

NEW MOBILITIES IN ASIA



Edited by Luke Heslop and Galen Murton

Highways and Hierarchies

Ethnographies of Mobility from
the Himalaya to the Indian Ocean

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New Mobilities in Asia

In the 21st century, human mobility will increasingly have an Asian face. Migration from, to, and within Asia is not new, but it is undergoing profound transformations. Unskilled labour migration from the Philippines, China, India, Burma, Indonesia, and Central Asia to the West, the Gulf, Russia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand continues apace. Yet industrialization in Bangladesh, Cambodia, and India, the opening of Burma, and urbanization in China is creating massive new flows of internal migration. China is fast becoming a magnet for international migration from Asia and beyond.

Meanwhile, Asian students top study-abroad charts; Chinese and Indian managers and technicians are becoming a new mobile global elite as foreign investment from those countries grows; and Asian tourists are fast becoming the biggest travellers and the biggest spenders, both in their own countries and abroad.

These new mobilities reflect profound transformations of Asian societies and their relationship to the world, impacting national identities and creating new migration policy regimes, modes of transnational politics, consumption practices, and ideas of modernity. This series brings together studies by historians, anthropologists, geographers, and political scientists that systematically explore these changes.

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Preface

Thinking with roads

Penny Harvey

The anthropology of roads has flourished in recent years in tandem with the expansion of road-construction projects across the planet.¹ Confronted by the ways in which road-construction and infrastructural investments appear as instruments of economic growth, ethnographers have begun to pay close attention to diverse modes and scales of alignment that play out in specific times and places. Ethnographic research, such as is exemplified in the chapters collected here, challenges the assumptions of linear alignment and of enhanced prosperity. Looking in detail at how such large-scale infrastructure projects land in people's lives raises questions about the many different modes of engagement that emerge across the diverse scales that roads articulate.

The chapters gathered in the *Highways and Hierarchies* collection attend to the grounded effects of major road-building projects such as the Chinese state Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), designed to promote and support infrastructural development in countries right across Asia and Eastern Europe. The mega-investments of the BRI build on the symbolism of ancient trade routes. They are promoted by the Chinese state as a gift to the region, motivated by the desire to enhance regional connectivity through the facilitation of economic exchange and the promise of economic growth. China has a unique capacity to fund infrastructural initiatives at this scale, and the source of economic possibility is also always a source of political concern. In particular, the BRI is a challenge to India's interests and influence in the region. As terrestrial trade corridors are opened up through Bangladesh, Myanmar, Pakistan and Nepal, and maritime trade facilitated by the enhancement of the ports of the Maldives and Sri Lanka,

¹ Recent anthropological monographs on the subject of roads include Beck, Klaeber, and Stasik 2017; Dalakoglou 2017; Filippello 2017; Harvey and Knox 2015; Uribe 2017; Simpson 2021.

the geopolitics of global circulation across both land and sea are reshaped. Borderlands are especially sensitive as physical and political proximities shift with the arrival of new and faster access routes to marginal areas and disputed territories. In these circumstances, roads appear as ambiguous and problematic gifts, technologies of development for some, of diplomatic provocation and asymmetrical integration for others. Either way, they impact on the lives of local people across the region who find themselves inextricably entangled in the materialities and the imaginaries of global expansion.

The chapters in this volume follow the unexpected ways in which roads change lives. They explore the notion of asymmetrical connectivity and the effects of differential inclusion. They look at how roads act as liberal modes of governance, channelling and filtering circulation, regulating movement. The ethnographic focus on how local people struggle to find ways to negotiate, resist and profit from these infrastructural projects suggest that 'enhanced connectivity' is far from straightforward. On the ground the BRI appears less monumental and more piecemeal. Every road has its own strategic implications for the territories it touches, connecting diverse local, regional and national interests. Close up we find less of a network and more of a meshwork of complex and incomplete alignments, many of which were already underway, while others address interests that diverge, often in significant ways, from the major geopolitical narratives of the wider 'project'. Indeed, the image of the BRI as a singular project is itself a rhetorical technology of alignment, an example of an idea that might help to build a road, as Rankin and Simpson suggest (this volume). More broadly still, this collection raises the question of how exactly road construction brings prosperity, and to whom, at a time when so many places are experiencing the fragility of environmental change, and the need for a carbon politics that does not simply aim to connect people and places but also to protect them.

In his recent book *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (2018), Bruno Latour argues that human beings need to find new ways to inhabit the Earth in order to survive. The challenge, he suggests, is to rethink and to redescribe what 'belonging to a territory' entails. The hope is that such thinking will produce a new awareness of the material conditions of human lives at a time when relentless modernization, deregulated extraction and the ever more frantic demands for globalized economic growth have deprived so many people of a secure 'place to land' as he puts it (Latour 2018: 5). With so many people and things on the move, as migrants, as refugees or as components of vast intersecting supply chains,



the fundamental social and political challenge of our time is to find ways to conceive a common world, where connection to the Earth includes a commitment to the grounded relations of place *and* to the extensive relations through which places, ecologies and climates are brought into being. In this short essay, and as a preface to the essays that follow, I want to propose that thinking through infrastructures in general, and through roads in particular, offers one useful starting point for this latest inflection of political anthropology. What place do roads have in a world that has already exceeded its capacity to sustain continued economic growth? As massive infrastructure programmes are projected for roll out across the planet, the abrupt stalling of circulation that the 2020 global pandemic produced offers us a timely reminder of how current modes of connectivity, long taken for granted by those able to travel without a second thought, are also overwhelming the capacity to provide sufficient ground for settled ways of life.

Roads are perhaps unlikely focal points for attempting to think in positive ways about how to address the relationship between human beings and the material conditions of their lives. In terms of environmental futures, roads are generally seen as harmful technologies, and for good reason. Major road-construction projects – and indeed many minor road-building initiatives – are associated with the invasion of territories for extractive purposes, the securing of territories for military or administrative control, and the destruction of fragile ecologies as aspirations for connectivity cut into spaces where other established life worlds are not valued, or even recognized. Once built, roads invariably produce an intensified circulation of vehicles, for such is their purpose. Increased circulation brings environmental pollution, a surge in accidents and fatalities, and the displacement or destruction of the life forms, and forms of life that stand in the way. Their histories are testimony to the effects of globalization, the explosion of inequalities, and the scope and rapidity of deregulation designed to speed up extraction, circulation, and accumulation of wealth for the few.

But roads are also, and perhaps almost always, built in the name of a greater good, supported by calculations that demonstrate possibilities for development, social inclusion and well-being – across all scales, local, regional, national and international. As these possibilities are questioned, roads offer important vantage points from which to investigate the histories of how we got to where we are, and from which to think with others (of many kinds) about viable alternatives in fuller awareness of what is at stake. It is the specific spatio-temporal quality of roads that affords these possibilities for thought.



Roads draw together multiple relational systems. They both comprise the ground of specific places and extend beyond through the open-ended possibilities that arise from connectivity to elsewhere. To invest in road construction is to speculate on these possibilities in the process of seeking to bring new relational dynamics into play. The contributors to this volume look in detail at how such transformations can lead to the disruption of established social, political and economic relations but also frequently reinforce existing hierarchies. In every case, however, the intention is to transform existing social possibilities by reconfiguring the material ground of relationality. These projects of transformation are intrinsically experimental. The outcome is always unpredictable, because the instigators and promoters of the transformation can never be fully aware of the multiple relations in play at the complex intersections of engineered systems and non-engineered, emergent ecologies.² Engineers manage such complications by limiting their focus to specific material challenges, as they work to specify the problem and articulate potential solutions. Contracted to build a stable surface, they focus first and foremost on the terrain, the instability of seismic zones, the demands of steep elevations, heavy rainfall, or perpetual drought. The contract with the client further narrows the scope and the quality of the material interventions. They rely on the political authority of their client to manage the social complications that arise. In this way, despite the huge popularity of road-construction projects, it is ultimately the powerful who are best placed to leverage the futures that they desire, with little or no interest in the desires and expectations of those who have other plans, or who do not plan at scale at all, but day by day seek to make a living from the world that takes form around them. The erasure of alternatives matters, and provokes further questions about the significance of what emerges at these sites of convergence where a specific infrastructural form becomes both the material condition of possibility for lives lived in specific places, and for connective networks that pay no heed to place.

State politics and infrastructural transformation on the ground

My starting point for conducting ethnographic research on roads grew from an attempt to think about the presence of the state in a small Andean town, where people consistently complained that they had been abandoned and

2 These ideas are drawn from 'Introduction: Infrastructural Complications' in Harvey et al. 2017.



forgotten by successive governments (see Harvey 2005). Here connectivity was not taken for granted, and the road was a focal point for local disquiet. The traffic from the highland city of Cusco to the lowlands of the Amazon basin was relatively frequent. The road had become an important regional trade route, and it gave some of the larger roadside settlements the status of market towns, able to provision both a wider hinterland and the steady stream of passengers who broke their journeys in need of food and accommodation. However, the compacted earth road was also quite lethal. Accidents were common as were the small roadside crosses and shrines that marked where travellers had died. Journeys were always unpredictable. Landslides and floods frequently left people stranded, sometimes unable to continue for days on end. Local people longed for an improved road and campaigned hard. Eventually, diverse interests aligned sufficiently for funds to be forthcoming. This forgotten corner of Peru was to receive a new highway. The parameters of connectivity and circulation expanded. No longer limited to the link between highlands and lowlands within a national territory, the road had been incorporated into a more extensive international imaginary. It was set to become a section of an international 'Interoceanic Highway', built to foster the flow of goods from the booming economy of Brazil to the growing markets of Asia (see Harvey and Knox 2015). This imaginary of transoceanic connection was expressed in a surprising road sign that went up at the junction where the new road forked off the existing paved highway just outside Cusco, high in the Peruvian Andes. Among other more local destinations the sign indicated that the city of São Paulo was 4601 kilometres away! São Paulo, one of the largest cities in the world is a place that nobody was ever going to travel to via this route – except perhaps the occasional backpacker with the time to spare. The Brazilian engineers working on the project frequently travelled back to their homes and offices on the east coast of Brazil, but they would always fly. The sign suggested a link to a destination that bore no relevance to the experience or the aspirations of travellers who passed by on their journeys. It marked a claim to an imaginary connection. It could just as well have marked the distance to Paris or London.

Despite the existence of this and other unlikely claims, local people were delighted by the prospect of this road, and in many ways it met their expectations. The construction process was disruptive but there were good employment possibilities. It was clear that some stood to gain more than others and there were anxious struggles over routing, and competition for access to jobs, and to the money distributed across the provisioning supply chain. The macroeconomic promise of the road was



not delivered. A limited budget had compromised the choices of route and the quality of the surface. The road that emerged was too slow, steep and winding to serve the needs of major international traders. It was also not sufficiently robust to withstand the harsh climate of the high altitudes, the shifting watery ecologies of the Amazon basin, or the seismic activity of the eastern slopes of the Andes. Furthermore, major corruption scandals subsequently revealed that this road had primarily served as a source of financial extraction. It was not surprising that the rhetorical promise of modernization through the facilitation of international connectivity was never materialized.

Nevertheless, the road did produce significant social transformation that came about through the changing proximity of rural settlements to urban centres. The new asphalt surface made it possible to travel in cars rather than trucks or SUVs. Transport ownership changed and collective taxis and buses began to shuttle people between the city and the rural areas. With journey times dramatically reduced people became more oriented to urban services, particularly the medical and educational possibilities. These movements redistributed populations and reoriented lifestyles. In the 1980s the large landowners with good connections to regional centres of power still controlled the local economy and the political offices. With the arrival of this new asphalted road they began to move away from the rural towns to live in the cities. They kept their lands but ceded local administrative power to a newly educated generation, familiar with urban institutions and keen to exploit the new economic opportunities that the road afforded. Electricity and mobile telephony had accompanied the road, and people from across the wider hinterland were drawn to the attractions of engineered environments. The town of Ocongate where I had lived over many years expanded rapidly and people joked that it had become 'Hong Kongate'. For many, however, life became more precarious. The changing spatial and temporal dynamics rearranged the relative advantage of different settlements. Small producers struggled to compete with the wholesale prices of urban markets. Small traders found that passengers no longer needed the services of a roadside town as journey times shrank. Roads offered possibilities, particularly for those who had capital to invest in vehicles, in stock for smarter shops, restaurants or petrol stations. Otherwise opportunities were haphazard and unevenly distributed. Livelihoods were realigned to urban values at a time when climate change further amplified the precarity of the rural poor. Are these inevitable outcomes? Perhaps. But they are not the only outcomes. There are many ways in which roads produce modes of engagement that can lead to the erasure of a sense of place, but it is also important to attend

to the ways in which roads can also provide a degree of common ground for social life and social organization.

On territory and circulation

As I began to explore roads as sites from which to think ethnographically about the nature of state presence, I recalled the centrality of Radcliffe-Brown's insistence that while states do not exist in the phenomenal world (1948: xxiii), territorial structures are of critical significance to the study of political organization.

Every human society has some sort of territorial structure. We can find clearly-defined local communities the smallest of which are linked together in a larger society, of which they are segments. This territorial structure provides the framework, not only for the political organisation, whatever it may be, but for other forms of social organisation also, such as the economic, for example. [...] In studying political organisation, we have to deal with the maintenance or establishment of social order, within a territorial framework, by the organised exercise of coercive authority through the use, or the possibility of use, of physical force. (Radcliffe-Brown. 1948: xiv)

Both the Belt and Road Initiative and the Interoceanic Highway can clearly be understood as emerging from and thus reproducing dominant forms of political organization – national states, regional administrations, local towns. At the same time, roads also reveal the effort it takes to sustain the integrity of territorial structures, because they do not stop at the borders. This visible effort suggests that such territorial structures only ever operate as partial and permeable frameworks. Roads are indeed frequently built in an attempt to integrate territory but they are also simultaneously used to disrupt and transform existing lines of political influence and control. In this respect roads both order and disorder territorial structures, as many of the contributions to this volume emphasize. Indeed, under conditions of neoliberal financing that exploit public assets for private accumulation in the name of 'progress', roads are key instruments of modes of governance that reference territory but are not bound by territory.

In our ethnographic study of the Interoceanic Highway (Harvey and Knox 2015), we learned of the multiple agendas that brought this road into being. We also unearthed the diverse forms that a long-held ideological



commitment to the creation of trade routes with global reach had taken over the years. Alongside the territorializing rhetoric that conjured the image of roads as the means to enhance a national capacity to trade effectively with other nations, the road was also clearly a site of diverse speculative investments. These investments reframed territories as either more local, or far more extensive, than the national framework acknowledged. For example, there were squatter settlements where people gathered in the hope of finding work, of establishing eligibility for compensation, or best of all, for rehousing once the road appeared. These modes of speculative investment in anticipation of displacement and subsequent compensation have been beautifully described by Jeremy Campbell in his work on a highway yet to be built in the Brazilian Amazon (Campbell 2015). Widespread falsification of land titles here has led to a situation where far more land is 'legally' registered than actually exists. The possibility of a road has granted some the space to settle, for a while at least. But it is not only the poor who speculate on roads. Large construction companies aligned to ministries of state pay handsomely for lucrative contracts. Roads are built with public money, ostensibly to serve the public good. They are also the means to secure personal fortunes and private gain at all levels of the construction process. People commonly assumed that transactions in the shadow economy of large construction projects shaped access to decision makers, to materials and machinery, and to legal permissions. The rumours of endemic corruption are occasionally substantiated in high profile court cases. The fall out from the Interoceanic Highway project included the aftershocks of the indictment of the lead construction company, Odebrecht, a Brazilian organization that was found guilty of corruption and collusion with officials at the highest level of government in both Brazil and Peru.

The bordering effects of roads

The ethnography of roads had led us to an understanding of state power as both personal and institutional, with both territorializing and de-territorializing ambitions, materialized in a complex meshwork of local, national and international relations. This tension between the containment of territory and the encouragement of flow brings the importance of borders to the fore. Roads are used to produce a huge range of bordering effects, as a consequence of the ways in which they cut through otherwise continuous territory (marking a differentiated physical space) and create corridors



of differentiated movement through the enforcement of exclusionary mechanisms.

The geopolitical landscapes of South Asia are dominated by the powerful territorial state influence of India and China. But these states invest in competing vectors of circulation, with the effect that a peripheral Chinese settlement might find itself more oriented to Indian centres than to Chinese ones (see Yi Huang, this volume). Imperial histories randomly produced the borders that now ground everyday life in important respects, shaping the direction that goods and taxes flow, the languages that people speak, the source of engineering expertise and the intersection of diverse modes of authority. So too in Latin America where the circulations of goods and persons also respond to wider geopolitical arrangements, with the US looming large not only in the financing arrangements, but in the bordering practices that open and close the flow of money, of labour, of drugs, of migrants, under a fluctuating and partial regime of international surveillance. The histories of roads register these fluctuations of bordering and of marginalization and the intersections of global, national, and local forces, of human design and ecological response. On the ground, at the local scale, they are also concrete sites of differentiation. Contributors to this volume describe the uneven distribution of risk, the varied experiences and modes of travel that equate to differences of status even within a single vehicle, the punctuated rhythms of journeys, the differentiations that determine who gets to stop where and why, and who chooses to continue. These are the complex intersecting rhythms of movement and stasis, of progress and delay.

The notion that modern road networks facilitate trade, by enhancing the flow of goods and money, pays insufficient attention to the ways that roads depend on 'friction' beyond that of the vehicles on the tarmac surface.³ Borders are the foundational expression of a managed territory. Roads are used to strengthen borders because they channel flows, they make the circulation of persons and goods more legible, and they can be policed. Nevertheless, borders are also always porous, even those that are highly militarized. The ways in which roads support and/or subvert border regimes are a key dimension of territorial politics in spaces of neoliberal governance. They are the valves that open and close the flow. Bordering devices accompany most claims to territory and the counterclaims that challenge the authority of political control. Thus, while agents of the state

3 A point that Anna Tsing (2004) emphasizes in her work on conceptual productivity of 'friction' as a generative force.



control populations by the use of many different kinds of roadblocks (from traffic lights to physical barriers), those who seek to challenge or question the authority of state agents also turn to roadblocks as an effective means of appropriating the capacity to control the flow. Whether deployed as modes of legal protest, or as criminal acts of intimidation or theft, these unofficial bordering devices reveal the importance of the ability to display the capacity to control the flows of goods and persons. Crucially, it is not only state forces that have this capacity.

Given the ubiquity of bordering devices, most road users expect friction, and there are skills to travelling acquired when needed by those who have learned how to circumvent barriers and checkpoints. Roads are experienced as sites of encounter and circumvention, as well as dangerous spaces. In the years of the war with Shining Path (from 1980 to the mid-1990s), journeys in Peru involved running a terrifying gauntlet of army checkpoints. Those without documents were always in danger of being arrested and detained as terrorists. The drivers would anticipate the checkpoints and stop to let people jump off the trucks and run around behind the police posts to join again further along the road. Those with papers would stay aboard. Attention to bordering devices matters because they shed light on the fluctuating rhythms of politics and capitalism as registered in the bodies of those who travel, in the state of the surfaces, in the speed of movement, in the periods of waiting.

Thinking with roads

This volume invites us to think with roads in order to attend to the hierarchies that are both reproduced and challenged as large construction projects arrive and inevitably reconfigure the places through which they pass. Ethnographic analysis allows for a focus on the diverse qualities and dynamics of specific places, perhaps allowing a glimpse of the possibilities as well as the constraints that a focus on roads brings into view. Attention to relational histories also allows for an expansive investigation about what belonging to a territory entails.

Roads produce unlikely collaborations, of engineering, finance, politics, manual labour, machinery, materials and all manner of 'disruptions' as the common purpose of a contained construction 'project', at whatever scale, will also bring forth specific and incompatible interests. But even as they emerge and fail in so many ways to deliver the promised future, roads also and always become the ground on which people, machines and animals



move, or simply wait as others come and go. A road, like any track, is a space that is differentiated from its surroundings in underdetermined ways. A road is a marker of difference. What matters are the differences that are marked, and what people make of that difference. For example, a stretch of tarmac can mark the change from a rough to a smooth surface, making it possible to move at more accelerated speeds. But roads can be travelled slowly, too; they can become spaces of stillness for those who are watching, or waiting, or finding themselves left behind. What these engineered spaces become and for whom is integral to their fascination.

Whether surfaces are repaired or not, modified by design or by neglect, they are also always 'unfinished' sites. In the world of the pandemic, of climate change, and the Anthropocene, where the category of the human is unsettled by other intelligences and other grounds for existence, might there be reconciliations that particular kinds of roads can provide? Highways as demarcated surfaces also produce the verges, the places ignored and left behind by those who rush by.

In Latin America roads excite passion and have what appears to be an almost unique capacity to draw people together in the expectation of a particular mode of connectivity from which everybody can benefit. Unlike a railway, a tram, underground pipes or overground cables, the road remakes the ground on which anybody can tread. The ground may or may not be policed but it can, at times, be appropriated even as it reveals the highly uneven terms of such inclusion. I am particularly drawn to the spaces that roads become when circulation stops. Projects in suspension become intriguing sites to visit, resonant with memories of past promises. Closed roads produce accessible public spaces for marches, rituals and ceremonies.

Latour refers to the 'critical zone' of the Earth, to draw attention to the fragile and threatened material relations that are the uncared-for source of life on this planet. His plea is also a call for awareness of the urgent need to create more 'common ground'. Belonging to a territory in this respect is not primarily a political ordering – although political action is desperately needed. Belonging is an affective relationship to the ground, an acknowledgement of its value. In Peru rural people make offerings to forces of the Earth as they set off on journeys. They also draw these forces into their lives when they build the foundations of a house, and when they construct roads. A curiosity as to what roads make possible and what they prevent, what they make flourish and what they kill, is a curiosity about the relational capacities of infrastructural formations, a move to further understanding of how relational possibilities can support the redescription of what 'belonging to a territory' entails.



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