The vanishing paradise: Lake Baikal

Science is such a great thing. There are so many things science gives us… There are technologies that make our life longer and comfortable, we can travel faster and safer, we have better medical services, better access to knowledge and so on. Oh, yes, I forgot: we have internet… and social media.... Of course, we have nukes, drugs, car accidents, pollution, global terrorism and other side effects of the so called progress.

Last but not least, we have universities doing research, and quite important we have many institutions funding universities. Why? Well, because universities have seem to be competent in this area, and in the last almost 1000 years among other things, universities have been in charge with knowledge production. And I have a particular reason to be happy about this, since in the warm summer of 2015 I had the opportunity to participate in another field trip in Russia, specifically to lake Baikal, thanks to the project managed by David Moon and his team.

What new can be said about Baikal? In the last two centuries many travellers, adventurers, scientist and traders had been around it and some of them left us inspired descriptions. But what impressed me from the very beginning of the trip - which happened to be in Ulan-Ude, was a permanent sense of struggle. A struggle between a very few devoted to preserving nature, and many others interested in exploiting the natural riches. I want to say that I don't necessarily see this struggle as one between the good and the evil. In the end the whole humankind history has been also a story about dominating the nature. Sometimes violent, sometimes excessively, but also harmoniously in many aspects. I think a constant of our history has also been the illusion of mastering the nature. As a matter fact, despite many punctual losses - Amazonian rainforest, most of European wild animals, Arctic ice, in the end the nature always balances back somehow.

Anyway, lake Baikal seems to be one of the hottest points of struggle. At the beginning it was the hunt for fur and fishes, later on on a drive for industrialisation, now pollution and global warming hit the ecosystem.

Back to Ulan-Ude - an interesting post-communist city, the capital of Republic of Buryatia. A strange mix of communist symbols with a Buddhist flavour. A huge head of Lenin oversees the city's main square. I was told this is the only statue of Lenin consisting in his head only. As a very often told joke runs, Lenin is always portrayed in his mobilising attitude, pointing to the best bar in town. In this case it seems the Buddhist religion had some strange impact, and made the communist authorities adapt the communist mythology to the local context.
The state always plays an ambiguous role in this struggle. On a hand, the state is either a beneficiary of the economic activities of natural resources exploitation, or is the drive force behind some of them. The former had happened mostly during the communist regime when the dam on river Angara was built, and other polluting industries were located near the lake. On the other hand, the state also has usually to pay the bill for pollution, either direct as in case of pollution accidents, toxic waste management, or indirect as in the case when population health is affected by pollution. Sometimes, the state also reacts under the public pressures, usually ignited by small groups of nature 'talibans', people aware of the potential dramatic consequences of the irrational nature exploitation. As always, there is a small number of tough fighters struggling for lake's preservation.

In this trip we met a couple of these fighters for the preservation of the lake Baikal. There is a strong sense of David and Goliath battle, when your listening them talking about their effort. But, I think there are reasons for optimism. I've watched for 15 years another such battle between Romanian state and a rich corporation on a side, and a handful of Romanian environment and cultural heritage NGO's on the other side. And I have to mention here - Romanian NGO's. The well known, international and much powerful environment defenders got into the battlefield much later. I'm not trying to downplay their role and weight in the final result, but I have to state that for more than a decade there were very few activists, hunted by the police at every public manifestation, overwhelmed by the millions of Euros spent by the corporation on advertising campaign, and annoyed by the state who issued again and again work permits just to be lated cancelled by the justice. And, of course refused to declare the site of historical interest in spite of the most extensive networks of Roman gold mines supposed to be affected by the new exploitation plans. Here are two links that offer some details on this case:
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/14/romanian-village-blocks-canadian-firm-mining-for-gold
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roşia_Montană#History