

Fixing Motorcycles in Post-Repair Societies. Technology, Aesthetics and Gender

by Gabriel Jderu (2023) York/Oxford, Berghahn (Politics of Repair Series, 3), 155 pp.

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This ethnography of motorbike repair in and around Romania is built on a fact that in principle seems indisputable: beyond the strictly vehicular function of motorbikes, their repair and maintenance can serve both as a source of personal meaning and, at the same time, a powerful trigger of social identities. There are several studies on the history of motorcycle design (e.g., Rapini 2007), about the motorbike as a glamorous object of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), about its relationship with age, class or gender affiliations (McDonald-Walker 2000), or even about the massive impact of the motorcycle taxi boom across the Global South (Ehebrecht et al. 2018). In this book, instead, Gabriel Jderu chooses to focus on the motorcycle technology itself and, above all, on its palpable effects on what he calls the “subjectivity” of users: personal and community identities, solidarity networks, and moral values.

The author's interest in motorcycling is firmly grounded in a well-defined historical context: the composition, maintenance and evolution of the Romanian motorbike inventory, spanning from the Second World War to the present day, and encompassing the decades of Soviet domination. Thematically, as its title suggests, the book commences with a precise definition of its subject of study. In tracing the “material biography” (pp. 166-117) that encodes the social life of the motorbike, Jderu opts to focus on a specific aspect often overlooked in the literature. Indeed, the conventional canon of moto-mobility studies tends to prioritize aspects such as vehicle production, use, and consumption (Pinch and Reimer 2012), relegating repair and mechanical maintenance to a marginal backstage. This perspective implies an assumption that motorcycles are always ready, functional, and never prone to failure or breakdowns. In contrast, this book seeks to investigate maintenance and repair to rectify the analytical neglect of the cognitive agency and embodied mechanical skills of motorcycle users. According to Jderu, motorcycling involves a relational capacity that goes beyond mere technological capacity, vehicular use and even representations of consumption, and that becomes integral to a sociotechnical system that is subtly influenced by the specific agenda of repair and maintenance. In turn, technological innovation affects motorbike culture itself. The question, then, is to track the specific relationships between mechanic knowledge and sociability over time, and how each context encourages or discourages the acquisition of technological knowledge.

The volume's most interesting pages delve into what we might consider the "classic" period of the motorbike, featuring the carburettor engine. Extending up to the end of the 20th century, this carburettor era marks a critical phase that shapes motorcycle culture. It is precisely within this period that the author reconstructs the heuristic primacy of maintenance and repair practices in Romania. The centrality of mechanics is influenced by technical factors. The characteristics of the carburettor engines in motorcycles manufactured during the 1950s, 60s, 70s, and 80s embody a basic, simple technology that was relatively accessible to all. The main mechanical principles (ignition, carburetion, lubrication) were fairly intuitive, allowing for a straightforward cause-and-effect reasoning to address most mechanical breakdowns. Consequently, riders, along with their families, neighbors, and friends, predominantly carried out repairs themselves, and this dynamic fostered a high degree of elective affinity between individuals and their motorcycles.

Almost nostalgically, Jderu describes the material conditions shaped by the scarcity economy of the socialist period. The lack of spare parts made them especially precious and prolonged their life far beyond their original design lifespan. The motorcycling community shared a practical knowledge of who possessed each mechanic part, how many hands the part had passed through, how operational it was, and who would be willing to exchange it for another used part. It could even be said that the carburation technology itself encouraged a kind of mechanical collectivism that demanded a heightened sensory connection to machines, refined through constant experience. The functioning/breakdown dynamic did not work in a binary way (e.g., the motorbike works well/is broken), but rather was managed based on a gradual perception of failure revealed by various signs – rattling, strange sounds, movement anomalies, and the like. Motorcyclists learned to anticipate breakdowns, equipping their bikes with portable tool kits, stocking spare parts, and travelled in groups to handle collectively emergencies on the road. Carburettor technology therefore blurred the distinctions between rider and mechanic, transforming repair into a communal, shared experience, which was not a solitary, esoteric or specialist task; instead, everyone participated in assembling and disassembling bikes, tweaking, fixing, and breaking them down. In this context, most riders became adept at handling routine maintenance tasks independently – tuning the carburettor and valves, greasing the chain, or changing spark plugs. And those less mechanically inclined still engaged by observing and discussing the activities of others: each person took care of their own bike while also contributing, to varying degrees, to the repairs of others'. No one was 100% mechanically proficient, but within the riding community users were deeply attuned to their vehicles.

Besides the mechanic experience he gained while learning to repair his own motorcycles, Jderu collected data since 2006 by travelling alone and also with groups of fellow bikers, by attending biker festivals, mechanic lessons and courses, and also from a variety of sources such as participant observation, published texts, and interviews with bikers, professional mechanics, motorcycle sale representatives and dealership managers. On the basis of this information, he compiles an impressive catalogue of eleven types of mechanical interventions on motorbikes, more or less complex, some specific to the socialist period and some others more widespread, to the point of being practically universal: 1) simple maintenance operations (lubricating, changing oil, replacing bulbs or brake pads, adjusting clutch cables); 2) handcrafted correction of manufacturing defects (as the manufacturer did not offer upgrades, repairs were improvised with spare parts from other compatible brands of motorbikes and even cars); 3) accessories and

decorations of a primarily aesthetic nature (such as adding windscreens or mirrors, replacing the original seat, handlebars or wheels); 4) functional upgrades and improvements (upgrading the electric ignition, adding additional suspension, luggage racks); 5) customization of engine parts; 6) “chameleoning” (pp. 48-49) or creation of hybrid vehicles to emulate the design of prestigious German, Japanese, British, and American brands; 7) repair of major breakdowns and critical failures; 8) reconditioning of old parts to prolong their life in the absence of spare parts (including the rebuilding of camshafts, cylinders, combustion chambers, suspensions and pistons); 9) “interspecies” hybridization (p. 52) of different vehicle types (motorbikes of different brands or even motorcycles and cars); 10) assembling composite motorbikes with parts from different models and makes; and 11) what Jderu refers to as “zombie motorbikes” (p. 54) (i.e., old motorbikes that essentially served as “organ donors”, providing spare parts for others).

At the turn of the century, this communitarian motorbike culture was shaken by the technological revolution brought about by the digital fuel injection engine. Technical innovation enters the scene in the book just as social change, colonization or history itself did in the old ethnographies, and this shift becomes the real drama on which the plot hinges. The advent of digitalization drastically altered the technological intimacy that motorcyclists had with their machines: the cultural devaluation of maintenance and repair, now relegated to “expert systems” (p. 43) that gradually replaced the old practical and intuitive skills of motorcyclist mechanics, marked a paradigm shift that in turn crystallized in what the author terms “post-repair society” (p. 3). In a sense, this transition from carburettor to digital injection mirrors a sociological passage from community to society which has given rise to new identities and relational subjectivities, such as the “a-technical bikers” (p. 58) who either cannot, do not want or are not interested in repairing their vehicles, the increasing number of female motorcyclists, or the middle-aged riders with stable jobs and higher education who have lost interest in vehicle repairs or pursue a utopia of masculinity and authenticity by transforming the old mechanical epistemology into individual “creativity” (p. 118) – a phenomenon the author provocatively refers to as the “gentrification” (p. 152) of mechanical praxis.

This, I believe, suffices to appreciate the richness of content in a solid, informed book that – perhaps beyond a certain repetitive character – succeeds in keeping the reader’s interest alive. After all, passing through the heyday of socialism, the fall of Soviet influence, and the rise of global capitalism, the history of Romanian motorbikes is the history of Eastern Europe from 1950 to the present day, and the rationalization of motorcycle mobility helps us to understand the impact of technology on the transformation of subjectivities and collective identities.

From a thematical angle, Jderu’s ethnographic perspective gives more attention to certain aspects than to others. In this sense, the order of the themes mentioned in the subtitle (“Technology, Aesthetics and Gender”) is representative of the decreasing degrees of attention awarded by the author to each of them: clearly, the strong point of the book is the vivid description of motorbike mechanics in the carburettor era, and the relationship of motorbike culture to aesthetics and gender relations occupies lesser plot space. Thus, for example, if motorcycling has traditionally been a male-dominated field, the different relational modulations between mechanics and gender are recorded through four short biographies of women to reveal which particular areas of mechanical culture have been opened up to female users and which remain predominantly male, and by observing how some of them completely transfer motorbike maintenance and

repair activities to men while others seek greater technical autonomy. While this is undoubtedly interesting, it does not seem an argument developed with the same descriptive quality as the pages on motorbike culture and repair under the Soviet orbit, which are replete with anecdotes, interviews, observations, and extensive archival material that make for gripping reading – for example, this is the case of the colorful passages about the Frankensteinian alchemies in the handcrafted construction of hybrid machines from socialist-era vehicle stocks.

From a theoretical point of view, and despite citing some relevant references (e.g., Strebel et al. 2019) or using specific categories such as “script” (p. 88) or “assemblage” (p. 6), Jderu does not systematically position his findings in the comparative framework of STS-related maintenance and repair literature (e.g., Denis et al. 2015; Graham and Thrift 2007; Henke 2000). Instead, he explicitly frames his investigation within the “moto-mobility” universe (Pinch and Reimer 2012), and classifies it as “an ethnographic perspective on motorcycle repair and maintenance practices” (p. viii). While he certainly is interested in research that has attempted to integrate technology and objects into the daily interactional routine in order to understand the motorcycle neither as a thing nor as a person, but an “assembled social being that takes on the properties of both and cannot exist without both”, as Dant says (2004, 74), he notes:

that the biker-motorcycle-repair assemblage also incorporates the persons and things that support maintenance and repair, such as other bikers, mechanics, trust, deception and (the performance of) technological knowledge and mastery (p. 4).

Then, the embodied STS research can appreciate in Jderu’s book a reinvigorated ethnographic approach and down-to-earth perspective.

Therefore, both for the information gathered and also for the theoretical and methodological implications, *Fixing Motorcycles in Post-Repair Societies* seems to offer much more than just an anthropological description of motorcycling aimed at counteracting what the author calls a “cultural depreciation of maintenance and repair activities” (p. 1). In addition to conducting research in the field with motorcyclists, collectors, amateur motorbike associations and mechanics’ workshops, Jderu himself is a motorcyclist and a certified mechanic, and his work is nourished by a personal affinity with technology. This personal involvement with the technical object as such undoubtedly contributes to the quality of his contribution to contemporary ethnography on repair systems, on the awareness of the failure potential, material fragility, and vulnerability of everyday technology, on the opportunity to challenge the traditional view of the role of artifacts and agency of objects by interpreting maintenance and repair as key to understand technology, and all the more the general phenomenon of motorcycle culture, so striking today in several countries of the so-called Global South.

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