



Lifts, Gifts and Paradigm Shifts *An Innovative Anthropology of Hitchhiking is an Allegory for Our Times*

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Patrick Lavolette 2020: *Hitchhiking: Cultural Inroads*.
London: Palgrave Macmillan.

A couple of the books in my rucksack during my first years of hitchhiking were Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics* (1975) and *The Turning Point* (1982) – ground-breaking treatises that sought to link human societies, cosmology, and ecology. They appealed to me for being more “holistic” in their analysis of social problems than many of the sociology books I was also carrying for my degree at the University of Lancaster. Being by the roadside seemed to be a launch pad from which to explore a more fluid, interconnected and complex understanding of society, one that was not irreducible to single abstract explanations or top-down solutions. My hitchhiking felt akin to being one of Capra's subatomic particles, bouncing around the roads of the country, as though participating in one huge cooperative cosmic experiment, acting out a local variation of a more general reality.

Forty years later, similar feelings returned reading *Hitchhiking: Cultural Inroads* (2020) by fellow hitching scholar Patrick Lavolette. For those with an academic mindset who have done their *hotch* (or time served) on the kerbside, delving into these pages is a rare treat to gauge personal experiences against a wide range of theoretical speculations and imaginative analyses. For everyone else, it is an entertaining and inventive way of unpicking the social universe

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through which we all travel, with a tour guide as likely to quote Patti Smith or The Ramones as French post-structural theorists of space and culture.

Writing well about hitchhiking is tough enough. Trying to think about it as a method of observation about the world is not unlike an experiment in quantum physics. To capture the experience, time, place, and meaning of hitchhiking, one must somehow reconcile the personal and the analytical. We must look out beyond the fixed thumb point of our preconceptions, whilst acknowledging that it affects our observations of the social world streaming past us on the kerbside. So, how should we assign priority when making notes on the back of our cardboard signs; what grand conceptualisations of mobility, society, and history ought we to strive for; and how might we facilitate constructive debate about sharing the road more, when it is so central to helping ameliorate the ecological crisis?

The answer from the pages of this pioneering anthropological reflection of (mostly) twenty-first-century European hitchhiking culture seems to be that we need to savour the act of “slow travel”, embrace the unpredictable and be mindful of the cooperative lessons that they have to teach us. This is also true of how we think and write about the world. “Letting the road decide” can be as good a theoretical maxim as a travel one: to be less didactic in our explanations, be more respectful of the subtle, the hidden, and the particular. In *Hitchhiking: Cultural Inroads*, Patrick Laviolette seems to be encouraging us to “see” less like a state anthropologist with fixed colonising intent and embrace the role of the translator who “goes native”, understands the “hau” (or spirit of material transactions), learns to sing the local songs and to tell their jokes. The book is therefore an enchanting dialogue between the formal academic world and the life, times, and culture of those who hang out around in the “no places” (Augé 1995) of motorway service stations, on-ramps, and underpasses. Each chapter provides a themed snapshot of what might be involved in those exchanges and how the artefacts and associations encountered en route inform new forms of communitarian identity. But Laviolette wants to do more than reflect upon his anthropologist field notes: this is also an exercise in deconstructing the simplistic dualistic thinking that reinforces motor age power to the exclusion of complexity, nuance, mutual aid, and empathy. Imagine this as a hitchhiker’s guide to putting the brakes on the frameworks driving us over a cliff! Hang on to your towel.

The book starts gently enough, with a party anecdote, with the author explaining to fellow guests what anthropology does as a subject and why it might be useful for studying a history of people standing by the roadside cocking thumbs, pointing fingers, raising palms, or flapping cardboard signs at passing traffic. Making one’s own culture strange is a good narrative technique and one also used by the late David Graeber at the opening of *Debt: The First 5000 Years*

(2011) to destabilise conventional perceptions about how the social organisation of the world works: past, present, mobile, or stationary. Graeber is a good reference point here, as he did so much to bring French anthropologist Marcel Mauss back into the analytic light (Graeber 2004) – which Laviolette’s book provides a lovely prism for. Examining the relative health of our gift economies offers us the opportunity to think more laterally about the systems we need for planetary survival.

Anthropology allows us the long view of forms of human association and can be a fine storyteller when it comes to discussing anarchist forms of social self-organisation (like hitchhiking!). After all, “hitchhiking” did not start with the emergence of the automobile, even if we mostly define it in those terms. There is plenty of discussion here then about the symbolic economy of hand signals and forms of on-the-road communication, but hitchhiking is at its heart an expression of travel mutual aid practised for millennia across oceans and continents. Standing by the highways of the world brings out our most primal animalistic natures and in doing so invites questions about what bonds us with one another and if we are going in the same direction, as people and societies.

Laviolette sets his methodological stall out pretty quickly: he is writing “experimental sociology”, making phenomenological enquiries about the “conceptual and embodied themes related to (the) practice” (10). Hitchhiking, he argues, is a form of temporary utopia, an alternative “total social fact”, a prefiguring of more caring forms of community and ways of living in the ecological crisis. He wants to capture both the intensity of the experience – what it is to be a hitcher in a landscape – and to evoke from this small part of road history other ways of thinking about social organisation and identity. Each of the chapter themes is based around an analytical touchstone: the figure of the *flâneur* (the free wandering observer), the concept of *corporeality* (how the body inhabits space), the psychoanalytic *uncanny* (where storytelling such as urban myths negotiate our social values) and anthropological debates about *dividuation* (a counter to the neo-liberal consumer notion of identity). Into these extensive excursions the author introduces an impressive range of examples of hitchhiking art, literature, popular film, and music (many of which do not usually get discussed in other books on the subject). These are suitably embellished with some fine roadside photography and some fascinating coverage of statues of hitchhiking, including the story behind “Augustin” a resident of Belgium, whose presence on the street might constitute a form of “technological enchantment” (184).

Spoiler alert. Readers expecting a treatise on the usual predictable questions about whether hitchhiking declined as a result of neo-liberalism, the rise of individualistic consumer culture, and a new media narrative of fear will have to forage around in the theoretical hedgerows. Whilst there are great observations on some aspects of the manufacturing of mobility consent in

these pages – particularly on the commodification of aspects of the sharing economy – Laviolette prefers to largely sidestep some of the usual questions about trust and danger. This is a tough call – so many books have unnecessary (and even apologetic) caveats in their introductions about the reasons for studying an apparently risky and unpopular mode of transport. And whilst it is easy to be flippant about the effects of popular culture on the imagination – there may still be a case for noting the handful of studies that say hitchhiking is relatively safe (Fiedler et al. 1989; Pudinski 1974).

What is more certain is that hitchhiking scholarship is having a (dare I say it) bit of a golden age! *Hitchhiking: Cultural Inroads* may be the first anthropological analysis to date, but we have also been treated to two detailed histories in Jack Reid's *Roadside Americans: The Rise and Fall of Hitchhiking in a Changing Nation* (2020) and Linda Mahood's *Thumbing a Ride: Hitchhikers, Hostels and Counterculture in Canada* (2018); there was an English translation of Barbara Noske's philosophical memoir *Thumbing It: A Hitchhiker's Ride to Wisdom* (2018) and Szymon Zylinski's detailing of the long running hitchhiking voucher system in *Autostop in Poland* (2016). As a specialist community of scholars, we have also had many innovative research contributions in the psychology of hitchhiking tactics by Nicholas Guéguen and Jacques Fischer-Lokou (2004), a cultural studies typology of different hitchhiking discourses in the US media in Jeremy Packer's *Mobility without Mayhem* (2008), reflections on contemporary independent tourist identities by Michael O'Regan (2012) and insights on the space/time of thumbing by the Australian actor and philosopher Alice Garner (2008). The number of undergraduate and particularly Masters level dissertations on the subject are now almost impossible to keep track of.

Laviolette is not only apace of all of these ventures, but as he thumbs between various academic conferences and hitchhiker gatherings, he is also adding in a lot of the “organic intellectuals” of the field. We meet thoughtful and charismatic figures such as Anton Krotov (long time president of the Academy of Free Travel in Moscow) and Miran Ipavec, the Slovenian who founded the world's first hitchhiker museum, which has become part of the independent traveller's mutual aid “grand tour”. One of the strongest aspects of the book is its insights into the close associations between those active in the promoting and theorising of hitchhiking culture and how willingly they support one another's initiatives. We see this in the “Thumb buddies” chapter, with the author detailing the close relationships between artists, hitchhikers, and academics at the 2017 *Art of Hitchhiking* exhibition in Warsaw and later that year with the *Autostop* group exhibition Z/K space in Berlin (curated by Dr Lýdia Pribišová). Of course, marginal interests tend to bring out a sense of collegiality, but this wider European network of hitchhiker-related art collaboration reminded me a little of the Malian concept of *dama*, where the whole village takes equal

responsibility for every person's well-being. Appropriately, there is a lot of ethnographic sharing going on in this book (including a contribution from Judith Oakley about her road experiences in the 1960s) and the author even manages to get the aforementioned Ipavec livestreamed into a lecture he is delivering, to give his anthropological paper some contemporary road gravitas.

There is another layer of politics here too: Laviolette argues that being by the roadside can be a form of "bearing witness" on injustice and inequality – through what he calls *sousveillance* (78) – and that it is through the uncovering of hidden histories that some of our re-enchantment of everyday life can begin. Storytelling is a key aspect of this. In the chapter "Dividually driven", he recounts a long lift from an obsessive female Harry Potter fan who says little but plays a lot of audio books. How, he asks, if we are to interrogate the Self/Other duality and understand one another, do we deconstruct a situation where someone's identity is so wrapped up in their privatised vehicle that they do not feel obliged to talk? It is a good question based on a very familiar hitchhiking situation, but perhaps the answer is in the subtleties of the gift economy itself. An unconventional transaction has already taken place, without dominant temporal economic frameworks, just by giving the lift. For some, this might be enough: to intuitively tap into that older mutual aid history.

Phenomenological questions like this run through the book and the discussion of "dividuality" seems as rooted in Jungian psychology as it is in anthropology. The transformation of the Self under capitalism requires a lot of reskilling and healing and our collectively imagined futures, observed from the kerbside require a new sensitivity to the land and the experiences of those who pass through it. Laviolette has cause to reflect deeply on this later in the book in a powerful vignette about vulnerability. We find him heading south on the A9 in Scotland en route back from a close friend's funeral, packed into a vehicle with fellow mourners. Suddenly, he wants out, declaring he will hitch back to London and heads off into the Cairngorm mountains to reflect. It goes wrong pretty quickly: ill equipped and disoriented, he is lucky to stagger to the roadside the following morning, chilled and in need of company. His rescuer is something of an eccentric filmmaker scoping out locations for a forthcoming narrative about climbing, heritage, and people's connection to the land (or not). Laviolette uses the incident to discuss how hitchhiking history is full of uncanny tales – notably the work of Roald Dahl, Michel Faber, Tom Robbins, and Milan Kundera – and that they mediate our perceptions of social boundaries, risk and identity, with the possibilities of transcendence.

Cautionary tales and urban legends are indicative of and immersed in power relations. This is also true of academic conversations about the rise and fall of autostop. Let us not forget that despite the recent purple patch of hitching histories, there is still a paucity of serious research, little in the way of funding

opportunities or the possibilities of translation of non-English language books. One consequence of this is that it can make us prone to citing underwhelming material simply because it is there, in the same way that everyone feels obliged to tap into the myth of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1984) as a hitchhiking bible, when it has precious little to say about getting a lift. A case in point would be Jeremy Packer's aforementioned study of the discourses of transport themed moral panics *Mobility without Mayhem*. As Laviolette notes, it is a fascinating taxonomy of different eras of representation – “the Civic Samaritan” (up to the 1940s), “the Homicidal hitcher” (1950s), “the Romantic rebel” (1960s), and the “Asking for it” narrative (1970s onwards) – yet it is also entirely impressionistic and based upon media sources, with no memoirs or interviews cited to support these typological claims. Perhaps this is why Packer's book, published at the height of the digihitch.com influence on alternative travelling cultures and hitchhiker gatherings in the United States, is so wedded to the idea that hitchhiking in any numerical and culturally meaningful sense stopped around 1990.

Scholars of hitchhiking can only work with what is available and good grounded theory can sometimes be hard to come by. Fortunately, *Hitchhiking: Cultural Inroads* offers plenty, managing to do a number of things simultaneously. It is data rich autoethnography, which conveys an authentic feel of being on the road, whilst also providing substantial social commentary to give legitimacy to the process of *sousveillance* that Laviolette is advocating for. Fittingly, the author himself adopts many modes of address and viewpoints to inject the discussion with a fresh angle: often the scholar, but also the seasoned traveller, the surfer, the music festival follower. As with any day's hitchhiking, sometimes the conversation can get a little heavy – there are sections of the book only a veteran connoisseur of cultural theory will truly appreciate – but there is always a useful vignette, a lively song on the radio, or a quirky aside to keep the journey flowing more easily.

This is an author not afraid to experiment, confess, or take a chance with an idea. Laviolette's sometimes random asides and self-deprecating detours – one of his favourite words is “stochastic” – brings us back to particle physics. We sometimes forget – and hitchhiking is an ideal vehicle for this – that the social world itself relies on chance events and unpredictability for it to evolve and actualise, just as much as the natural world does. Being flexible with our sociological and anthropological theorising is as vital as being placed based, appropriate, and equitable in our transport policies. So, as we roll through the landscape bearing witness to hidden histories and the effects of power, we need reliable brave observers, to document the underlying cooperative order that often evades the academic eye. Good theory has a role to play in building wider resilience for social and ecological survival. *Hitchhiking: Cultural Inroads* shows the imaginative possibilities of a paradigm shift that is only a lift or two away.

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