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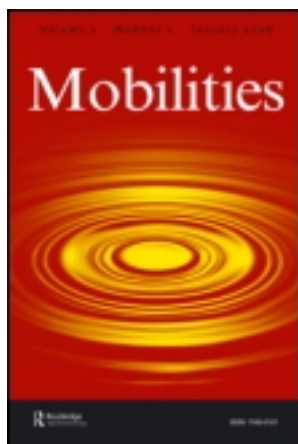
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# Roads and Anthropology: Ethnographic Perspectives on Space, Time and (Im)Mobility

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**ABSTRACT** *The current text locates the anthropological study of roads within the wider context of studies on mobility and modernity. Besides introducing the articles of this special issue of *Mobilities* on roads and anthropology, this introduction also addresses some of the broader theoretical and epistemological implications of the anthropological perspective on roads, space, time and (im)mobility.*

**KEY WORDS:** roads, anthropology, ethnography, space-time isomorphism, mobility and immobility

## Roads as Ethnography

In ‘Speed and Politics’ (2006[1977]) Paul Virilio drew attention to the power of roads, referring to modernity as a ‘dromocratic<sup>1</sup> society’. Associations between modernity, mobility and accelerated living have subsequently become quite standard in contemporary social science. Today, terms such as mobility (Urry 2007, Cresswell and Merriam 2011), flows (Appadurai 2000), networks (Castells 1996), liquidity (Bauman 2000) or even exhaustion (Brennan 2000) have entered the standard lexicon and are frequently used either metaphorically or pragmatically to describe and analyse the conditions of late capitalism. Roads and the powerful sense of mobility that they promise carry us back and forth between the sweeping narratives of globalisation, and the specific, tangible materialities of particular times and places. Indeed, despite the fact that roads might, by comparison with the sparkling agility of virtual technologies, appear to be grounded in twentieth century industrial political economy – they could arguably be taken as the paradigmatic material infrastructure of the twenty-first century, supporting both the information society (in the ever increasing circulation of commodified goods and labour), and the extractive economies of developing nations on which the production and reproduction of such goods and labour depends.

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Moreover, roads inflect our contemporary lives in other ways as the ethnographic studies collected here show. They elicit powerful temporal imaginaries, holding out the promise (or threat) of future connectivity, while also articulating the political and material histories that often render these otherwise mundane spaces so controversial. Such controversies arise from the fact that the planning and construction of a modern highway involves the accommodation of many competing interests and expectations (Thévenot 2002). Beyond the moral complexity of establishing the infrastructures as a 'public good' – in the majority of cases roads are constructed as public works – the realisation of such works involves financial, regulatory and technical relations that often fold international, national and local regimes into a single and specific location.

The ethnographic studies that we have gathered here all take advantage of the possibilities that roads offer to those with an interest in the empirical exploration of current sociocultural conditions. Roads are materially embedded in local particularities, but the thematic concerns that these ethnographies raise also speak to a more general sense of promise and uncertainty associated with the idiom and materiality of (auto)mobility – and its association with issues of modernisation, connectivity, growth, displacement, circulation, etc. Given the centrality of mobility to the modern sensibility, it is not surprising to find that there is an established and growing literature on automobility across the humanities and social sciences (e.g. Miller 2001, Wollen and Kerr 2002, Featherstone *et al.* 2005, Merriman 2011, Moran 2009).<sup>2</sup> One could argue that this relatively recent emphasis is due to the fact that mobility has come to define the contemporary human condition as never before, involving long-range and frequent movement that impinges on or even defines the everyday life of people from all backgrounds and social strata (Urry 2007, pp. 3–16). However, at the same time, it could be argued that never before have so many people felt so deeply the consequences of their exclusion from a condition where mobility is embraced as a correlate of freedom (to trade, to work, to travel, etc.). Within this wider purview, our comparative ethnographies from across the world show how roads can disconnect as effectively as they forge connection. Too often they fail to fulfil their promise, too often they entrench the violent exclusions of established political and material orders.

This brings us to a main point we want to make with this volume, namely the contribution that ethnographic studies of roads can make to a more general social science of (im)mobility, differential speed, new landscapes, modernisation and networked infrastructures. The contribution comes from the ways in which ethnographic studies locate specific roads and the material and social relations they entail, without needing to decide in advance on the ontology, the scale or the extension of such relations. Indeed ethnographies of roads allow the ethnographer to tease out the practices and imaginaries that work across scales, and thus across the traditional sociological categories: from materiality to human subjects, from the state to the society and from there to individuals; from global capitalist enterprises to local communities; from the politics of infrastructure development to cultural conditions of everyday life and so on.

Thus, Nielsen describes how road building in the Zambezi Valley, Mozambique involves a tense engagement between Chinese corporate capital and local road workers; and he explains how the mystified incomplete road materialities and the fetishised incomplete wages are de-mystified and materialised by the Mozambican road workers in a different material entity: houses or land. In the case of Ghana, Klaeger writes about the daily work of Ofankor's hawkers. Alongside traffic their lifeworld is marked by their continuous engagement with differential speeds, rhythms and related temporalities. These are simultaneously constitutive of the

hawkers' entrepreneurial tactics, their corporeal-kinetic practices and the distinct socialities that emerge from their interactions on the Accra urban road section that forms their intrinsically moving workplace. The relationships along the Sino-Mongolian border zone road are studied by Pedersen and Bunkenborg who analyse ethnographically a kind of road that in fact it disconnects. It is a road that serves to curb both the quantity and the quality of interactions taking place between Mongolians and Chinese. This road acts as a technology of distanciation, which ensure that the two sides become less connected as time passes. In the case of Brazil, Campbell asks what happens when the colonial dream of a road does not materialise as intended, and becomes instead a permanent project for both state managers but also rural Amazonian settlers. The road in that case has a central role in the forging of surprising alliances between environmental activists and colonist farmers in negotiating the tension between the material challenges of moving in Amazonia and the bold modernist figurations that guide highway construction and territorial planning.

The road materialities are examined also in the case of the Eastern valleys of the Peruvian Andes by Kernaghan. There takes place the counter-insurgency war against the Maoist Shining Path and a US-sponsored project to control the cocaine boom. There furrows and walls each express points around which accounts of regional history would be narrated. Yet it was their solid materiality that enabled distinct kinds of encounters, often violent ones. Emphasising the surface disruptions of the road, the author studies events on the highway as well as their relationship to the lived topographies of law in state frontiers. In reference to an international highway connecting Peru and Brazil, Harvey and Knox talk about the materialities of promises that are invigorated by mundane engagements with unruly forces that threaten to subvert the plans of politicians and engineers. The authors argue that such forces are integral to the ways in which roads come to endure as enchanted sites of contemporary state-craft, despite their capacity to disappoint and/or the likelihood of generating negative consequences. The political and material process of creating those unstable and destabilising roads both challenges and reinvigorates the promises of speed, integration and connectivity. In the case of socialist Albania infrastructure fetishism, road materialities and materialist principles of scientific socialism are mixed, paving the way for new social relationships and post-socialist spatial practices. Within such (post)socialist contexts Dalakoglou wonders how we can form a critical-materialist account of highways and auto-mobility in non-capitalist contexts.

### **Roads and Cultural-Spatial Critique**

In all cases, the roads emerge as interfaces, negotiating but also creating and consolidating boundaries and borders while at the same time transcending the limitations of prior relations in their promise of new found connectivity. Within the wider anthropological literature, this sense of boundary formation and deformation has an antecedent in the ground-breaking work of Gluckman in Zululand (1958). With his classic account of the opening of a road bridge, Gluckman somehow inaugurated an ethnographic interest in this kind of space where diverse social and cultural groups move, meet and interact. Since then different ethnographic regions have each produced a smattering of road ethnographies – the significance of such work is often more directly related to the analysis of the international, or at least inter-regional dimensions of such sites.<sup>3</sup>

Augé (1995, pp. 85–87) famously declared that motion and spatial mobility were generally seen as antipathetic to traditional anthropology. This is only partially correct; anthropologists did not suffer from a complete antipathy to mobility. For example, they were the most dedicated students of nomadism (e.g. see Barth 1964, Campbell 1964, Vainshtein 1980, Rao 1987, etc.) and produced pioneering works on the research of migrants and their communities since the 1960s (e.g. see Lewis 1964, Watson 1977, etc.). If anthropologists were avoiding something, before the 1970s, it was perhaps better characterised as the crossing of established spatial–cultural boundaries through which particular cultural groups were specified and contained. These boundaries were of key significance to the rationalist, separation of humanity into semi-sealed cultures, each identified with an apparently objectively identifiable location and set of cultural traits via a process that Gupta and Ferguson (1992, 1997) termed place–culture isomorphism.

Commitment to this space–culture isomorphism made it hard for most of our disciplinary ancestors to find roads interesting as sites for their emergent anthropology. Anthropology traditionally devoted the majority of its research energy to describing populations and lifeworlds no longer visible in those other disciplinary spaces more likely to be fascinated by the successes and failures of modern capitalist systems. In this tacit division of labour, roads and road travel were framed as unwelcome Western intrusions into non-Western worlds. Lévi-Strauss (1966) noted this relationship between roads and the end of an imagined ‘isolation’ in the 1960s (Lévi-Strauss 1966, p. 125). Others even claimed that roads do not necessarily change things: Evans-Pritchard, for example, noted that: ‘Long rectangular settlements straggle along both sides of government roads at distances varying from a mile to several miles between each. They are of so recent a formation that it is difficult to ascribe to them any great change in the life of the Azande, though here and there in this essay the reader will note evidences of their new spatial density’ (Evans-Pritchard 1932, p. 292). Indeed, he moreover noted that since the Azande did not use cars, the roads were used just as footpaths would have been: ‘though the Administration compelled them to maintain wide roads it was noticeable that when a group of Azande walked down them they did so in single file as they were accustomed to do along their bush paths’ (Evans-Pritchard 1960, p. 311).

Ethnocentric or not such statements are indicative of a certain approach that dominated most anthropological research and discourse in the past. When the moment to doubt this legacy of static bounded culture came about in the 1980s, an interest in mobility emerged as a central trope of anthropological cultural critique (see Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986). Within anthropology, as for many other humanities and social science disciplines, some of the most significant paradigmatic shifts in terms of the conceptualisation of space, culture and mobility came from Marxist contributions (e.g. Lefebvre 1974) which paved the way for more postmodern, processual and dynamic understandings of space (e.g. Jameson 1984, Harvey 1989, Soja 1989, Thrift 1996, Massey 2005).

The background of this theoretical shift is the general turn in social science that began in the late 1960s. This was closely linked to events in the political arena which were in turn connected to the critical perception of auto-mobility and the infrastructures of post WWII capitalism. Since the 1950s Lettrists – and later their intellectual offspring the Situationists – had been concentrating on a critique of dominant ways of perceiving space and the materialities of sovereignty. For example, they suggested psychogeography as an alternative technique to engage with

urban spatialities. These distant political-theoretical predecessors of the cultural critique saw motorways as ‘anti-social’ and ‘alienating’ spaces – from Guy Debord, who talked about ‘the dictatorship of the car’ and ‘the dominance of the expressways’ (Debord 1967[1992], p. 174) – to Henri Lefebvre who stated categorically that a ‘motorway brutalizes the countryside and the land, slicing through space like a great knife’ (Lefebvre 1991[1974], p. 165, see also pp. 124–125). The traces of these ideas can be found in Marc Auge’s influential discussion of the non-place (1995) and his suggestion that motorways are archetypal non-places, lacking in social significance (1995, pp. 73–77, 100, 106, 118).

However, today, many recent studies, including the articles concentrated in this issue, imply that such – supposedly – non-places do have social significance, cultural dimensions and relations to reveal. Like most material-cultural formations, when observed closely enough, or when dwelt in for sufficient time, there are always interesting and creative relations to be explored. For example, airports, shopping malls and motorway service stations might be non-places to the passing traveller – but they are replete with social relations, with material histories, with regulatory forces and when given the chance reveal complex social and cultural dynamics that bear close attention. It is in and through such sustained attention that the ethnographic studies of roads provide new perspectives on the simultaneity of global circulation and local lifeworlds of (im)mobility, speed, motion, frictions, tensions and journeys. The authors of the contributions to this special issue explore some of these surprising worlds that roads generate, looking beyond the promise of connectivity to observe how relations are (un)made in and through these most aspirational of social infrastructures. They document the diverse ways in which roads gather events, and generate meaningful interactions (and separations) in the diverse rhythms and differential speeds. They interrogate the particular capacity of roads to hold a developmentalist vision, a seemingly intrinsic future-oriented temporality that seems to render them so irresistible to nation builders and state planners, despite the fact that as our examples show they are in practice as likely to manifest state uncertainty as state capacity. People integrate these ribbons of asphalt concrete into their daily lives, cutting the aspirational down to size as the roads become just one of the possibilities or impediments to making a living in the hugely diverse circumstances in which they appear across the planet.

## Notes

1. From the Greek words ‘dromos’ (road) and ‘cratos’ (power and control).
2. Featherstone (2004, p. 1) has argued that automobility still remains under-researched by sociologists, a statement that perhaps could also be extended to include anthropologists. However, one could not claim the same with respect to archaeology, a discipline that has long shown an interest in the study of roads, trails and paths. For a recent collection of excellent road and path archaeology, see ‘Landscapes of Movement’ (Snead *et al.* 2010). There are also several transport historians who have published some exceptional pieces of work (e.g. see Mom 2005).
3. This regional focus provides the grounding of any ethnographic approach to roads since then and readers may find the following studies useful additions to the articles and related bibliographies presented in this collection: Regarding Africa there are works from the southern Niger (Masquelier 1992, 2002), Zaire (Fairhead 1994); Central African Republic (Giles-Vernick 1996) and Madagascar (Cole 1998, Thomas 2002). Latin American was the focus of one of the first book monographs written by an anthropologist on a highway, Moran’s work (1981) on the Trans-Amazonian highway; and key European and Mediterranean examples include

studies of Portugal (Pina-Cabral 1987), Spain (Roseman 1996), Palestine (Selwyn 2001), Yugoslavia (Coles 2002), Sweden and Denmark (Lofgren 2004). The USA has perhaps led the world in its expression of a particular imaginary of the open-road, the frontier and freedom – explored by philosophers, writers and film-makers, a major reference could be Baudrillard's 'America' (1970) or a more ethnographic exploration would be Stewart's work (1996). From Asia and the Pacific, there is a number of studies on roads in Laos (Trankell 1993) and the highlands of Papua New Guinea (see Hayano 1990, Stewart & Strathern 1999, O'Hanlon & Frankland 2003).

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