallow lake of Maliqi and its surrounding marshlands –this is why it had been baptized with the same name– located some few kilometers north of the city. There were plenty of reasons to celebrate. This enterprise had for the Albanian political elite and nationalists a profound meaning. The draining of that lake would help them to overcome that sense of inferiority injected by the country’s backwardness and the whole discourse on the assumed inability of the Albanians to develop and modernize. The draining of the lake of Maliq was considered as one of the first steps toward the modernization of the country and its transformation into a European nation.

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¹ The concept of modernization is imbued with ideological prejudices that establish a hierarchy of nations that sets the western model of industrial mass society as an example to follow for the rest of the world. In this spirit, it was also used in the 1960s as a political and ideological program by the American government to respond to the Soviet threat in the “Third World.” Regardless of its more recent use, though, the use of modernization as a term has a longer story that dates back in the late 19th and early 20th century –Japan, Russia, Ottoman Empire, China, Iran, and the newly established Balkan states are cases in point. The way modernization was perceived, interpreted, and used differs from one place to another, something that makes the use of modernization as a generic term even more daunting and problematic. For this reason, I have not used “modernization” as an analytical tool but simply as a descriptive term to which the historical actors gave different meanings.

To start with, *Maliqi* company was founded with 100% of Albanian capital, something that the politicians labeled as the token of the vitality of the Albanians to fearlessly undertake the important challenges of progress. The enterprise in itself, with its very important engineering component and complexities, would demonstrate to the world the ability of the Albanians to subjugate nature and use its resources to build in their country the new modern civilization. The draining of the swamp of Maliq was a symbol of the enlightened self-interest because it was going to promote development and increase the wealth of the entire region; it was also going to address the malaria problem that was devastating the region for centuries and also solve once and for all the bread problem of the area of Korça, which had suffered many famines due to the lack of grains. This is what, in essence, the company's CEO, Selim Mborja, the Prefect, Zef Kadarja, the future Prime Minister of Albania, Mehdi Frashëri, and other personalities spelled out in their speeches at the occasion of the inauguration of the draining.²

Regardless of the euphoria of the participants, not everybody was happy with what *Maliqi* enterprise was going to do. While the company was pretending it was transgressing nature on behalf of modernization and social improvement, others were going to transgress these efforts on behalf of community responsibility. The rural population of the sixteen villages located around the swamp complained and sometimes reacted violently against this undertaking. The Albanian communist historiography considered the tensions between the company and the rural population as part of the class struggle, which, according to it, was taking place in the country during the interwar era. This was a clash between two antagonizing forces: the peasantry and the alliance between the bourgeoisie and the landowning elite.³ The case of Maliq is also considered as an example of how the bourgeoisie invest-

² "Inaugurimi i tharjes së liqenit Maliq" (The inauguration of the reclamation of Maliq's lake), *Zëri i Korçës*, 12 July 1927, 1-2.

³ Agim Muçaj, *Lufta e fshatarësisë shqiptare kundër shfrytëzimit çifligaro-borgjez zogist (1925-1939) dhe qëndrimi i klasave ndaj saj* [The struggle of the Albanian peasantry against King Zog's bourgeois-manorial exploitation (1925-1939)] (Tirana: ShBLU, 1990), 39-41.

ed its capital in agriculture and exploited the peasantry.⁴ These interpretations are biased, though, because they were politically motivated. They were part of the Albanian communist narrative, which used history as an ideological weapon to legitimize its rule. Installed in a country with a very small working class, the communist regime of Tirana tried to highlight the idea of peasant resistance and thus justify the Leninist model of the alliance between peasants and working classes.

The concept of peasant resistance is not although unique in the communist historiographies. Scholars in the West, like Eric R. Wolf, James C. Scott, Eric Hobsbawm, and George Rude, have also used, however in a much more sophisticated way, the Marxist theoretical apparatus to highlight the class struggle between peasants and ruling classes. These authors have argued that a series of activities that range from armed rebellions to banditry, arsons, or even gossiping are part of peasant resistance.⁵ James C. Scott has argued that the venue of resistance is not only the open stage, which many times is controlled by the dominant group, but also the backstage where more refined forms of the hidden transcript are elaborated as part of the everyday resistance.⁶ The main analytical category these authors use is the class and their works explore the way the emergence of capitalism shaped class relations and triggered new forms of peasantry's resistance. They argue that this resistance to the modernizing forces was not an irrational blind reaction of the backward groups that were rejecting progress, but, indeed, a very rational reaction that corresponded to the objective forces that were shaping a reality where the peasants found

⁴ Rinush Idrizi–Beqir Meta, *Lufta e fshatarësisë për tokë, 1925-1939 (Përmbledhje dokumentesh)* [The struggle of the peasantry for land, 1925-1939 (Collection of documents)] (Tirana: 8 Nëntori, 1987), 16-7.

⁵ Eric R. Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969); James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasants: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Heaven, London: Yale University Press, 1976); James C. Scott, *The Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Heaven, London, 1985); Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981); Eric J. Hobsbawm–George Rude, *Captain Swing* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968).

⁶ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden Transcript* (New Heaven, London: Yale University Press, 1990).

themselves in a disadvantaged position.⁷ Hence, these new Marxist thinkers have tried to debunk Leninist practice by claiming that class conscience does not belong exclusively to the working class.

Resistance is also a central concept of the work of a cohort of other scholars that have worked on the modernization of the Middle East. Debating with important works written in the 1950s, like *The Passing of Traditional Society* of Daniel Lerner,⁸ who, basing his analysis mainly in Turkey, argued that the unstoppable march of modernization would wipe away the traditional social organization and culture in the Middle East. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, when Lerner's deterministic anticipations were largely discredited, different historians started approaching modernization from a different angle, using as their main analytical concepts the juxtaposition of the modernizing state apparatus with the society. According to these authors, in countries like Turkey and Iran modernization was a top-down process promoted by the political elites, whose goal was to westernize and homogenize their respective societies through authoritarian means and ways. Accordingly, the society resisted to the oppression of modernization of state apparatus.⁹

If we turn our attention to the Balkans, the region has mainly been under the scrutiny of social scientists due to its notoriety as the powder keg of Europe. The bulk of the works have focused first on the nation-building and state-building processes, whose goal was to transform diverse societies into homogeneous nation states, and second on

⁷ On the dichotomies constructed by the urban middle classes, which juxtaposed themselves, who they defined as modern, progressive, and future oriented, to the rural, defined as barbarian, vulgar, conservative and backward looking, see Eugene Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1976); James G. Carrier (ed.), *Occidentalism: Images of the West* (Oxford: Calderon Press, 1995).

⁸ Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of the Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (New York: The Free Press, 1958).

⁹ See for example Touraj Atabaki–Erich J. Zürcher (eds.), *Men of Order: Authoritarian Modernization under Atatürk and Reza Shah* (London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2004); Touraj Atabaki (ed.), *The State and the Subaltern: Modernization, Society and the State in Turkey and Iran* (London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007); Stephanie Cronin (ed.), *Anti-Veiling Campaigns in the Muslim World: Gender, Modernism and the Politics of Dress* (London, New York: Routledge, 2014).

the effects these processes have caused. There are authors who argue that the penetration of modernity and western concepts and the distorted way they were applied disrupted the traditional societies and created the bogus of nationalism with all the dramas of the 20th century.¹⁰ There are also works that deal with the social, economic, and cultural transformations that have taken place in the Balkans in the last two centuries.

In the spirit of the theories of modernization, in the 1960s a group of historians coined the recent history of the region as a period of transition. Such an argument implied the movement of the region from the Ottoman to the western modern world orbit, due to the immense political, cultural, and economic influence the latter exerted on the new nationalities.¹¹ In the 1980s, John Lampe and Marvin Jackson argued that in the last four centuries the Balkans have preserved the status of the periphery, first as imperial borderlands and later as developing nations, economically dependent on the West.¹² Lampe, as well as other authors, has also highlighted that the spinning of the Balkans around the West has transformed this region. Agreeing with Mark Mazower, Lampe and other historians have emphasized that the new nation-states of the region, after borrowing the western model, lost their distinct cultural traits and the Balkans were transformed into the south-eastern part of Europe, which means from an Ottoman to a European periphery.¹³

¹⁰ There are authors, though, like Mark Mazower, which argue that modernity is violent. Instead of looking for any propensity of the Balkans for violence, he claims that rather than distorted interpretations, the penetration of modernity, which is inherently violent, caused the dramas of the 20th century in this part of Europe. For more see Mark Mazower, *The Balkans: A Short History* (New York: The Modern Library, 2000).

¹¹ Charles Jelavich–Barbara Jelavich (eds.), *The Balkans in Transition: Essays on the Development of Balkan Life and Politics since the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963).

¹² John R. Lampe–Marvin Jackson, *Balkan Economic History, 1550-1950: From Imperial Borderlands to Developing Nations* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982).

¹³ John R. Lampe, *Balkans into Southeastern Europe, 1914-2014: A Century of War and Transition* (London, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Andrew B. Wachtel, *The Balkans in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Despite all that, these works discuss the implementation of western models by the local elites, while the social, political, and cultural dynamics of this complex process at grass root level and the interaction between different actors are often left out. The theoretical approaches mentioned above, whose analysis is based on the framework of the tensions between oppressors and oppressed, either in the form of class antagonism or that of state vs. society, do not give satisfactory answers. The case of the tensions between *Maliqi* company and the social groups, whose interests conflicted with those of the actors who wanted to drain the lake, provide a very good example of the complexities that cut across many categories we use in the social sciences, like class, religion, community, labor vs. capital, or urban vs. rural. With them, the idea of transgression becomes more plastic and complex.

Except for rare cases, it is harder for a historian than for an anthropologist to retrieve the voices of the powerless because of the limited access to the hidden transcript of the past. Weaved in the backstage, where the eye of domination cannot penetrate, the hidden transcript remains encapsulated inside the shell of the intimate sphere. For this reason, it is quite often out of the historian's reach, who generally works with the records produced by those who control the public sphere. To narrate a past with many voices and to fully reconstruct the dynamics of the interactions between different groups and actors is hard. However, this is not an impossible task. Some sources, especially the petitions and complaints from the rural population or different groups involved in a contest of interests, are a very good source to understand the dynamics of social tensions. The petitions that landowners, the rural population, and the company "Maliq" addressed to the state authorities are very helpful to tell a polyphonic story, where the voices do not always comply to the main categories social scientists use.

Located in southeastern Albania, at an elevation of 820 meters above sea level, the plain of Korça is surrounded in the east by the Dry Mountain and that of Morava, both above 2,000 meters of altitude; in the west, it is confined by the highlands of Gora and Opar. In the north, the pass of Plloça separates the plain from the furrow of Ochir-da and the pass of Molla (which means apple in Albanian) divides it

from the highland of Kolonja. When seen from the air, the plain has the shape of a small shark. Approximately twenty-two miles long, its narrow southern tip widens gradually toward the north, where, at the $\frac{3}{4}$ of its length, it reaches ten miles in width and then it narrows again. It was here, in its widest part, that the plain was covered since the Late Glacial era by the perennial shallow lake of Maliq.¹⁴ The tectonic depression and the alluvial sandy fan of the river Devoll, which cuts the northern part of the plain in two halves, were responsible for the location of the lake and its surrounding marshland.¹⁵ Depending on the season and the level of snowfall and rainfall, the surface of the lake of Maliq varied between 40 and 80 square kilometers.¹⁶

The area around the lake of Maliq has been inhabited, with only a few interruptions, since the Early Neolithic by groups that practiced agriculture and fishing. Maliq was the center of a very dynamic prehistoric culture and by the late Iron Age, in the 7th c. BC, the communities living in this area engaged in a trade that covered a large swath of the Balkan area.¹⁷ For thousands of years, the lake was a highly important component of the life and activity of the human communities that inhabited the northern part of Korça plain. The swamp had been a constant source of food for the people and their livestock. The Otto-

¹⁴ Michelle Denèfle et al., "A 12,000-year Pollen Record from Lake Maliq, Albania," *Quaternary Research* 2000, no. 432-433: 21. The lake of Maliq was part of a complex system of four lacustrine basins, also called the system of Dessarettes lakes, that comprised to its east the basin of the Great and Small Prespa, that are on the Albanian, Macedonian, and Greek borders, and to its north the basin of Ochrid on the Albanian–Macedonian border. See Amandine Bordon, "Pollen-inferred Late-Glacial and Holocene Climate in Southern Balkans (Lake Maliq)," *Quaternary International* 200, no. 1-2 (2009): 21.

¹⁵ Jean-Jacque Dufaure et al., "Tectonics and Geomorphological Evolution: The Example of the Korçë Basin (Albania)," *Géomorphologie: Relief, Processus, Environnement* 5, no. 2 (1999): 11-112.

¹⁶ Eric Fouache et al., "Palaeogeographical Reconstruction of Lake Maliq (Korça Basin, Albania) between 14000 BP to 2000 BP," *Journal of Archeological Studies*, 37 (2010): 525.

¹⁷ For more see Frano Prendi, "The Prehistory of Albania," in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 3, part I, ed. John Boardman–I. E. S. Edwards–N. G. L. Hammond–E. Sollberger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 187-237; N. G. L. Hammond, "Illyris, Epirus and Macedonia in the Early Iron Age," *ibid*, 639-40.

man sources have recorded since the early 15th century a series of villages that still exist today around the lake and their engagement in fishing.¹⁸

The situation remained the same until the end of the 18th century when Korça started growing from a small administrative center into an important economic hub. From this moment, the population of the area lost its self-sufficiency. The demographic expansion and the limited arable land of the plain of Korça created a Malthusian crisis. The city largely depended on the imported grain from outside the region, which exposed its population to the market fluctuations of cereals or the caprices of weather that hindered their transportation along the poorly maintained Ottoman road network. In the late 19th and early 20th century, Korça experienced a series of famines. As a response, in the 1890s, the Ottoman administration flirted with the possibility of draining the lake of Maliq in order to solve the problem of food scarcity and the periodical inundations of the Devolli river.¹⁹ The Ottomans undertook only timid steps and didn't solve any of the problems.²⁰

Serious steps were attempted only after the Ottomans were gone, with the establishment of the Albanian state. In the 1920s, once the existence of an Albanian state was guaranteed, important segments of the Albanian interwar-era political elite started thinking about how to modernize the country. Once the external borders were almost established –although only a few people in Albania were happy with them– many started planning on the inner frontier.²¹ The clearing of the

¹⁸ Archive of the Institute of History [hereafter AIH], *Regjistri osman i Korçës dhe Përmetit, i vitit 1431* (The Ottoman Register of Korça and Përmet), 42-88.

¹⁹ During the same period the Ottomans pursued other similar projects in the Balkan. One of them was the draining of the lake of Shkodra in the Albanian–Montenegrin border, which is also the largest of the Balkans. During the interwar era, the project was discussed by the Albanian and Yugoslav authorities, which were both willing to find ways to find scapegoats for the demographic pressures, especially those of the highlands. Fortunately, none of the governments undertook concrete measures.

²⁰ Andromaqi Gjergji, “Jetesa në një fshat në fushën e Korçës (gjatë shek. XIX–XX)” (Life in a Village in the Plain of Korça), in *Mënyra e jetesës në shekujt XIII–XX (përmbledhje studimesh)* [The Way of Life in the Centuries XIII–XX (Collection of Studies)], ed. Andromaqi Gjergji (Tirana: S. n., 2002), 207-8.

²¹ I have borrowed this concept from the work of the American medievalist Archibald Lewis, who used the concepts of the inner and external frontier to describe the

swamps and marshes was part of this modernizing enterprise, which was based on the confrontation with and triumphs over nature.²² The clearing of the marshlands of Maliq and the draining of the lake was among the first of such enterprises; most importantly, it was a private enterprise. The state fully supported the project. Some of the richest merchants and landlords of the area joined their capital and formed the company *Maliqi*, whose goal was to drain the lake and use the land for agricultural production.²³

In 1925, the Albanian President –and future king– Ahmet Zog, uttered that, for the region of Korça to have a prosperous future, the building of a modern road to connect the district with the Adriatic port of Durrës – which would allow the area to overcome the relative isolation from the rest of the country– and the draining of the marshland of Maliq were necessary.²⁴ Such a claim was not off target. Besides the discourses of modernization, historical contingencies had aggravated the Malthusian pressure the population of the region was facing. The new international context of the post-war era²⁵ did not have an indif-

expansion of western Europe during the High Middle Ages. See Archibald Lewis, “The Closing of the Mediaeval Frontier, 1250-1350,” *Speculum* 4 (1958): 475-83.

²² Neil Smith argues that the confrontation with nature was nothing but the result of the emergent industrial capitalism and the objectification of nature in the labor process. Neil Smith, *Uneven Capitalism: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (Athens, GA: Georgia University Press, 2008), 10-30. While I do not agree with such a categorical claim –man has since the prehistoric times confronted nature– I agree that the modern industrial civilization and the scientific ideology of the Enlightenment increased the importance of such confrontation to a degree never witnessed in history. As a result, all the countries that wanted to catch up the industrialized West loyally applied all the conceptual repertoire that they had already borrowed from their examples, including the idea that development meant confrontation of man with nature and the subjugation of the latter by the former. Albania is not an exception.

²³ The far reaching and ambitious goal of the company was to cultivate beet sugar and produce refined sugar in a factory that Maliq was planning to build in the future.

²⁴ “Çështja e Liqenit Maliq” (The Issue of Maliq’s Lake), *Gazeta e Korçës*, 28-4-1925, 4.

²⁵ The Balkans became a battlefield firstly in 1912 with the First Balkan War, then in 1913 with the Second Balkan War and at the end the with the Great War. The degree of devastation and the difficulties that the populations of the region, which were also very often subject to genocide, had to endure was tremendous. Hence, the

ferent role in the race for new sources of food. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire excluded the district of Korça from some of the markets –like Monastir, in Yugoslavia, and Thessaloniki, in Greece– with which it had traditionally been linked to for centuries. The new national framework oriented the movement of goods, capital, and people toward the Adriatic, opening up new challenges, especially that of transportation. In a country with no modern road network, the region of Korça found itself geographically isolated, from the rest of the nation and, to a good degree, from the rest of the region. Hence, the solution of the problem of cereals' scarcity was deemed, as a local journal argued in 1925, vital for the survival of the city.²⁶

The founders of the company, though, sought desperately an alternative to make a profit. The shareholders were also exploring for other crops, besides cereals, which would allow them to have higher returns, such as sugar beet.²⁷ Profit drives, notwithstanding, did not stop the major shareholders from clothing their enterprise with an ideological garb. They considered their company as the example of the enlightened self-interest, where private and public fitted neatly into a perfect synthesis. According to one of them, besides the profitability, *Maliqi* was going to play a powerful social role because it would fight unemployment and famine²⁸ and heal the economy and health of the whole country.²⁹ A newspaper wrote that draining the lake and its surrounding marshlands was a public necessity because it also meant to root malaria out of the region and, as a consequence, help its further development.³⁰

Things did not go smoothly for the company. To begin with, to its project –drawn by a Greek engineer whose name was Vlamos– the

recovery was more difficult, especially if we take into account the very limited resources that the countries of the region had at their disposal.

²⁶ “Shoqëria Maliq” (Maliqi Company), *Koha*, 20-6-1925, 1.

²⁷ “Shoqëria ‘Maliq’” (“Maliqi” Company), *Koha*, 5-9-1925, 2.

²⁸ Mina Frashëri, “Një shpjegim mbi çeshtjen e Liqenit të Maliqit” (An Explanation on the Issue of the Lake of Maliq), *Gazeta e Korçës*, 2-5-1925: 4.

²⁹ “Lajmë enteresane e Liqenit” (Interesting News Regarding Maliq’s Lake), *Gazeta e Korçës*, 26-8-1924, 2.

³⁰ “Shoqëria ‘Maliq’ dhe qëllimet e saj” (“Maliqi” Company and its Intentions), *Koha*, 12-9-1925, 2

rural population that lived around the lake was totally invisible –in a way very similar to the way that the indigenous were invisible to the European colonizers.³¹ The truth is that the land was not empty and the company learned it as soon as it implemented the project. There were sixteen villages around the lake with a total population, as for 1923, of around 7,500 inhabitants of both Muslim and Orthodox confessions.³² The religious affiliation of the villagers did not affect the structure of propriety and its distribution, their social status, wealth, and access to resources or opportunities. Generally speaking, the peasants were happy with a partial drain of the lake. Its cyclical floods damaged their property, crops, and belongings; moreover, it was also the cause of endemic diseases, like malaria. On the other hand, the lake of Maliq had been the center of to the economy of all the villages located around it for millennia.³³ Fishing and hunting were a constant source of food, while reeds and other types of vegetation were used for feeding cattle. What the villagers wanted was a middle ground solution, which, of course, the company was not so willing to provide.

The land around the lake belonged partially to the villages, in the form of communitarian land, to small landowners, and to landowners who worked their land through sharecroppers. The large landowners, with only a few exceptions, lived in the city of Korça, but their influence in the villages was huge and many times they controlled the local rural authorities.³⁴ Their relations with the peasants were based on a

³¹ For more on this subject see Robert L. Nelson, “Emptiness in the Colonial Gaze: Labor, Property, and Nature,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 79 (2011): 161-74.

³² Teki Selenica, *Shqipëria më 1923* (Albania in 1923) (Tirana: Ministria e P. Mbrendshme, 1923), 98-9.

³³ I am not claiming that the population that lives here has been the same for millennia –I do not want to get involved into to the futile spiral of the debates on the autochthony of the Albanians. Neither do I want to make any statement –which by the way falls outside of my academic competence– on whether or not the Albanians are descendants of the Illyrians, or of any other of the ancient ethnic groups that inhabited the Balkans before the Slavic moved in the region. I am only saying that the lake had been crucial to the life and economy of all the groups that have inhabited the area since the Neolithic. This is true regardless of the origins or the time they settled in.

³⁴ The cities in Albania during these years, likewise the bulk of the cities of the Balkans, were rarely hubs over which the middle classes exercised and radiated their

very complex network of services that each side provided for the other. The borders of the proprieties were very intricate because many times the familial property was divided into many scattered plots. The use of the communitarian land was determined by the natural cycle of the seasons and rainfalls. Some of the pastures were only used during summer when the lake was at its lowest level.

Instead of following the twisted and complicated lines of existing proprieties, which were the result of centuries of social interactions and human intercourse with nature, Vlamos' project pursued rectilinear lines.³⁵ As a result, willy-nilly it included within company's control whole swaths of land already owned. Moreover, the concession determined that the peasants had to pay the company to improve their land, which basically meant the delivering of their land from the periodical advance of the lake.³⁶ The peasants also had to pay for fishing, hunting, and collecting reeds. The conflict was imminent because the

power. In the Ottoman Empire, whose legacy in the Balkans was still very strong in the 1920s and 1930s, the cities were foremost administrative and military centers. The urban centers were also the residence of the landowning elite, which many times also held important military and bureaucratic positions within the power structure. The guilds and merchants played a prominent role in the life of the cities but generally they were not the dominant group, although there are many exceptions and Korça is one of them. First of all, the landlords in this plain of Korça were not exclusively Muslims and, from a religious point, they were a mixed group. Moreover, the Muslim elite had to negotiate its power with the powerful Orthodox middle classes, which held the rein of power in the city.

³⁵ Look for example what James C. Scott says on modernity and its rectangular geometry. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve Human Condition Have Failed* (New Heaven, London: Yale University Press, 1998). In this case, the rectilinear lines were not simply an expression of that tendency to organize the world in a geometric fashion. Rather than the power of the discourse, it was driven by the will of the company to expand its properties.

³⁶ According to the concession, the peasants had to pay to the company with 6 Napoleon (Albanian currency of the era) for dynym (measuring unit equal to 1000 meters square). Albanian Central Archive [hereafter AQSh], Ministry of Justice, number 155, year 1926, file II-854, sheet 6. The exchange course of the Napoleon to Dollar for that period was approximatively 1 Napoleon to 4 dollars. "Kursi i Monedhave në Korçë" (Currencies Exchange Rate), *Zëri i Korçës*, 6-2-1926, 4. It means that the price for 1000 m² square was equal to \$24, which converted in today's currency would be equal to \$325. For populations loosely connected to the market and with a very low standard of living such price was stratospheric.

project of *Maliqi* seriously disturbed the whole base of the rural economy of the sixteen villages around the lake. It excluded the population of the villages from the natural resources that they had always used and ignored all the traditional borders of propriety. The result was a strong reaction that resulted in an alliance between landlords and peasants, Muslims and Christians, urbanites and rustics.

In July 1926, a long telegram, signed by the representatives of the sixteen villages located by the shores of Maliq's lake, arrived at the office of the Prime Minister of Albania. It was a petition against the "injustices of the *Maliqi* company at the detriment of the pauper people." They asked the head of the government to protect the peasants, whose "ownership and miserable bread is endangered" from the "predatory and ruthless tendencies of the capitalists organized around the Anonymous Company," which was robbing the "pastures we have owned without any contestation for hundreds of years." The Turkish regime, they recalled, when it started to partially drain the swamp, did not strip their land away from them.³⁷ In May, the office of the Prime Minister had received other complaints from the peasants against the price they had to pay to the company for improving their properties.³⁸

The first telegram did not hit the target, but the second, crafted in a different language, did achieve its goal. The government in Tirana started moving to see what was happening. The Ministry of Interior confirmed, through the Prefect of Korça, Hil Mosi, that the peasants were telling the truth. Vlamos' project, explained Mosi, had unjustly included within company's control hundreds of already owned hectares. It was obvious that the government had approved the concession without checking first. The project had violated the property of only one part of the villages. The parliament and the government had approved the project under the strong lobbying of the politicians and

³⁷ AQSh, Prime Ministry, number 149, year 1926, file III-4054, sheet 1.

³⁸ AQSh, *ibid*, file III-898, sheet 1-5.

deputies of Korça,³⁹ who played a prominent role in the Albanian politics of the interwar era.

Prefect's office, though, scaled down the alarmism with which the petition depicted the situation when he said that the unjust appropriation of land had occurred only in some of the villages and not in all of them. Moreover, he observed that from 1924, the time that Vlamos drafted the project, to 1926 the villagers did a series of draining works, thus undermining the company's claim and changing the situation in their favor. The Prefect urged the Ministry of Interior to take steps and negotiate the conflict in a way that served the interests of all parts.⁴⁰ In October, the President of the country, Ahmet Zog, and the Council of Ministers decided to create a committee to revise the concession and give an end to the ongoing conflict.⁴¹ The committee that was going to negotiate the dispute was formed only in December 1926,⁴² but it never gathered and the conflict remained latent until it resurfaced again in 1931.⁴³

At first glance, it looks like we are witnessing a class conflict between peasants and capitalists, expressed in the classical dichotomy of countryside vs. city; it seems like this is capitalism in action that is upsetting the tranquil waters of tradition's routine and rural subsistence and the conservative peasants fighting back against exploitation. The state, with its paternalism, looks like it is caught in the dilemma of how to defend the capital while preserving the image of the unbiased negotiator that stands above the partisan interests, devoted to preserve and promote social harmony. Once we identify the actors involved in this conflict and the dynamics of their interactions, however,

³⁹ AQSh, Ministry of Economy, number 171, year 1931, file IV-144, sheet 6. I will elaborate more on the connections between the company *Maliqi* and the local politicians below.

⁴⁰ AQSh, Prime Ministry, number 149, year 1926, file III-898, sheet 20-21.

⁴¹ AQSh, *ibid*, sheet 26-27.

⁴² AQSh, Ministry of Justice, number 155, year 1925, file II-854, sheet 8.

⁴³ The archival sources do not explain very well why the committee never gathered and why there was no opened conflict. The peasants sent some telegrams in 1929 but they did not influence the government and nothing happened. AQSh, The Prefecture of Korça, number 317, year 1929, file 111, sheet 1-3.

we find out that the classical dichotomies of antagonist forces do not fully explain what was happening.

After an attentive reading of Prefect's conclusion, some questions rise up. Why did all the villages plead to Prime Minister, while only one part of them is really losing its lands? Where the peasants really cheating? Was the Prefect trying to scale down the size of the problem because he was siding with the *Maliqi* company? Where those representatives really representing their villages? Who wrote those petitions? This latter is an important question because in the 1920s the bulk of the Albanian peasants were illiterate, especially the grown up.⁴⁴

In mid-October, after the decision of the Council of Ministers to create a committee to negotiate the conflict, the Ministry of Infrastructure received another petition on behalf of the whole population of the villages around the lake of Maliq. The senders pretended they were representing the ten thousand people of the sixteen villages – an exaggerated number, of course, in order to raise petition's stakes. The language was identical with the petition of July. The company was considered as the agglomerate of ruthless capitalists while the government as the only salvation of the people. The senders expressed the conviction that the government was not going to sell ten thousand Albanians out to the capitalists of a company, whose goal was only to earn millions.⁴⁵ The telegram, which pretended it represented the whole population of the villages around the lake, was signed by Adem Vila, Emin Pojani and Sadik Qyteza, members of some of the most powerful landowning families of the region, and Thimaq Cali, a prominent Orthodox landlord.⁴⁶

As Partha Chatterjee argues in his work on the politics of governmentality, the mediators are very important for marginalized groups to make their voice heard. As he correctly argues, the mediator should know the political language of the regime and hence speak on behalf

⁴⁴ In the 1920s, at least 85% percent of the population was illiterate, with 15% of the population living in cities and 85% in the villages. Of course not all city dwellers were literate; women were such an exception.

⁴⁵ AQSh, Prime Ministry, number 149, year 1926, file III-898, sheet 35-37.

⁴⁶ AQSh, Ministry of Justice, number 155, year 1926, file IV-182, sheet 4.

of the marginalized.⁴⁷ The language of the July telegram struck the right cords because it was written by people who knew where to place and how to pressure their demands within the bureaucratic machinery. It was written by people with good knowledge of the political conjectures that knew at first-hand how the power structure worked. The authors of these petitions were striving to give a political content to their pleas and give proofs that they were representing a community with moral attributes.⁴⁸ Who were these mediators?

The mediators were the rich landlords who were losing properties from the draining of the swamp and who considered the *Maliqi* company as a dangerous competitor, whose land they sought to appropriate for themselves. In interwar Albania, the landowners were not removed from power and they preserved their mediating role between the population and the central power.⁴⁹ The draining of the lake of Maliq and its surrounding marshlands became a field of political contest, where the borders between the power of the traditional power holders, who were left out of the new power structure, and the power of the Albanian modern state were being tested and negotiated. The vocabulary of the petitions had new nuances and flavor because the landlords were defining their interests by identifying it with those of the people. They did not appeal only to the traditional moral order to

⁴⁷ Partha Chatterjee, "The Politics of the Governed," in *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 64-6.

⁴⁸ Chatterjee argues that one of the crucial parts of the politics of the governed is "to give to the empirical form of a population group the moral attributes of a community." Chatterjee, *op.cit.*, 57.

⁴⁹ At this point Albania offers a different picture from the other post-Ottoman nation states of the Balkans, where the landowning elite, mainly Muslim, was removed from power. In Albania, the ruling elite of the Ottoman era consisted exclusively of Albanians and in a country with a Muslim majority they were not considered as the representatives of an alien rule, especially in the face of the contribution that they gave for the independence of the country. Albania would complete this process, thus joining the other Balkan nations only with the communists, who annihilated all the Ottoman era feudal class. For an interesting explanation on the contribution of the Albanian Muslim elite to the Albanian National Movement see George Gawrych, *The Crescent and the Eagle: Ottoman Rule, Islam and the Albanians, 1974-1913* (London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2006).

highlight their rights vis-a-vis the state or other “alien actors.” They also glossed their interests over with a new form of morality: that of the good of the people. They juxtaposed the general wellbeing of the community to the egoistic greed of the capitalists, naked from any morality and social responsibility. They were constructing the ideology of a community, which dismissed the concept of class and opposed the ideology of the capitalist class and individualist selfishness.

The landlords appealed to the central authorities by crafting their petitions as the voice of the peasants –for example, in their complaints they also mentioned the problem of the communal land or their right to fishing and collection of reeds. It did not mean, though, that the mediators were speaking for the peasants. They were simply forced to include the peasants’ requests in their petition for the sake of legitimating their appeal and because such a step would put them under the leadership of their community. These petitions were not the peasants’ voice. It was that of those landlords, whose interests were threatened by the draining of the lake from a new actor in the local economy. The landowners that confronted the activity of the company *Maliqi*, who almost all lived in Korça, had remained out of the power structure of the newly created Albanian modern nation-state.

Resisting to the company was for them a way to factorize themselves and defend their status and wealth in the new context. Such resistance also took an ideological form against transformation, promoted by the *Maliqi* company. The narrative of the landowners who by being negatively affected by the draining of the lake tailored a narrative based on the wellbeing of those who lived by its shores. They were not speaking about improvement but about the preservation of what people had. Rather than a resistance to pre-capitalist moral economy against capitalism, this was especially an ideological garb of the confrontation between the urban powerholders, those who were successful in integrating their interests within the politics of modernization, and those who had not been so.

The landowners that petitioned against the activity of the *Maliqi* company represented only one fraction of this group in the region of Korça. The company was founded with the joint capital of merchants, free professionals, and landowners, either of Christian or Muslim background, who all lived in Korça. Some of the founders of *Maliqi*,

such as Selim Mbroja, Qazim Frashëri, Fazlli Frashëri etc., were among the richest landowners in the region and they held leading positions within the company.⁵⁰ Important shareholders were also members of other feudal families, like Pojani, Qyteza, Zavalani, Panariti etc. Among the shareholders were also the rich Orthodox merchant families of Turtulli, Bimbli, and Ballauri and also politicians like Pandeli Evangjeli, two times Prime Minister of the country, Kostaq Kotta, twice Prime Minister as well, and Vasil Avrami,⁵¹ the mayor of Korça, who was also a member of the administrative council of the company. Thus, the major shareholders of the company were linked to the central government through many threads and were well positioned within the state machine.

The company presented the latter's work as a philanthropic service to the community and a way of saving the peasants from the periodical floods and destruction, from malaria and other misfortunes. They remained loyal to this narrative until World War II.⁵² Both the company and the discontent landlords were legitimizing their interests by investing them with the idea of community's interests and pretended they were speaking on behalf of the people. Unlike the narrative of preservation promoted by those who were resisting to the project of the draining of the lake, the company's narrative was based on the ideology of development and modernization and the concept of improvement, which juxtaposed the miserable past with the better present or future.

The company's contribution to the community would be expressed, according to the leading group of shareholders, in an increased quality of life and more wealth for all in the region. The leading group of the company considered the draining the lake and the building of a sugar factory⁵³ as solutions to cope with the reduction of Korça's hinterland after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the closing of the emi-

⁵⁰ AQSh, Royal Court, number 150, year 1929, file III-60, sheet 30.

⁵¹ AQSh, *ibid*, sheet 28.

⁵² AQSh, Anonymous Company Maliqi, year 1943, file 13, sheet 1-7.

⁵³ "Industrija e tanishme në barabijte me industrinë q'i duhet Shqipërisë" (The Actual State of Industry in Comparison to What Albania Needs), *Shqipëri' e re*, 3-6-1928, 2.

gration in the USA.⁵⁴ Their business was, according to the owners of *Maliqi*, at the service of the community.

Except for few incidents, the situation remained calm until 1930, when another wave of petitions and confrontations started after the government renewed the concession. Since as early as March 1930, the company complained to the local authorities that pyramids that marked the company's property borders were continuously destroyed.⁵⁵ In January 1931, the peasants sent a petition to the Prefect of Korça, Abedin Nepravishta, where they asked him to establish a commission to revise Vlamos' project, which gave the right to the *Maliqi* company to misappropriate their properties.⁵⁶ In April 2, 1931, the landowners –among them Thimaq Cali, Zenel Vila, Koço Papadhopulli, Demir Ali Voskopi, and others, whose properties were located along the southern shores of the lake– petitioned to the King and Prefect against the company.⁵⁷ They claimed that *Maliqi* was using political support to pursue its predatory activity and force the peasants to pay for their own land.⁵⁸ Despite that, King Zog rejected their complaints and did not take them into regard.⁵⁹

The landowners did not loosen their pressure. They kept sending petitions to Zog,⁶⁰ while on the ground the openly defied the government's orders. According to the Prefect of Korça, the man behind all the turmoil was Maliq Frashëri, one of the largest landowners in the region.⁶¹ It is worth noting that Maliq Frashëri's cousins, Eshref, Fazlli and Qazim Frashëri, were among the most important shareholders of the company. In September 1930, the local court had fined and sentenced Maliq Frashëri with one month of jail for infringing the

⁵⁴ AQSh, Anonymous Company Maliqi, year 1943, file 13, sheet 1.

⁵⁵ AQSh, Commune of Maliqi, number 319(12), year 1930, file 13, sheet 1-2; AQSh, Commune of Maliqi, number 319(12), 1931, file 23, sheet 1.

⁵⁶ AQSh, The Prefecture of Korça, year 1931, file 72, sheet 5-6.

⁵⁷ AQSh, The Ministry of Economy, number 171, year 1931, file IV-144, sheet 6-7

⁵⁸ AQSh, *ibid*, sheet 16-20.

⁵⁹ AQSh, *ibid*, sheet 23.

⁶⁰ AQSh, *ibid*, sheet 41-48.

⁶¹ AQSh, *ibid*, sheet 8.

borders of the company's land,⁶² but he was not jailed. According to the President of the company, Kristaq Pilika, Maliq Frashëri was encouraging the peasants to occupy company's land by force.⁶³ Pilika complained that armed men who worked for Maliq Frashëri were persecuting the agricultural workers the company had employed to work its land.⁶⁴ In August 1931, the company's administrative council complained also against the communes and other branches of local power, which, according to the former, had done nothing to prevent the abuses against company's property.⁶⁵ The landowners, on the other hand, accused the local authorities of siding with the company.⁶⁶

After the constant pressure and petitions of the large proprietaries, who always spoke on behalf of the people, the central authorities decided to act. In June 1931, Zog drew the attention of the Prime Minister of that time, Pandeli Evangjeli, who was also one of the shareholders of *Maliqi*, to the misbehavior of the company, which kept going with its injustices against the peasants, and ordered him to send a commission and give an end to the whole matter.⁶⁷ Encouraged by the turn of the events, the landowners, speaking, as always, on behalf of all the rural population that lived around the lake, plead Zog and the Minister of Economy to order the preservation of the status quo and not renew the company's concession until the rectification of the borders had been finished.⁶⁸ In the same time, they wrote to the government that politicians in Tirana, connected to the company, were already working to predetermine the outcome of the commission's work.⁶⁹ While such a thing was true, the same is also for the efforts of the landowners to attain the same goal.

The landowners compensated the lack of connections to the center with elaborated appeals, which they weaponized, to achieve their goals. By portraying the company to the state authorities as an entity

⁶² AQSh, *ibid*, sheet 9.

⁶³ AQSh, *ibid*, sheet 13.

⁶⁴ AQSh, *ibid*, sheet 9.

⁶⁵ AQSh, Prefecture of Korça, number 317, year 1931, file 72, sheet 31.

⁶⁶ AQSh, The Ministry of Economy, number 171, year 1931, file IV-144, sheet 132.

⁶⁷ AQSh, *ibid*, sheet 73.

⁶⁸ AQSh, *ibid*, sheet 95-96.

⁶⁹ AQSh, *ibid*, sheet 174.

driven by greed, defining its actions as illegal rapine of pauper peasants, and calling the King as the father of its people that had always shown care for the peasants,⁷⁰ the landowners were trying to determine the outcome of the settlement before the commission had started its work. Putting pressure from below, landowners like Maliq Frashëri and Thimaq Cali were drawing in the sand the line of their interests. By defining people's expectations, they were actually elaborating and imposing from the periphery what they considered as deemed role of the state and central authorities. These men were articulating an ideology of the state that served their own interests, thus forcing the government to pursue their agenda and not the one of the company.

The company, on the other hand, did not miss the chance to hit back and delegitimize the landowners' claims. In May 1932, it sent to Zog a petition, in which it argued that the peasants were taking by force the land from the company under the inducement of Maliq Frashëri.⁷¹ The new Prefect of Korça, Ismet Kryeziu, shared the same belief.⁷² On June 2, peasants from the village Pirg sent a telegram to the government, admitting that they were pushed by other people to petition to the government against the company.⁷³ On June 4, peasants from the villages of Zvirinë, Pertush, and Leshnicë sent to the Prime Minister's office telegrams, with which they did thank the company for the humanitarian work it had done for the improvement of their lives.⁷⁴ On June 5, peasants from the village of Libonik sent to the government a petition, urging the latter to allow the company to proceed the drainage of the lake.⁷⁵

At the end, when the commission reached the agreement, also thanks to the skills of Ismet Kryeziu who received a special thank from the Prime Minister Pandeli Evangjeli,⁷⁶ it was the company that

⁷⁰ AQSh, *ibid*, sheet 132-133.

⁷¹ AQSh, Ministry of Economy, number 171, year 1932, file IV-159, sheet 15.

⁷² AQSh, Ministry of Interior, number 152, year 1932, file 404, sheet 37.

⁷³ AQSh, Ministry of Economy, number 171, year 1932, file IV-159, sheet 33-34.

⁷⁴ AQSh, *ibid*, sheet 39-40.

⁷⁵ AQSh, *ibid*, sheet 37. Maliq Frashëri tried to debunk these petitions and wrote to the Prefect of Korça that the telegrams sent by the peasants of these villages were all fabricated by the company. See AQSh, *ibid*, sheet 67.

⁷⁶ AQSh, Prefecture of Korça, number 317, year 1932, file 258, sheet 1-2.

lost the most. The state granted to the villagers and landowners the right to own 1,000 hectares from those, which according to the concession based on Vlamos' project, were under the company's management.⁷⁷ The central authorities, as they themselves admitted, sided with the peasants and did not protect the company's interests.⁷⁸ Immediately after the agreement was signed, some of the large landowning families that benefitted from the deal, such as Pojani, Qyteza, Dëshnica, and Pirgu, expressed their gratitude to the company for all it was doing for the wellbeing of the entire region.⁷⁹ Only a few weeks earlier, they were accusing it as a thief.

The deal of 1932 was not the end of the story. Once the agreement was reached, in some villages, like in the case of Rëmbec, landowners and peasants turned against each other and the former expropriated the latter.⁸⁰ Moreover, the agreement appeased only one part of the landowners. Just to mention some, Maliq bey Frashëri, Demir Ali Voskopi, Thimaq Cali, Gani bey Shënepremtja, and others were not happy with the deal and they had their eyes pointed to the new lands the company was delivering from the muddy waters. In 1936, the conflict exploded again and the discontented landowners refused to recognize the 1932's agreement because, according to them, the company had failed to drain the lake.⁸¹ The real reason behind the 1936's tensions lied in the decision of the company to bring agricultural workers to settle in and work the land. In front of the threat of the colonization of the land, old landlords and peasants found again the common language.

The peasants sent petitions to the state authorities and sought to force the company to give that land to them⁸² and to not allow newcomers to settle in.⁸³ In tandem, the landowners asked the Prime Minister to withdraw the concession to this company, which was led by "usurer bloodthirsty capitalists" who were "sucking poor's people

⁷⁷ AQSh, Anonymous Company Maliqi, year 1943, file 13, sheet 2.

⁷⁸ AQSh, Ministry of Interior, year 1936, file 828, sheet 13.

⁷⁹ AQSh, The Parliament, number 146, year 1932, sheet 1-4.

⁸⁰ AQSh, The Royal Court, number 150, year 1937, file III-1084, sheet 8-11.

⁸¹ AQSh, Collection, Prime Ministry, number 149, year 1936, file III-3047, sheet 34.

⁸² AQSh, *ibid*, sheet 6-7.

⁸³ AQSh, Ministry of Construction, number 177, year 1936, file 189, sheet 4-5.

blood,” because it had failed to fulfill its conditions.⁸⁴ Besides petitioning to the state authorities⁸⁵ and trying to manipulate them, both landowners and peasants started to openly transgress company’s land. Landowners did not shy away from exploiting the situation and put their hands over company’s land.⁸⁶ The peasants of the village of Pojan assailed the peasants that worked for the company.⁸⁷ In front of this situation, the Prime Minister, Kostaq Kotta, who was from Korça and was a shareholder of the company, advised the administrative council of *Maliqi* to give the land to the local peasants and not give it to newcomers,⁸⁸ but without success. At the end, the state authorities decided to respect the status quo of 1932 with no change.

Landowners and peasants challenged the decision of the state. Once the petitions failed to bear fruits, they started speaking the language of action. In 1937, Demir bey Voskopi, escorted by armed men, threatened and chased the company’s peasants out of the place they were settled in.⁸⁹ In 1938, the peasants of Pojan attacked the agricultural labors that were installed by the company and destroyed many tools, including also its tractor.⁹⁰ However, no attack was registered against the sharecroppers that the landlords installed in the land they gained from the agreement of 1932. The company, which was abstract and not identified with a specific person, was an easy target also because there were no older loyalties and patronages that could refrain the peasants and villagers from using violence.

The situation was aggravated also by the restrains the company imposed on fishing and reed collection. Now the peasants had to pay a fee of 15% for everything they got from the lake, which scandalized them –they had never paid for them, while fishing and, especially, reeds were vital to their economies. Open acts of disobedience took place. Peasants and landlords kept using the resources of the lake or the land under the company’s control for grazing their cattle of agri-

⁸⁴ AQSh, *ibid*, sheet 2-3.

⁸⁵ AQSh, Ministry of Interior, number 152, year 1936, file 828, sheet 14.

⁸⁶ AQSh, *ibid*, sheet 56-48.

⁸⁷ AQSh, *ibid*, sheet 52.

⁸⁸ AQSh, *ibid*, sheet 44.

⁸⁹ AQSh, Prefecture of Korça, number 317, year 1937, file 53, sheet 54.

⁹⁰ AQSh, Ministry of Interior, number 152, year 1938, file 465, sheet 2.

culture. *Maliqi* complained after these violations became a routine and asked the state authorities to take administrative measures and enforce the court's decisions.⁹¹ After the continuous complaints of the company about the routinized transgressions of both peasants and landowners, the government decided to take direct measures to stop them.

The Minister of Interior ordered to not allow anyone to hamper the activity of the private companies because such a thing would harm the country's economy.⁹² The peasants, although they were still important, had descended the ladder of the economic importance. Now they were not considered a segment that would bring development, as it was the case with the capitalist companies. The police intervened and jailed a number of peasants for either property transgression⁹³ or property occupation.⁹⁴ The state was now strong enough to make its voice heard and impose an asymmetric relation with the society. The authoritarian modernization was starting to take place.

In May 1939, after the Italian invasion of the country, the representatives of the sixteen villages requested the Minister of Economy of the Albanian Quisling government to deny the company its concession and revise the decision of 1932. In the telegram they wrote: "Today...with enthusiasm, we will enjoy from Your Excellency, inspired by the valuable principles of Fascism, the justice through the fair application of the law for everybody."⁹⁵ This petition was not written by the peasants or their representatives. The hidden hand of Maliq Frashëri and Thimaq Cale is felt in every line of this telegram. However, to their frustration, their sweet words did not influence neither the Italian nor their Albanian collaborators, who were not so willing to help them out. With the passing of the time, the landowners started to play the state to their advantage. They kept complaining, but, in the end, in 1943, the Ministry of Agriculture rejected their pleas and recognized the concession of 1925,⁹⁶ which was a decision of a regime that the Italians had overthrown.

⁹¹ AQSh, Royal Court, number 150, year 1937, file III-1084, sheet 21.

⁹² AQSh, Ministry of interior, number 152, year 1938, file 465, sheet 10.

⁹³ AQSh, *ibid*, sheet 5.

⁹⁴ AQSh, Ministry of Interior, number 152, year 1939, file 755, sheet 2.

⁹⁵ AQSh, Ministry of Economy, number 171, year 1939, file VIII-18, sheet 16.

⁹⁶ AQSh, Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, number 172, 1943, file V-152, sheet 7.

The peasants kept complaining also about the 15% tax they had to pay for fishing, which, as they were saying, ruined them economically.⁹⁷ The answer of the authorities was a long and empty silence. But by 1944 the tables had turned. The Italians were gone and the Germans did not care very much for the interests of an Albanian company and the Albanian collaborators were worried about their survival and the communist resistance. The company complained that the peasants were taking advantage of the turmoil and were not paying the fishing taxes. The President of *Maliqi*, Vasil Kondi, reminded the government the company's contribution to the country.⁹⁸ But this was not enough in those days. What followed was total silence from the government and the peasants kept transgressing the rules in a moment that nobody was thinking about the rules. When the communists came to power, in November 1944, a new era started for the Albanians. Young, energetic, and determined, the communists turned everything upside down, while they continued older projects that the previous regimes had left just on paper. They annihilated the whole group of the old elite, implemented the agrarian reform, drained the swamp, built the sugar factory, and collectivized the land. The time of full-fledged authoritarian modernization had started.

Where are the peasants' voices? It is not so much in the telegrams and numerous petitions the landlords sent to the state authorities. There, the voice of the peasants is crafted to serve landowners' interests. Their voice appears here and there, in the form of the abrupt reactions against the company or when they infringed state's decisions and laws. Were they transgressing modernization? Where they against of the taming of nature? Were both peasants and landowners rejecting change and improvement? Not at all! Peasants and landowners were not resisting to the transformation per se but were resisting to its direction. They were trying to bring the transformation, initiated by other actors, to their own terms. It was a process of negotiation where all the actors involved were giving shape to the project of a modern Albania.

⁹⁷ AQSh, General Vicegerent, number 161, year 1943, file 192, sheet 1.

⁹⁸ AQSh, Prefecture of Korça, number 317, year 1944, file 85, sheet 1.

The Albanian state, fragile and, in many aspects, still amorphous, was testing in many levels its expanding boundaries.

The central authorities were forced to negotiate their power in the periphery with the local actors. The infringement, stretching, and bending of the laws by the local population and notables were a crucial part of the state-building process. Everybody was trying to use the events to their own advantage and carve their niche in the new context. Modernization in interwar Albania was not an authoritarian, top-down project that imposed the vision of the bureaucratic elite over the society but rather a multilateral and very much negotiated and complex process. The infringement of state decisions by both peasants and landowners was part of this process; they used their strategies to use the transformation to their own advantage in order to make their presence felt and become visible to the state authorities and other state-related actors.

The resistance to the draining of the swamp was not a simple class response to the oppression of another class. In the process of the negotiation of the project were involved both peasants and landowners, urban and rural dwellers. What they had in common was their opponent. The company was also an agglomeration of different social groups of different religious affiliation and access to power. The state as well, as not a monolithic entity. It was neither a structure with its own clear interests distinct from those of the society nor a tool of one or another class. The bureaucratic machine was rather a heterogeneous composition, instituted by people with different interests who were trying to use the position within the state hierarchy to further their agendas –at least this was the case in interwar Albania. The company had strong support in the center –despite that it did not control all of it– but it did not have much power over the local branches of government, where the traditional influence of the landowners who were against the *Maliqi* was still great.

The peasants were not a monolithic group as well. Their actions were not concerted but separated in time and space. Some of them participated in the actions against the company and some others supported the company, as it was the case in the village of Sovjan where some of them, against the will of their fellow villagers, took land from

the company.⁹⁹ Some others sided with the company because of their enmity with the landowners.¹⁰⁰ The whole landscape of social interactions was an open and fluid field where the interests were never fixed and they were shaped and reconsidered on a daily basis.

⁹⁹ AQSh, Prime Ministry, number 149, year 1936, file III-3047, sheet 11-12.

¹⁰⁰ AQSh, Ministry of Interior, number 152, year 1936, file 828, sheet 20.