

Chapter Eight

Roads and the politics of thought: Climate in India, democracy in Nepal

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Key words:

India; Nepal; Reunion; democracy; environment; methodology

Abstract

The chapter presents the politics of thought as an analytical terrain through which to broach the themes at the heart of this volume: the inadvertent role of roads in reproducing and generating hierarchy, class inequality, and social disruption. In bringing together two major research projects led by the authors, we illustrate how roads have been engaged through critical social sciences as an epistemological as well as a material vector of change. By outlining methodological and conceptual approaches to large road and infrastructure projects in South Asia, we show how *ideas build roads*. The chapter draws attention to frequently overlooked aspects of road construction – such as how future environmental impacts are routinely ignored in the political processes and construction practices that constitute the making of roads.

Introduction

This chapter brings together two major research projects led respectively by Edward Simpson and Katharine Rankin: 'Roads and the Politics of Thought: Ethnographic Approaches to Infrastructure Development in South Asia'¹ and 'Infrastructures of Democracy: State Building as Everyday Practice in Nepal's Agrarian Districts'.² Simpson is an anthropologist, whose UK-based collaborative project worked comparatively across South Asia, but the contribution here is written with India centrally in mind. Rankin is a geographer trained in anthropology and planning, whose project works in partnership with Nepal- and Canada-based researchers and collaborators to explore road development in vernacular terms.

¹ This project is funded by the European Research Council (616393). At SOAS, I am grateful to my colleague Marloes Janson and to those who worked on the project: Shaina Anand, Ilona Bowyer, Julia Brodacki, Carolyn Charlton, Khalid Chauhan, Srinivas Chokkakula, Niamh Collard, Sanjukta Ghosh, Liz Hingley, Laura Jeffery, Mustafa Khan, Luke Heslop, Debbie Menezes, Nicole Roughton, Kanchana Ruwanpura and Ashok Sukumaran. Views and errors in this chapter are mine (Simpson).

² This project is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC Grant no. 435-2014-1883, 2014-2020). The current project is being undertaken collaboratively with Pushpa Hamal, Elsie Lewison, Shyam Kunwar, Lagan Rai, Sara Shneiderman and Tulasi Sigdel. Community-based researchers have also contributed data and reflections; they are Durga Hasta, Samjhana Nepali, Yaman Sardar and Shanta Thapa. The chapter was vetted with core team members, and the errors are mine (Rankin).

We start by considering how roads have been engaged through critical social sciences as a key vector of change, epistemological as much as material, before moving to discuss the key theoretical and practical aims of the research projects. The projects are centrally concerned with the overarching themes of this volume, namely the inadvertent role of roads in reproducing and generating hierarchy, class inequality, and social disruption; uneven experiences of road development amongst the people in its midst; and the articulation of road building with state building and sociopolitical and geopolitical relations. The projects consolidate around the politics of thought as an analytical terrain through which to broach these themes. Like the material and human resources as well as governance processes that build roads, ideas can be understood to constitute infrastructures upon which roads are built. Both projects used ethnographically oriented comparative methodology and treat ideas and politics in broad registers of culture and power in addition to political parties and the institutions of democracy. Among the projects' key findings, the chapter identifies climate change as an example of critical, globally significant issues that come into view and demand political attention when roads are engaged as a politics of thought. We specify the distinctive ways within South Asia that road building leads to an imperative to broach matters of environmental sustainability, as well as take stock of its implication in processes of uneven development.

Together the projects build an expansive understanding of political thought and make a case for careful investigation of how *ideas build roads*. Simpson's project focuses on planners, engineers and governments, and the office as a key site of knowledge production; he is concerned primarily with large-scale highway-building projects. Rankin's project orients to a farther-flung 'field' in order to encompass other agents of knowledge production – labourers, local contractors, and the cultural-political imaginaries of people in rural areas where smaller-scale but equally transformative motorable tracks (known as 'rural' or 'agricultural' roads) multiply at a staggering pace, with the aim of 'connecting' regions perceived as 'remote' relative to centres of governance and commerce. It is our hope that the considerations and insights arising from these long-term, collaborative investigations can serve as a frame and overview for the work discussed in other chapters of the volume (for example, Khan, Heslop and Jeffery, Huang, and Gohain can be read in relation to 'Roads and the Politics of Thought' and Sarma as well as Murton and Sigdel in relation to 'Infrastructures of Democracy').

Roads through the critical social sciences

The arrival and expansion of roads changes the ways in which space and time are conceived. The Romans famously saw roads as key to the growth and control of their empire, an idea suggestive of broad civilizing powers. In England of the eighteenth century, it was commonly thought that roads reduced the incidence of witchcraft. In the colonial nineteenth century, the road was considered the first change a 'rude country' must undertake to pass from poverty and barbarism. Roads recursively are forged by and bring with them ideas, politics, and ways of seeing. Roads, as the chapters of this volume have shown, structure and are structured by human relationships and geographies in particular ways, ways which are not 'natural' or given but made.

Several clusters of critical roads scholarship are discernable and have a bearing on how we have conceived the politics of thought in our respective work. Historians of colonialism have looked at the ways in which roads intersect with power and control. Road building was often instrumental in the formation of colonial knowledge and cultural systems (e.g. Mrázek

2002; Ahuja 2004). Roads allowed the passage of goods, troops and bureaucrats, and they also allowed the land and its people to be imagined and experienced in particular ways (e.g. as a vector of linguistic change). They also manifest some of the inconsistencies and uncertainties in the colonial project (Sinha 2012). Non-colonized states like Nepal engaged roads to thwart colonial incursion, building selectively on the interior but eschewing linkage across borders (Leichty 1997; Whelpton 1983, 2005; Rankin et al. 2017).

The anthropological literature on roads and infrastructure is not vast, but uncommonly high in its qualities. It regards roads as potent sites of meaning and culture in which ideas such as hope and desire, fear and danger (e.g. Khan 2006), spirituality and witchcraft (Klaeger 2009; Masquelier 2002), nationalism and hatred (Dalakoglou 2012) are brought into sharp relief. Roads variously divide or shape communities; represent either the state or modernity; reflect the end of traditional ways of doing things by marking the onslaught of commodity fetishism (Mostowlansky 2011; Trankell 1993). Roads alter the shape of things and have qualities all of their own which exist outside the materials of their construction. In the anthropological work, we can clearly see the relationships between road building and power and control. While the witches of the road highlight an uneasy relationship to modernity, we can also see how roads become the sites through which history is made, notions of citizenship are forged, and where capitalism operates in its most extreme and enchanting forms. Roads cease to be anodyne or the neutral means to a destination. Rather, roads become artefacts of culture and politics, mediums of change and hope, and vehicles of state building, liberation, and oppression. Roads tie construction to notions of religion, time, and agency.

We have also been inspired by the ways that anthropologists have shown how power and ideas intersect with the compulsions and principles of bureaucracy and governance. Well known are Scott (1999), Ferguson (1990), and Li (2007) as well as Mosse (2004). In *Cultivating Development*, Mosse shows how distinct organizational cultures work to legitimate their own forms of knowledge practice in development contexts. Institutions inform what can be known about their activity through the use of language, aims and objectives and by existing in particular relations to other institutions.³ Of particular significance for our purposes, Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox (2015) move the focus of the discussion towards cultures and language of engineering and bureaucracy, as well as the life worlds and thoughts of those who live in and along the new roads. In their work, we see how different perspectives and approaches to the world come together to produce direct and concrete action, however unlikely that might at times appear. Their scholarship has directly contributed to the critical theorization of infrastructure, the role of culture in the cost-benefit analysis of roads, the desire for connectivity, and roads as a form of contemporary governance. Harvey and Knox move to the methods of engineers and planners in emphasizing the unruly character of nature in their discourses and in their work to control nature. In this concluding chapter we follow this approach, to take stock of some of the ways the ideas of those who build roads, including the perspectives not only of planners and engineers, but also of local contractors and labourers. Like many of the contributors to this volume, we ask, *What do the road builders believe they are doing when they build a road?*

³ Similarly, Didier Fassin (2012) has examined the political use of compassion in international humanitarianism, showing how unquestioned words and ideas are at the heart of how we think about global injustice and moral hierarchy.

In a general sense, road building has historical, cultural, and political momentum of its own. Following a different tradition of critical transport history, a new generation of economic and cultural historians of twentieth-century Europe have written wonderful and inspiring books about roads. Schipper (2009) has described how road building was central to the development of the European Union in the twentieth century: 'infrastructural Europeanism'. Zeller (2007) has shown how in Germany the National Socialists attempted to use autobahns as pathways to nature and to further their nationalist vision. Moran (2009) has traced the development of the motorway network in the United Kingdom, arguing, amongst other things, that the semiotics and fonts of Britain's roads were used to distinguish the country from its hierarchical Victorian past and the politics of continental Europe. Merriman (2007) has looked at the history of Britain's M1 motorway, paying particular attention to the subaltern dimensions of its construction and social life. There are many books written by engineers on roads which document the relationship with their craft and political and social ideas of the moment (e.g. Baldwin and Baldwin 2004). They show how fashions quickly change and how plans for building roads that in the 1970s looked like the future are seen as regressive and even foolish a decade later. We draw inspiration from this literature as accounts of power, culture, history and affect, alongside the anthropological interventions discussed above.

By both design and effect, roads are built for both improvement and obsolescence. Road building passes through technological phases and financial fashions. Roads are built because of the continued appeal of the story of individual freedom and movement and the grand narratives of modernization and progress. Roads are built because some people may think there is a need for them, to improve traffic flow, to temporarily reduce congestion, to bypass somewhere, to pass through somewhere else, to reduce the unit cost of transport. New roads may replace older and poorly maintained roads – roads always need costly maintenance. Other people may build roads to bring civilization to a rude country, to bring producers closer to a market, a village closer to a highway, a port closer to a city, or an army closer to a site of potential conflict ('closer' here means in time and with oil). Some people believe that roads bring peace; others think roads bring trouble (see Sarma, this volume). Roads may be part of an attempt to establish a democratic utopia or a society based on class inequality (see Gohain, this volume). Some may build roads to add further lustre to their achievements (see Huang, this volume). Others may build roads because they were passed plans and instruction to do so. Many build roads for investment, seeing profits in tolls, kickbacks, rising land prices, and the corruption of land-acquisition orders or construction contracts (see Khan, this volume). Road building is thus a deeply political act, with historical drag and the profound influence of political ideas about individuals and societies.

In South Asia, road building has entered a new historical phase characterized by intensity and scale and the global reach of many of those involved. Deregulation is allowing, indeed encouraging, non-sovereign actors to influence the direction and spread of new roads (see Murton and Sigdel, this volume). Road building in today's South Asia involves chains and layers of organizations and subcontracts (see Heslop 2020). A large and under-examined part of building a road takes place in offices, in meeting rooms, and on paper. Engineering the landscape and laying the tarmac can be a relatively swift process in comparison, and certainly one that is more visible to critical scholarship. Knowledge and control of current road-building practices belong to a long list of interest groups in a wide range of locations. Many of these organizations have their own philosophical traditions,

epistemologies, languages, and specific institutional aims and objectives. Financers, planners, engineers, contractors, labourers, and road lobbyists, for example, see themselves and their duties very differently in road building.

These are our road builders. The work in colonial history, anthropology of infrastructure, and critical transport history exemplifies how and why an ethnographic approach is well suited to understand the cultures of international organizations and road-building practices, and how different ideas about road building come together to make roads happen. They show how objects at the centre of an institution's discourse (development, humanitarianism – or roads) come to be clothed in particular enchanted ways of understanding; they show how such understandings have histories, which are held in place by identifiable individual and collective relationships; they are also able to trace how discourses about particular objects may shift through time and space and between relationships. They also show how the 'distributed cognition' (Hutchins 1996) or the division of labour between organizations tends to mean that there is no one with an overview. In different ways, our research set out to chase an overview, one that was, however, always disappearing round the next bend in the road because of the scale and complexity of our questions.

Road-building projects

Our projects share an interest in the infrastructure of ideas and underlying politics of thought that build roads. Simpson's project on 'Roads and the Politics of Thought' aimed directly to look at the interface between climate change discourse and policy and road building across South Asia. In South Asia, there is a great deal of institutional work being done on climate change, which happens in parallel but with no connection to road-building projects. In many parts of South Asia roads have become integral to the world – yet are seldom spared a thought other than as barometers of 'development' and 'government efficiency'. Consequently, it has been intellectually, institutionally, and morally difficult to link roads – as a way of organizing social, economic, and political life – to carbon politics and climate change. This difficulty has been compounded by the fact that over the last few decades, mobility has been promoted as the panacea for economic and political woes and these ideas have enormous institutional and popular momentum. These developments often take place as if there is no need to reduce carbon emissions in an era of global warming, although many of the same institutions that promote roads also have divisions dedicated to carbon reduction and climate change awareness. The chapter attends to two critical junctures in the articulation of roads research – the first identifying an imperative to attend to the politics of thought, and the second pointing to an imperative to interrogate road politics in relation to carbon politics.

Rankin's project, 'Infrastructures of Democracy', has focused on democratic transition in Nepal in relation to roads. While undertaking exploratory research on the meaning and practices of 'democracy' in rural areas of Nepal following the decade-long Maoist insurgency and civil war, and the subsequent institution of a multiparty democratic (and ultimately federal) republic, roads were continuously articulated as key sites of protest, claims making, profit, and territorial control. Post-conflict, these colliding claims manifested in a veritable frenzy of rural road building – sometimes dubbed a form of 'dozer terrorism' (Paudel 2018). Rapid track opening aimed at diminishing 'remoteness' sits in contradictory relation to a parallel, donor-led push to pursue 'green approaches' to infrastructure development aimed at achieving the twin goals of social and environmental sustainability. Given the stakes for

governance and local claims, roads thus offer frameworks for probing the ‘infrastructures of democracy’ – the contested physical infrastructures underpinning state reconstruction, as well as the social and political infrastructures governing everyday life and claims for democracy. The chapter illustrates these frameworks first by considering several conjunctures, or ‘regimes of territorialization’, within which distinctive ideational formations emerged to shape the building of roads. It subsequently explores how the idea of ‘green roads’ in the current conjuncture articulates long-standing aspirations for modernization, political power, and economic development on the ground.

Roads and the politics of thought: Ethnographic approaches to infrastructure development in South Asia

In the briefest terms possible, this project has traced how roads have been produced historically by governments as metaphors and monuments for control and progress. In the twentieth century, roads were entwined with nationalist projects with their own institutions and peculiarities and embedded in popular political consciousness. In the twenty-first century, roads have been given to the market and ‘off shored’ as engineering spectacles and, as an asset class, roads now allow money to move as well as vehicles.

The historical and institutional history research we undertook compellingly showed how roads became an integral part of South Asian political thought.⁴ We then ‘collided’ this material with climate change agendas. The importance of this move is demonstrated by two ‘facts’ derived from research with international road builders, mostly in consultancy firms and government departments concerned with ‘development’ elsewhere. First, road transport produces around a quarter of global carbon emissions (World Bank 2017). Carbon emissions continue to rise despite decades of negotiation conducted on the assumption that the globe is warming and the effects will be catastrophic (IPCC 2018). Second, planners and infrastructure specialists assume that new roads produce more traffic, rather than easing congestion in the longer term. New roads therefore have multiplier effects on mobility and on future carbon consumption. It is therefore salutary to learn that globally 25 million kilometres of new roads are anticipated by 2050 and that while it took a century to get the first billion vehicles on the road, the second billion will take a decade.

In India, the current targets set by the national government are 130 km of rural road and 50 km of four-lane highway every day. It might seem incredible, but no one is thinking through road building in a prognostic and anticipatory fashion. In India, recently there have been some attempts to work out the carbon costs of building a road; but there is no mechanism or apparent will to think through the future implications of carbon consumption through silent multiplier effects.⁵ Although this oversight is easy to point out, it took a few years of research to reach this conclusion. The following section outlines some of the steps taken in the research with a focus on one particular strand of the overall project.

In India, there is a massive and highly publicized rural road-building scheme called PMGSY (Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana or the Prime Minister’s Village Road-Building

⁴ In this and the subsequent section, ‘we’ refers to the members of the two project teams; elsewhere, ‘we’ references co-authors Rankin and Simpson.

⁵ When the project started in 2015 there was no literature. In the August 2019 edition of the *Indian Highways*, a publication from Indian Roads Congress, the editor noted in reference to India’s commitment to Conference of Parties (COP-21) that: ‘At present, there is no such system that can quantify the environmental footprint of upcoming and ongoing projects’ (Nirmal 2019: 4-5).

Scheme). This scheme claims to have added half a million miles of new rural road to the network since the turn of the century. The aim was to 'connect' tens of thousands of 'habitations' (a term used to include sub-settlements within entities classified as 'villages' in census data) to 'all-weather' or 'black-topped and asphaltic roads'.

Prolonged fieldwork with road men and bureaucrats within their institutions and pages of reports indicates that there is jubilation and pride in the structure and achievements of the programme. All this energy and enthusiasm notwithstanding, we were curious – given the size and certainty of the programme – as to why there was so little writing about PMGSY, particularly as the scheme has a budget of US\$50 billion. Among the road men, we met with blank faces when trying to talk critically about PMGSY. The scheme was 'non-controversial' – many of these men asked, *What is wrong with building roads in rural areas?* Often, the language that came back mirrored the words used by the promoters of PMGSY, particularly the idea of 'connectivity'. We were dealing with truth so self-evident that otherwise critical minds did not see a question in the idea, at least in the way it was packaged as a particular form of claims and data. Building roads was progress, meaningful development, and an obvious priority in India. Srinivas Chokkakula, who was leading on this strand of the research, asked around among academic colleagues in Delhi for their response to the question as to why there was no critical debate about PMGSY. Memorably, he received a reply from a colleague: 'The uncritical responses may be due to the belief across the board, there is no counterfactual to building rural roads.'

The powerful phrase, 'no counterfactual' stuck with the project and we have used it often in our discussions as shorthand for how deeply embedded roads have become in popular thought in India. There are lots of shades of opinion in India which revolve around the varying role and responsibilities of the state, ideas of welfare, and market forces. Among the experts, there are also differences of opinion about network modelling and efficiency in road networks. However, the broader question of whether roads are the best way forward is not one that can be meaningfully discussed in the present climate, where the government is stepping back from welfarism and providing roads, electricity, and water as a way of facilitating 'choice' among the electorate.

Simpson's project hosted a number of roundtables in India to discuss the pros and cons of road building with a range of practitioners and professionals. In these fora, too, the evidence discussed was equivocal and unconvincing and the statistics or sample sizes questionable. Often the claims made by road builders were assertions rather than evidence backed. It seemed as if there was no counterfactual because the history of the twentieth century had put road building at the heart of a nationalist project. The institutions and language of government had developed to focus on road building as a priority and as a gauge of its own success. The provision of roads had become as fundamental as health provision or education had been in previous decades.

Notions of development – as a rhetorical and strategic priority – and the centrality of the road to nation-building in India mean that there is little counter thinking. Therefore, to make the connection between roads and climate change in the offices of roadmen was often a matter of diplomatic hazard. In such environments, road building was an unquestioned imperative, national service almost. Climate change suggested the need to reduce carbon emissions. First, quite often, road builders did not see their work as being relevant to carbon reduction. Roads were generally not seen as polluting forms of activity; when they were, their self-evident need outweighed the cost of carbon emission. Some road builders suggested that to associate road construction in India with climate change was

an example of neocolonial thought: a way of keeping India undeveloped and therefore less powerful in the world. This was until quite recently also India's position in international climate talks. At home, climate change remains a 'non-issue' in electoral politics (Dubash 2012). Internationally, India has consistently argued that the North and South have different responsibilities and obligations. In line with the international stance, the domestic focus has been on economic growth as a developmental ethos.

The project's way out of this impasse was to conduct research elsewhere, in this instance, the French island of Reunion, where climate change and road building have been hotly debated for two decades as a way of generating a counterfactual narrative. In that field location, Simpson looked at cars, roads, and climate thought on the island. The material again shows how roads have been produced historically by the French state as monuments to colonial domination over unruly nature and civilizational progress. However, here, in the late twentieth century, resistance to nationalist control and the presentation of an alternative to roads and cars was built on separatist, environmental, and leftist politics. In the context of a small island, positions on climate change responsibility became inseparable from competitive dynastic rivalries and therefore part of the reproduction of the social order rather than the catalyst for a radical new direction. The planned construction of a yet another new road, this time on a massive bridge out at sea parallel to the coast and high above the rising waters of the ocean, gives historical legitimacy to the recent political success of the centre right and firmly sediments French power in the post-colony. The material shows how climate change thinking becomes part of everyday struggles and concerns and carries with it the potential for metamorphosis as the relation between road infrastructure and climate change is reconfigured through argument and bitter contestation. In India, things are how they are, but they are not like that everywhere.

In Reunion, there is a struggle between political left and political right over the relation between human action and climate change. In short, the left wanted to end the hegemony of the car and the road as a way of life by introducing collective forms of transport such as trams. The winning right wanted roads that were adapted to climate change – built higher above the sea – so that business could continue as usual. In India, there is a struggle to determine if the state or the market should provide – but there is less disagreement about what should be provided, as roads remain beyond question. In some parts of the world, the feeling is now that we are rapidly heading towards climate extinction, while in other parts of the world this remains a 'non-issue'.

Infrastructures of democracy: State building as everyday practice in Nepal's agrarian districts

The link between democracy and roads emerged in the late 2000s when Rankin had begun working with colleagues Pushpa Hamal and Tulasi Sigdel in Nepal and Andrea Nightingale at the University of Edinburgh. We had been motivated by the sense of optimism that seemed to characterize the period of political restructuring immediately following the Comprehensive Peace Accord (2006) that ended the Nepalese Civil War, and particularly the commitments to redistributive justice that were being articulated by the Unified Communist Party of Nepal, the *janjati* (indigenous ethnic population), and other social movements in the context of a hard-won state-restructuring process. But we also could see like everyone else that despite the Maoists' ambitions to bring their revolutionary struggle within the ambit of liberal political institutions, the so-called 'post-conflict' period was already wracked with political stalemate. In this context, it seemed to us that subnational scales of

governance were an important place to look for interesting political openings, as well as regressive closures.

The late 2000s was, in fact, an extraordinary moment in terms of local governance – there was no national constitution, no elected local government, and at the same time, a major decentralization of financial resources and governing authority, following on the mandate of the Local Self-Governance Act (1999). The latter had designated infrastructure as one of four key service sectors that would be devolved to the local state, supported by the requisite budgetary transfers. An ‘all-party mechanism’ had been designated to formalize local bureaucrats’ informal practice of consulting with local political party leaders in the exercise of local governance.⁶ Under these circumstances – decentralization plus an ad hoc local governance mechanism premised on the possibility of political consensus across multiple interests – the district (*jilla*) had become important to a range of actors: donors who want to bypass the dysfunctional national state and ‘partner’ with local community-based organizations; NGOs and consultants burgeoning to conduct the business of ‘social mobilization’ and programme monitoring and evaluation; party leaders who were finding that in the absence of viable national party organizations, authority derives from a capacity to collaborate with others to actually plan and get things done; and a politicized population recognizing that making claims on the planning function of the local state is the way to express a sense of entitlement to inclusion and citizenship (Rankin et al. 2018). Our work sought to develop an approach to determining what kinds of polities are being built from the ground up through everyday governance practices of these colliding interests.

What we did not anticipate was how this framework would lead to roads as a central topic of subsequent research (which consolidated as the ‘Infrastructures of Democracy’ project). The topical focus on roads derived foremost from the observations of Hamal and Sigdel in Mugu District of the Karnali Region in 2010. A national strategic road, the Karnali Highway, a dirt track all of 5.5 metres in width, had recently been blasted open through the precipitous mountains surrounding the Jumla-Mugu district border by the Nepal Army – an extraordinary feat of engineering by any measure. The inauguration of the Karnali Highway in the district capital by the Maoist prime minister marked an expansion of the national highway network into one of two districts remaining ‘unconnected’ from the national grid. Of equal note, albeit to less public fanfare, was the extensive ‘track openings’ branching off from district trunk roads to scale precipitous slopes and ford Himalayan rivers and reach the villages of politicians and businessmen who had the power to influence the allocation of budgets and resources – all to the incessant roar of bulldozers and excavators, with barely a hint of engineering or environmental rationality.

Based on these observations, the ‘Infrastructures of Democracy’ project has revealed the multiple ways in which roads have become a major focus for competing governmental ambitions – donors pioneering ‘green’ development; political parties gaming the market for local construction contracts; trucking syndicates seeking to control the terms of transport once the roads are built; NGOs and consultants in the business of social mobilization and evaluation; entrepreneurs seeking to trade in imported goods as well as expand markets in agricultural and forest products; and marginalized groups making claims to social inclusion and citizenship. Nearly everyone, it seemed, was enrolled in the project of road building;

⁶ The All-Party mechanism was dissolved in 2012, under allegations of corruption, but in practice the style of ‘consensus politics’ that it sought to institutionalize has continued even after local elections in 2017 and the transition to a federal state structure.

this trend was dramatically on display in Mugu where there had formerly been no motorable roads, but equally evidenced in the hill and Terai (southern plain) district. Thus roads came to furnish for our purposes a contested terrain of local governance through which competing political rationalities are revealed and contradictory political subjectivities are forged.

Given the dramatic imprint on the landscape unfolding before our eyes, it was tempting to marvel at the novelty. And yet the diversity of competing claims and renditions of 'what brings the road' and 'what the road brings', as Hamal (2014) puts it, also led us to wonder how the motorable road had figured historically and geographically in the making of the Nepali state and its official discourses and practice of development. We found, not surprisingly, that road building has always figured centrally in the political thought of planners and rulers in Nepal (Rankin et al. 2017). In fact, significant documentation already existed allowing us to identify three 'regimes of territorialization' through which roads have played key roles in territorial strategies for building the Nepali state and constituting political thought (Wilson 2004). Mahesh Chandra Regmi (1977), John Whelpton (1983, 2005) and Mark Liechty (1997) show how managing roads served as a means to 'manage coloniality' during the period of national consolidation under the Shah monarchy, through to the end of a series of hereditary Rana prime ministerships (1950). On the one hand, Nepal's rulers sought to limit access of foreigners and thus British colonization by refusing to build motorable roads between India and Kathmandu. On the other hand, they sought to build and upgrade a postal road network within the country as a means of issuing orders, collecting revenues, and thus controlling the population within Nepal's newly constituted borders.

A second regime of territorialization, which we identified as 'integrating the nation' (1951-1970), corresponds roughly with Indian independence and the end of direct colonial rule in South Asia. At that time the Ranas lost their ruling status and a series of democratically elected governments operating alongside the restored Shah monarchy sought to establish the country's first formal and modern government bureaucracy. Nepal's rulers sought to ensure autonomy from India despite its longstanding integration into the British Raj economy (Tamang 2012), by engaging roads and transport as a means to forge national unity. Within a Cold War geopolitical context, roads also furnished a mechanism for building leverage with India, China and the US in international diplomacy – and the acquisition of bilateral aid. Finally, roads served as a popular developmental imaginary through which the modern Nepali state could win consent for a highly unequal path to modernization, as well as mobilize labour without recourse to illiberal modes of force and repression. Third, 'Building the Economy' (1970-1990) signals a shift towards regional economic planning. Within this regime of territorialization, economic development would no longer be assumed to result naturally from improved accessibility afforded by new roads. The economy would require spatial planning – which involved dividing the country into development regions, establishing a north-south axis linking mountains, hills, and southern plains, and strengthening east-west connections among regions for deeper national integration that would address wealth and population disparities (Gurung 1969).

Our research staked out a 'final' regime of territorialization corresponding to the post-1990 period. Not only our research, but the media and the development grey literature had become replete with accounts of 'dozer terrorism' by which motorable tracks were being opened throughout rural areas all over the country in conjunction with the devolution of governance authority and budgets, and ultimately with the crafting of a federal state

structure. As they should, these accounts have raised the alarm about the intensity of rural road building. And yet, observing these developments in relation to the historical trajectory mapped above suggests that road building has long been imbricated in processes of state building. Thus the task becomes one of clarifying the politics of thought – and, we would argue, its articulation with politico-economic and cultural currents – governing particular regimes of territorialization.

We might characterize the contemporary regime of territorialization as ‘restructuring the polity’, in order to evoke the new forms of collective and political consciousness generated by the Maoist movement and subsequent trajectories towards political democratization (even as they have been criticized for falling short in achieving a meaningfully democratic state). Evoking ‘polity’ also troubles globally circulating currents of neoliberal economic ideology that dispel notions of state-led economic development in favour of local, self-help entrepreneurship and market making. As in previous regimes of territorialization, roads can be read as a trace on these developments. This is the time of devolution of road planning and budgets, mobilization of local users’ groups for ‘labour-based’, ‘green roads’ construction. And it is also a time in which those seeking to challenge legacies of exclusion and marginalization regard the road as a key site for making claims and forging political judgement. Our project title, ‘Infrastructures of Democracy’, thus denotes the physical infrastructures (such as roads) underpinning post-conflict state restructuring as well as the social and political infrastructures (such as users’ groups or political parties or *janjati* [indigenous ethnic population] associations), through which governance transpires and aspirations for democracy are pursued.

We are not alone in recognizing the significance of roads for the contemporary conjuncture in Nepal. Based on an analysis of Himalayan borderlands, Galen Murton (2016, 2017) has similarly investigated the co-production of roads, states, and ‘spaces of social, political and economic interaction at multiple scales’ (2016: 229-330). Engaging relational ethnographic approaches, and enriching a body of scholarship attending to Nepal’s critical geopolitical tactics in relation to East and South Asian hegemony, Murton traces how various actors within Nepal leverage major infrastructure projects like highways and hydroelectric dams for political purposes; or, in other words, how politics articulate infrastructures at the same time as, vice versa, infrastructures articulate politics across a range of social and spatial scales. Dinesh Paudel and Philippe Le Billon (2018) similarly examine two trans-Himalayan road corridors connecting Nepal and China to consider the ‘Geo-logics of power’ – on the one hand, how Nepal’s ‘buffer state’ status (between India and China) has contoured its participation in China’s Belt and Road Initiative and, on the other hand, how geologic formations have a role to play in shaping these geoeconomic and geopolitical power dynamics.

As with the central focus of this volume, our research has eschewed a focus on mega-infrastructure developments in favour of more mundane rural road building and its articulation with the everyday lifeworlds of purported beneficiaries – a key terrain for the politics of thought. In this sense it takes inspiration from another long-term academic study investigating the impacts of road construction in rural areas of Nepal (Blaikie et al. 1980). That research engaged neo-Marxist dependency theory and multi-sited, mixed-methods research to argue that road building had exacerbated relations of dependency between the rural periphery and urbanizing centres – specifically by displacing populations, promoting rural-urban migration, inflating land values in roadside locations, generating a new broker economy of contractors and middlemen, and creating enhanced opportunity in commerce

and transport for those with capital to invest and loss of livelihood for those who do not (see Cambell 2010). In so doing, it challenged long-held assumptions about the positive impacts of roads on economic development and spawned a major debate within Nepal about development rationality.

Our work takes many of these critiques as a starting point, and seeks to understand these ongoing politico-economic processes in relation to competing political rationalities for road building three decades later, and in the wake of a major revolutionary mobilization carried out in the name of rejecting relations of dependency. It engages ethnographic approaches to foreground the significance of cultural politics for tracing dynamics of consent, subversion, and critical political consciousness in relation to prevailing patterns of spatial and socioeconomic inequality and the politics of thought. For purposes of illustration, and in order to address the issues of climate change awareness raised by Simpson's project, we elaborate the concept of 'green roads', a donor-led formulation geared towards institutionalizing principles of sustainability that might be regarded as an 'alternative paradigm' for road development, if not the elusive 'counterfactual' raised in Simpson's project.

Like in India, it is certainly fair to say that carbon politics has failed to inform road building in Nepal or to animate Nepali popular imagination, enamoured as it also tends to be with the modernist allure of mobility, and especially of connectivity and accessibility within and between remote regions and difficult topographies. A politics of environmental degradation most certainly has, however, deriving from the critical role played by Nepal in generating a global discourse of environmental crisis in the 1980s (Lewison and Murton 2020). An approach to conservation was worked out in Nepal at that time (involving donors and Nepal-based forestry experts) to confront the dramatic evidence of human-induced forest degradation, which rejected foregoing Malthusian frameworks, to centre the viability of 'traditional' management systems (Gilmour and Fisher 1991; Eckholm 1975). Due in significant part to the presence of a vigilant and active federation representing forest users, Nepal went on to develop some of the most progressive community forestry laws in the world, which have since travelled through foreign aid circuits as models of best practice for blending social and environmental sustainability (Nightingale and Ojha 2013). A key feature of this socio-environmental approach was the institution of community forestry user groups (CFUGs), which ceded forest management to surrounding communities entrusted with balancing conservation and livelihood (Ojha and Timsina 2008).⁷

By the late 1980s, rural road building, dozer-terrorist style (known more formally as 'cut-and-throw'), seemed to be undoing many of the gains in community forest management, and the renewed scars of deforestation, landslides, erosion, and loss of agricultural lands were visible for all to see. Pioneered by the Swiss and Germans in the second half of the 1980s (Sharma 1999), 'green roads' was consolidated as an approach that adopted commitments to environmental and social sustainability now normalized in the forestry sector, and applied them to road construction. Like community forestry, green roads were worked out in relation to global currents and politics of thought about environmental degradation and conservation – namely the principles of sustainability articulated in the Bruntland Report – and the experience in Nepal again proved critical for informing global strategy (Acharya et al. 1999; Banskota 1997; Shrestha 2009). The aim was

⁷ CFUGs organized to form the Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal (FECOFUN), itself now a powerful force for indigenous and community rights on Nepal's political landscape.

to engage local labour, local resources, and appropriate technology to build roads in a manner that would reduce environmental and social vulnerability. Road-building users' groups would be formed by communities trained in bioengineering techniques and tasked with constructing sections of the road with hand tools. Livelihood benefits and social protections were promised in the form of minimum wage, equal pay for men and women, transparency in accounting, proper maintenance over time, land compensation, and public hearings for social audits. Green roads thus aim to build 'a sense of ownership' that would help ensure quality and maintenance over time, while bioengineering techniques would reduce the maintenance required. The political thought underpinning green road practices thus aligned well with the decentralization agendas of both the transitioning Nepali state and the neoliberal, good-governance, post-Washington consensus informing much of the development aid agenda.

How, though, has the politics of thought in this instance articulated on-the-ground politico-economic currents? How could we situate green roads conjuncturally in the districts where we are working? In the hill and plains districts, where longer-term and more lucrative employment options exist, residents typically opt against stigmatizing manual labour contributions. They may wish to contribute in other ways, such as through cash donations, or may even insist that roads are a public good that should be provided by the Nepali state. In such contexts, politico-economic relations and modes of political thought on the ground simply do not support the model. In more remote, high hills areas, participation is more robust, but residents comprising users' groups as well as an emerging cadre of local petty contractors notoriously 'game' the system in a context where power and opportunity tends to be concentrated amongst a nexus of political party leaders, senior government officials, businessmen, and leaders of third-sector organizations. In the 'green roads' register, users' groups come across as 'local labour'. In practice, users' groups tend to be led by those members of the local elite with the social capital to recognize and seize opportunity from the apparatuses of development. They have honed skills to harness benefits that would enhance their status while also generating benefits for those within their communities from whom they derive political support (as the two objectives often go hand in hand). They may, for example, record local labour contributions in green roads accounting rubrics, and then commit 'wage' payments to cover the costs of a bulldozer to surreptitiously open a track in a fraction of the time that manual labour could while distributing any 'wages' that remain among group members. Users' groups are able to hire bulldozers without official oversight because costs for their allotted road sections are small – falling below the threshold for formal contract tendering. Supply of petty contractors and heavy equipment has been facilitated by state-led construction of strategic and district roads involving contract tendering. Here, too, petty contractors have developed mechanisms for collaborating to subvert official tendering processes, so that contracts are rotated amongst affiliates of political parties, while ensuring that everyone enjoys some monetary remuneration for 'consensus bidding'.

Local politics of thought informing 'green' (and other) road construction, that is, goes a long way towards shoring up prevailing relations of class (and indeed caste and gender). As Murton and Sigdel also examine in this volume, users' group leadership as well as the 'winning' bids among local contractors are typically claimed by those who have prior access to other forms of power, such as by owning a business, holding a high-level post in the local bureaucracy or a contractor license, serving the leadership of a political party, or winning an elected office – or by being closely related to someone with one or more of these

credentials. Such opportunities are typically brokered by caste, class, and gender status, and they primarily accrue to higher-caste men – with the recent institution of gender and minority quotas opening up some opportunities for women and low castes, usually those with influential relatives or patrons. Users' group leadership and contracting bidding forms part of a nexus of privilege, through which power and wealth accumulate. Sometimes users' group members or the wider public view these roles as rightful compensation for the effort involved in securing a project budget for the community, or even for the expenses of election campaigning – the logic here being that a party candidate might be promised compensation out of users' group funds. Patronage is another logic that sustains the system, as 'clients', those with less access to power and opportunity, hope to benefit by maintaining allegiance and reaping the benefits of patronage ties, whether as a kickback, a temporary job, or party recognition.

The politics of thought underlying green roads necessarily falls to the wayside when it comes up against these logics. How have donors and their government partners responded to such practices that compromise sustainability goals? Foremost, they have sought to clamp down on 'corruption', as these subversions of the model are commonly glossed. Thresholds for tendering requirements have been lowered in order to promote more transparency in contracting. The use of bulldozers would thus be managed by market signals – in favour, presumably, of sustainable cutting techniques, but also in recognition that in practice users' groups consistently opt against providing the requisite manual labour. In an effort to conjoin good governance and market making, a consortium of donors and government line agencies has also advocated that local bureaucracies contract out monitoring and compliance roles (World Bank 2013). The task going forward, then, will be to similarly account for how these politics of thought aimed explicitly at making markets in turn (and no doubt similarly) articulate politico-economic and cultural political dynamics, creating differential opportunity and inevitably straying once again from the intended political rationalities.

Conclusions

Roads are shaped by thought as much as by bulldozers, excavators, and cranes. Roads render abstract political ideas – modernity, markets, development, good governance, environmental conservation, climate adaptation (among many others) – as concrete, territorialized reality. This insight suggests that it is not just access to the infrastructure itself, but also access to the political arena of ideas that are at stake in road development. Given the experience in Nepal and India, how, we might ask, might the politics of thought about roads become more encompassing, more deliberative, more democratic? What are the conditions of possibility for more robust counterfactuals and alternative paradigms?

A first order of commitment might be to reassess ideologically 'loaded' keywords that have acquired considerable political potency in the governance of road building.

'Corruption' comes to mind as a liberal-economic vector of thought that directs practices of market making, and aims to curtail the latitude formerly accorded to civil society for participating in the development of infrastructure. Certainly, patronage practices intersect with material conditions in ways that divert resources away from their intended purpose of constructing roads in an environmentally sustainable manner. And yet, practices glossed as corruption also support enduring forms of social sustainability that enjoy widespread consent, even if they work to reproduce hegemonic cultural politics. Good governance strategies alone are unlikely to find much traction against these deeper dynamics. 'Mobility'

and 'connectivity', too, are ideas that correlate unproblematically with growth in thought about roads. And yet burgeoning ethnographic research on roads points to the dialectics of mobility and immobility (e.g. Murton 2017; Harris 2013; Huang, this volume), as well as the challenges for viable livelihood posed by mobility itself. As many cases show, the road becomes a danger zone where children can no longer play safely, for example, or, as goes the common refrain, trucks arrive full but leave empty – creating dependency and gutting long-standing forms of socioeconomic and agricultural sustainability. Other terms to problematize might be 'sustainability' and 'resilience'. How, for example, might roads ever be sustainable, especially with the carbon outputs attributed to them?

Such reassessments could go a long way towards building alternative thought. They point to the imperative to seek out modes of judgement and forms of anticipatory thinking within the societies that are the intended beneficiaries of road building. How, for example, might existing practices of care for the environment inform more deliberative processes for linking conservation and development (Singh 2018)? How might day-to-day evaluations of justice and desired futures become a resource for a kind of planning that would seek to go beyond 'good governance', to help catalyse collective forms of political consciousness. What threads of revolutionary consciousness, even, can be salvaged in India and Nepal, through critical deliberation over the meaning of roads in relation to planetary futures? Such modes of questioning point to a more expansive politics of thought than that which is linked to the visions of experts and politicians; and they forge a role for research about political thought that goes beyond critical analysis to broach terrains of advocacy.

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