

An Anthropology of the Road

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When I first went to conduct fieldwork in Albania my idea was not to study roads but rather the things that travel on them. Especially my PhD was to be about the material culture of Albanian migration. The possessions people take back and forth between the location of their migratory destination, and the place of their birth. A major part of my thesis will still be concerned with the house and home as part of a larger study of transnationalism, migration and material culture. Yet as time went on, and in particular when I started to write up my field material I realized that actually what was just as interesting was the infrastructure behind this, more especially roads and highways. Roads are dynamic, both materially and culturally, and proved so fruitful analytically that it would probably now be possible to produce a doctoral thesis solely in reference to roads, traffic and their infrastructure, which cross the southern Albanian borders to Greece.

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~~Although roads and arranged routes are very old and basic things, as old and basic as clothes,~~
houses or tools and other material culture objects of study; anthropological discourse seems to neglect them. Even though there is a growing literature on the car and other vehicles, after long bibliographical research I have been disappointed to find that there are no more than three ethnographic books which seems to relate to roads per se, besides a fistful of (printed) articles or book chapters, written by anthropologists. This is striking for such a significant and so extremely regular object as roads. There is not a day that you leave your home and you do not come into direct visual or tangible contact with a type of road; you, or your shoes, or the vehicle that you ride. Yet there are a number of specific issues regarding the roads which made those in Albania so interesting. Firstly, their usage, Albania is probably the country with the proportionally largest migratory population in Europe (approximately one third of Albanian passport holders lives abroad today), and migration means mobility, and mobility means mostly roads. Secondly, is the political and social biography of traffic infrastructure in Albania. Vehicular roads in Albania have a complex spatial production, initially introduced by foreign armies during First World War. They went through a period of 45 years when private vehicles were forbidden, while people had to build them with forced labour, and now are being constructed within international development programmes. Roads were important to the political economy, political ideology of socialism, but equally to the contemporary context of Albania, international aid and the EU. Thirdly, there is the inspiration that these ideologically and individually charged spaces of mobility offer to the imagination of the people, who live around them and use them every day. In particular there sense of welcome and threat as to what roads may bring and what may leave. Fourthly, there is the landscape per se where these roads lie and the transformations that land and territory are undergoing since the political transition started. Finally, roads connect with the history of the sealed state borders which opened in 1990, almost suddenly, which together with the cross-border roads brings and takes away human beings and objects.

For all these reasons I expect my work to be increasingly 'driven by roads'. I would be very interested to hear of others working on a similar topic or who can suggest any relevant and worthwhile literature.