

SPECIAL SECTION ON ROADS

My Way or the Highway

Introduction to the Special Section on Roads

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Roads matter. They define spaces, spur economic development, provide ways of seeing cities and countryside, and enable generally faster forms of moving around. While the history of mobility and transportation has paid lots of attention to automobiles, trains, and airplanes, fewer scholarly accounts of streets, roads, and highways exist. For one, roads, unlike cars, almost never become individually owned objects of personal consumption. While some iconic highways such as the myth-laden “Route 66” in the U.S. exist, the majority of roads are nameless except for combinations of letters and numbers. As is the case with so many other everyday technologies, most observers only notice roads when they are dysfunctional: during traffic jams, when they contain potholes, during periods of construction and maintenance.

Roads are extensive. While roads have a long history, beginning with footpaths and serving multiple purposes throughout the ages, the twentieth century has seen the most spectacular extension of roads in human history. The idea that ample, paved roads would be planned and built exclusively for motorized traffic was far-fetched in most places at the beginning of the twentieth century; yet by the early twenty-first century Europe (defined as the 27 members of the EU) had more than 61,000 kilometers of highways exclusively for trucks and automobiles, while the number for the United States was higher than 75,000 kilometers.¹ The history between these two points is one of aspiration, transformation, expansion, contestation, and a continuous debate over questions such as these: Who wants motorways? For which purposes? Who stands to benefit from them and who will lose? Who should pay for them? How do they affect landscapes and the environment? How should they be designed?

Historians have studied some of these questions in specific national settings.² Such limited-access roads exclusively for motor traffic, at ideally high speeds and with grade crossings at different levels are called motorways in British English and interstate highways or freeways in American English; vernacular versions of the term include *autostrada*, *autoroute*, and

autobahn. Their politics have been a major focus of historical analyses. Given the enormous costs of these motorways and the resulting initial reluctance of many governments to sponsor such road systems, political battles regarding their scale, scope, and routing should come as no surprise. In many countries, the often delicate balance of power between regions, states, and the central government was at stake when national motorway systems were on the planning board. Massimo Moraglio's paper in this issue highlights such tensions in the case of Italy, a late nation, historically speaking, and one in which the forces of regionalism were and are robust.

Another arena in which these roads were prominent was nation-building. Not unlike railways, but without direct central control over the means of transportation, motorways were often advertized as tying nations more closely together. In Belgium in the 1950s, as Michael Rycckewaert points out in his contribution, organizing the country's territory through highways was part and parcel of a national strategy of stimulating and sustaining economic growth, the hallmark of the *trentes glorieuses*. At the same time, while Belgium was characterized by linguistic and regional tensions, the growth of the motorway network should enable the rise of a single Belgian conurbation with Brussels at its center. Not all roads would lead to Brussels, but the capital's prominence was to be safeguarded through road-building. While some experts, notably regional planners such as Benton MacKaye in the interwar United States, had thought of "townless highways" as ways to decentralize their country, the intention of the Belgian planners was centralization.³ As a result, the latter country today has one of the most expansive motorway systems in relation to its size. In contrast, motorways in Britain came relatively late and were often thought of as interurban rather than intraurban connections, as Peter Merriman points out in his paper.

The contributions in this issue also bring up questions of the role of the state in economic and transportation history. While automotive mobility is often seen as the result of individual choices, the essays make it clear that governments shaped transportation policy, transportation planning, and the spatial arrangements of their polities. For more than a decade, scholars in several fields have received conceptual guidance from James C. Scott's book, *Seeing Like a State*. Scott's remarks on the ways in which "high-modernist" states have made their landscapes legible for large-scale planning schemes would also be applicable for the places and time periods examined here. The practice of motorway planning, it seems, rendered the environment legible and the results of these plans, the roads themselves, offered a means to read these landscapes quickly while traversing them.

States, then, and their road-building schemes were deeply anchored in national frames and debates. Without invoking the treacherous notion of "national styles," the three papers relate their analyses to contemporaneous understandings of how Italian, Belgian, or British political processes, cultural

values, and ideas about national spaces coalesced in the experience of planning and building roads. When such projects were discussed, no country was alone in it. Engineers, economists, politicians, and writers of all stripes sought to buttress their calls for road-building or their opposition to it with evidence from abroad. Undoubtedly, the most obvious reference point in such debates were the United States, given its fast and early pace of motorization and the cultural processes which some historians subsume under the term “Americanization.” Debates over modernity in Europe invariably involved America; cars and roads as the most modern land-based transportation technologies of their time figured prominently in such debates. Especially during the Cold War, looking towards the United States and American highways and interstates was common practice among European nations. In Michael Ryckewaert’s paper, the transatlantic flow of ideas and practices was almost self-evidently the primary means for legitimizing the project of a Belgian urban and national highway system. Massimo Moraglio, however, cautions against simplistic assumptions that put the United States at the center of such narratives. For interwar Italians, he argues, the U.S. was too distant in terms of political culture and levels of motorization. Rather, the United Kingdom and its organization of road-building was the focus of Italian road lobbyists. Moraglio also reminds his readers that the sponsorship of the Fascist dictatorship was the enabling factor for the *autostrade*, even though its support was more haphazard and unsystematic than previously thought.

Another right-wing dictatorship, Adolf Hitler’s Nazi Germany, adorned its self-image with a road network. The Nazis used the autobahn as a way to portray the country both internally and externally as technologically modern and in sync with its history. Politicians and professionals from various countries were invited to visit the German motorways before 1939. Peter Merriman details how British observers vacillated between open admiration of the alleged technological feat and doubts whether the model could or should be replicated on British soil, not the least because of the odious smell of a totalitarian dictatorship. The Nazi propaganda machine had done its best to showcase the supposedly apolitical character of the road network. Yet the British response was more varied than the German hosts probably wished for.

Merriman’s chapter also raises the issue of the professional groups associated with motorway planning and construction. The profession of the “traffic engineer” grew up with motorways and in many places the latter necessitated the former. In their absence (and in addition to them), economists, regional planners, urban planners, geographers, architects, landscape architects and, of course, civil engineers tried to participate in the public discourse regarding highways. They dominated the discourse for some time. Yet, depending on the nation and region, non-experts called into question the scope and location of motorways, especially in highly populated

urban areas, as early as the late 1950s or as late as the 1970s. The “freeway revolt”, as it is known in the American case, showed that such roads were not as uniformly popular as many experts and politicians had thought. Many plans were altered, delayed, or cancelled altogether. The environmental effects of motorways—emissions and noise pollution, to name but the most glaring ones—contributed to making the roads publicly contested rather than universally embraced infrastructures. Historians are only now beginning to understand the contours and contexts of these developments.

The rise and fall of the motorway idea, its manifold repercussions in daily life and national culture, and the changing perceptions of these roads underline how central the study of roads is to the academic engagement with mobility in history. The three papers in this issue demonstrate the potential of this approach.

Notes

1. The data for the European Union is from 2005, the data for the U.S. is from 2002: Eurostat Statistical Books, *Panorama of Transport*, 2009, p. 18, http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-DA-09-001/EN/KS-DA-09-001-EN.PDF, accessed 14 December, 2011; <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/programadmin/interstate.cfm>, accessed 14 December, 2011.
2. For an historiographical synopsis, see Bruce E. Seely, “An Overview Essay: Roads in Comparative Perspective,” in *Road History: Planning, Building and Use*, ed. Gijs Mom and Laurent Tissot (Neuchâtel: Alphil, 2007), 13–31.
3. Benton MacKaye and Lewis Mumford, “Townless Highways for the Motorist”, *Harper’s Magazine*, August 1931, 347–356; Benton MacKaye, “The Townless Highway,” *The New Republic*, 12 March, 1939.

Author Biography

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