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‘OTHERWISE ENGAGED’
Culture, deviance and the quest for connectivity through road construction

Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox

This article explores the cultural framings that all too frequently pass un-noticed in standard cost-benefit accounts of development economics. Our purpose is not simply to add our voice to those who argue for the importance of ‘bringing culture back in’, for we assume that in contexts of modern development economics ‘the cultural’ cannot simply be added to the technical or the economic, as these perspectives are explicitly elaborated as an abstraction from the cultural. Rather, we are interested in how an exploration of the cultural dynamics of technical process leads us to a disjunctive (rather than an additive) mode of ‘inclusion’. Building on approaches from science studies and social anthropology, we draw on our ethnographic and historical investigations of road-building in Peru to explore divergent modes of connectivity through which a politics of cultural engagement is played out. Taking the example of a highway under construction in a frontier zone not generally considered of economic importance to the wider national economy, we discuss the historical desire for ‘connectivity’, highlighting the instability of the physical and social environments on the margins of a marginal state. In this context we find that the vital energies of the frontier – entrepreneurial, innovative, experimental and unruly – consistently disrupt the vision of smooth, orderly, technical integration. We argue that this tension between the cultural and the technical, so clearly manifest at the frontiers of capitalist expansion (but characteristic of technological expansion more generally) is a driver rather than an obstacle in the development process. Attempts to produce a political resolution to a perceived lack of integration on the margins of society too often proceed through further attempts at securing smooth continuity (via further technical modes of intervention) rather than building on the diverse (disjunctive) modes of engagement that already exist.

KEYWORDS: integration; development; materiality; migration; Peru; roads

This article explores the cultural framings that all too frequently pass un-noticed in standard cost-benefit accounts of development economics, and considers how that which is ‘externalised’ through such framing processes, continues, nevertheless, to energise from within. We should emphasise that our purpose is not simply to add our voice to those who argue for the importance of ‘bringing culture back in’, for we assume that in contexts of modern development economics ‘the cultural’ cannot simply be added to the technical or the economic, as these perspectives are explicitly elaborated as an abstraction from the cultural. Rather, we are interested in how an exploration of the cultural dynamics of technical process leads us to a disjunctive (rather than an additive) mode of ‘inclusion’. Building on approaches from science studies and social anthropology, we draw on our
ethnographic and historical investigations of road-building in Peru to explore divergent modes of connectivity through which a politics of cultural engagement is played out. Taking the example of a highway under construction in a frontier zone not generally considered of economic importance to the wider national economy, we discuss the historical desire for 'connectivity', highlighting the instability of the physical and social environments on the margins of a marginal state. In this context we find that the vital energies of the frontier — entrepreneurial, innovative, experimental and unruly — consistently disrupt the vision of smooth, orderly, technical integration. We argue that this tension between the cultural and the technical, so clearly manifest at the frontiers of capitalist expansion (but characteristic of technological expansion more generally) is in fact a driver rather than an obstacle in the development process. Attempts to produce a political resolution to a perceived lack of integration on the margins of society too often proceed through further attempts at securing smooth continuity (via further technical modes of intervention) rather than building on the diverse (disjunctive) modes of engagement that already exist.

Most analyses of road building proceed from the assumption that such infrastructures offer a technical solution to problems of economic and social integration. These analyses highlight how, as projects of economic development, road-building programmes are pursued for the possible contribution that they are able to make to greater economic well-being and social connectivity within and between nation-states. As material, territorial (and territorialising) entities roads clearly operate as technologies of modern state formation (Carroll 2006; Mukerji 1997; Mitchell 2002) and function to connect states and to enable the international transaction of persons, goods and ideas. Highway construction projects draw together private capital, state bodies and international institutions into partnerships through which financial and social benefits for a broad spectrum of different interests are sought. In developing countries, road building is set alongside education, healthcare and other infrastructural development programs such as the spread of telephony and the Internet in order to improve the internal and international connectivity of marginal states as a means of alleviating poverty (Slater & Marvin 1997; Jones 2006; Fan et al. 2000). Development studies literatures evaluating the relative success or failure of such programmes of highway construction focus on the extent to which highways are able to reduce poverty by increasing access to new markets, as well as measuring other indicators of wellbeing such as access to education and health and job creation (Belotti 1990; Dawson & Barwell 1993; Gibson & Rozelle 2003; Windle 2002). In developed nations, roads are still a central concern in government planning, though discussions here have moved away from the potential of roads to boost economic development for poverty alleviation, to the combined question of how they are figuring as revenue earning enterprises for private capital (Rus & Romero 2004; Shaoul et al. 2006), and how they might be better managed given the congestion on transport systems which are becoming increasingly overloaded (Roth 1995; Hibbs & Roth 1992; Newbery 1990).

Whilst a political-economic understanding of roads reveals how they are central to contemporary neo-liberal arrangements of states and markets, such studies of road building tend to focus on their technicist intentions as projects of social change and evaluate their impacts on this basis. But roads are also sites of passionate engagement holding the promise of transformative potential in ways that create an unlikely and unpredictable convergence of interest between institutions such as the World Bank, governments and NGOs, and a hugely diverse informal sector of ‘public opinion’ and
unregulated economic activity. Those approaches which begin with the technical
intentions of road building tend to result in the framing of the informal sector and
unregulated activity as that which lies outside the technicist program, allowing these
aspects to then be brought back in through a prescriptive politics of inclusion and
integration of the seemingly disengaged. In what follows we draw on ethnographic
material to explore this convergence of interests in road building processes from the
perspective of those we prefer to describe as ‘otherwise engaged’. The ethnography
suggests that the convergence of opinion around road building in Peru depends not on
the success of incorporation, but on a systematic misunderstanding, or ‘equivocation’
(Viveiros de Castro 2004), specifically in relation to how key notions of ‘connectivity’ and
‘the cultural’ are related to the materiality of road construction and use by the very many
people who long for roads with a passion that is perhaps hard for those living in
congested western economies to comprehend.

The Passions of the Road

Roads and cars have long held a central place in the popular imagination as spaces
of freedom and sites of passionate imagination surrounding the possibilities of the future
for individuals and society. Twentieth century art and literature abound with images of the
American highway as a symbolic road to the future or personal quest for discovery (Lackey
& Butterfield 2001; Eyerman & Löfgren 1995; Marling 1984), whilst car advertising
continues to play on the image of the freedom of the open road or a drive through
empty wilderness as an experience of excitement and escape (Gudis 2004; Shukin 2006).
Nevertheless, as a recent BBC series made dramatically clear in relation to British
motorway building programmes, the excitement of the post-war years and the consumer
boom of the 1960s and 1970s had by the 1980s given way to a far more critical public
attitude. Having aptly titled the first two programmes in the series ‘Love Story’ and
‘Honeymoon Period’, the final episode ‘The End of the Affair’ highlighted the confrontation
characteristic of Thatcher’s Britain, when state-backed private enterprise pushed the logic
of the economic model further towards its current neo-liberal form, disaggregating and
reconnecting public and economic interests in new ways. Visible tensions emerged
between the quality of people’s daily lives and environments and the ‘interests’ of industry
and business – tensions that united protesters across social and political divides and led to
strange new alliances between establishment figures and young radicals, echoing similar
protests that had erupted between environmentalists and engineers in the USA in the
1960s and 1970s (Mohl 2004).

In Peru however, roads are still an object of desire and passion, holding the
possibility for economic and social integration, and the seductive suggestion of the
freedom, mobility and efficiency of modern networked connectivity. Promoted by
politicians, and supported by development NGOs, roads also provoke protests on the
part of some local communities but far from aiming to stop construction on environ-
mental grounds, these communities use road blocks and even hunger strikes to
demonstrate the strength of their desire, and their political will to ensure that these
new roads pass right through their ‘back-yards’. Supported by multilateral agencies such
as the World Bank, the Peruvian government is actively engaged in several large-scale road
construction programmes which aim to produce interconnectivity between regions, as
well as connecting Peru to an international South American and ultimately global trade
network through an organisation called IIRSA (Iniciativa para la integracion de la infraestructura regional Sudamericana – the South American Regional Infrastructure Integration Initiative). The most ambitious of these is the project known as the Interoceanic Highway, part of which involves a $100m investment to asphalt a 700km stretch of road between the highland Andean town of Urcos in the department of Cusco and the lowland Amazonian border between Peru and Brazil, at Inapari in the department of Madre de Dios (see Figure 1).

We have been working in and alongside this road building project interested in the diverse practices through which the road is gradually assembled, over time, as a concrete material form. In this paper we focus on the heterogeneous histories through which this road emerged, histories which in turn reveal how these apparently marginal places might be better characterised as spaces of fluctuating connectivity. Drawing on the experiences and memories of people who live or lived in the places through which the new highway is planned to go, we look again at the people and places which are conventionally construed as obstacles (or as incidental) to the broader development intentions of road building, and challenge the ways in which they are conventionally framed as exceptional, external and problematic. What we describe, by contrast, is a disjunctive and equivocal co-habitation of

FIGURE 1
Map of Interoceanic Highway.
ideas and desires about connectivity and progress that we argue plays a crucial part in energising and renewing the terms of interaction in this space of economic development. In the interstices of multiple framings the cultural dynamics of technical process come into view in ways that prompt us to rethink the terms upon which the engagement and inclusion of the cultural in processes of development is usually conceived. Moving away from a view which emphasises the need for the inclusion of the disengaged in processes of economic development, we argue for the elaboration of an alternative perspective which allows for the acknowledgement of the ‘otherwise engaged’ in explorations of the cultural dynamics of technical processes.

The Interoceanic Highway

The Kalinowski family provided us with the earliest example of the complex and uneven social processes through which the national and international connectivity of this region of Peru emerged. Benedicto, now an elderly man of 96, told us about his father. Juan Kalinowski was born in Poland in 1856 and was sent to Peru in the 1880s by a certain Count Breżński to work as a taxidermist. He spent most of his life isolated, living in the forest exploring and collecting samples which were sent around the world – to Poland of course but also to Chicago, London, Paris. Benedicto remembers him going off on trips for months on end, bringing back birds and animals that had never been seen before – collecting over six and a half thousand new species in his life-time. He lived ‘on his own’ in the forest – with his Peruvian wife and their fourteen children! When he had first made his way into the area there had been no road and he had had to cut his way through with a machete. At times the forest was so dense that he had had to carry his dog on his shoulders. In fact Benedicto himself discovered years later that there was a road into this area. The Spaniards had built one as they followed information that led them to gold but the forest had grown over it and it didn’t re-appear until the 1940s when there were many more people in the area all looking for gold and closely following the traces of previous incursions.

Benedicto himself was born in 1910 at Cadena, the place where his father had settled and built a school in which to educate his children. Benedicto then revealed that this place also had prior connectivity. The Spaniards used to come down here with three or four hundred indigenous workers from the highlands, forcing them to work. When they found the river was too swollen to cross they ordered them to form a human chain and in that way hundreds of workers managed to cross with none of them being swept away by the river’ – hence the name, Cadena (Chain). Benedicto remembers the Russian colonists arriving, about sixty of them. They weren’t all Russians in fact – there were Yugoslavs, Poles, Czechs, Germans and Russians. President Leguía had set up the ‘Russian’ agricultural colony. Benedicto didn’t know why they would have wanted to come, but presumed there were political disagreements in Europe. These Russians were soon followed by waves of gold miners – about seventy at first, but soon numbers grew to three or four hundred. The road didn’t reach Cadena until 1941, but by the 1930s the way past their house was very well trodden.

The waves of immigration that Benedicto recalled were closely tied to state-led initiatives to build roads. It was during President Leguía’s first government (1919–1930) that the big push to connect the Amazon to the coast through the Andes was made. In his first period of office 11,000 kilometres of road were built (Nugent 1997, p. 177) in an
explicit attempt to modernise the economy by providing access to what were effectively the enclaves of local elites. However the connectivity imagined in these early years was primarily concerned with a one-way extractive process. These roads were not designed to network between regions, but rather to connect sites of extraction to coastal ports and ultimately to Lima.

Furthermore, according to Benedicto, the fortunes of these early road building visions were determined by somewhat underhand negotiations between presidents, engineers and townspeople. Benedicto recalled how two of his father’s friends who were fellow landowners in the area had presented Leguía’s predecessor, President Jose Pardo y Barreda with a 400 gram nugget of gold to persuade ‘the state’ to bring the road down to this area to facilitate their business interests there. Benedicto also told us how the engineers building the road had influenced the route that it ended up taking. Rather than being paid a salary, the engineers were allegedly paid per cubic metre of excavated soil, a situation that led to the construction of meandering mountain roads, and lengthy deviations around gullies which could have been crossed using bridges.

But these were past irritations. What angered Benedicto about the current construction was the way in which nobody seemed to have learnt from the mistakes and inefficiencies of the past. He saw the same negotiations taking place in the current project as had characterised his sense of inefficiency and corruption in previous eras, negotiations which were evidence for him of how the state was totally failing in its obligation to provide a proper, modern, efficient road system. In his opinion, the politicians needed to take the decision about which points they wanted to connect and then commission the most direct route. But instead of taking advice on the most logical route, he saw them doing what they had always done, caving into the pressure exerted by various interest groups along the way.

Benedicto’s narrative echoed similar complaints that we heard from others who were sceptical about the way in which the current interoceanic highway project was progressing. As we began our fieldwork in 2005, many people bemoaned the fact that Peru had never had a coherent roads policy. The system was generally perceived to have been put together piecemeal and in response to short-term political goals. From the perspective of friends and colleagues in Lima, the highway was another shameful example of political expediency – huge resources being directed to an area of the country from which the majority of the population stood to gain very little, and from which Lima in fact may well stand to lose. The cost-benefit analysis did not appear to adequately demonstrate the need for this project. Yet the terms of the cost/benefit equations were not straightforward. For those in favour of these roads (a very complex cross-section of the population in the broad regions in question) social criteria were brought into play that endowed these projects with the moral value of ‘public works’, the obligation of governments to attend to those on the margins, and to not allow the appearance of expansive territories of ‘abandonment’ that would ‘return’ areas which had once known themselves to be hugely significant to the wealth of the nation, to a space of pre-modern isolation. Prior connectivity was used to lever government investment through a narrative of loss that was recognisable at a national level.

As in the rest of the world, modern road networks began to outstrip the railway in the early twentieth century in circumstances in which Peru was deeply implicated. Peru provided the rubber for the first car tyres which appeared in France in 1885, Michelin building on the techniques developed by Goodrich and Dunlop in the USA. Peru had the
rubber but with no roads connecting the coastal cities to the interior, there was no easy way for Peruvians to commercialise this product. The story of the rubber boom exemplified some of the key problems facing the Peruvian state at the turn of the century. National territories which had always been disputed at the borders – with Ecuador, Colombia, Brazil and Bolivia – were confirmed as sites of valuable resource through the systematic explorations of Latin American and European scientists, traders and adventurers.9 The War of the Pacific had left the country in disarray – there was no capital available for the kinds of ‘public works’ necessary for the national exploitation of these resources, and worse still the frontier regions were clearly vulnerable to predatory neighbours. The government was compelled to strike deals with entrepreneurial explorers, men willing and able to militarise their extractive enterprises, both for their own personal gain and for the defence of the ‘national territories’ within which these resources lay.10

By 1918 the first major road to the interior, the Carretera Central, stretched 231 km from Lima to Tarma, and it was the construction of this highway that launched the major road building programme of president Leguia. This road building programme went hand in hand with a highly politicised immigration programme. Taking advantage of the poverty and instability of Europe and the USA, Peru, like other Latin American nations, actively worked to recruit workers, in the case of Peru to settle the new agricultural frontier zones. Progress on the roads lurched forward and stagnated according to the complex alliances between regional elites and central government, and reflected the rhythms of the emerging and receding markets that fluctuated around the seismic political events of the great depression, the Second World War, and the post-war boom in western manufacturing and consumption.11

Several miles down the road from Cadena where Benedicto grew up, in the frontier town of Quince Mil, we met some of these early migrants who had come to the region to exploit the possibilities for gold mining. Braulio Reina was born in Marcapata in 1927. His father had come south from Northern Peru, looking for work. His mother was from Urubamba in the Cusco region. Together they must have decided to make their lives in relation to the hacienda economies of the southern Andes. He visited them as a child, heard them talked about. The family had moved again through a government colonisation programme and had come on down to Quince Mil with a group of Russians.12 The Peruvians and the Russian colonies had been set up on opposite banks of the river. There was nothing there in Quince Mil when they arrived – it was virgin forest which the colonists were expected to bring under cultivation. After the colonists, came people with family names – Zlatter, Meza, Stambor. These were men of a different social class, men who came to make money from the area in a more ambitious way, men who were remembered as individuals, and who left material traces in the landscape – old machinery, abandoned houses, plots of land that their descendants still lay claim to, even the echoes of their exploits in local place names. At the time of Zlatter and Stambor, the settlement now known as Quince Mil was called Qimsa Challwa in Quechua, ‘Three Fishes’. Braulio told how on Sundays, Zlatter and Stambor would come down from their haciendas looking for gold in the rivers. There was an abundance of fish and animals to hunt. They used dynamite to fish and on this occasion despite the huge explosion only three small fish had floated to the surface, an event worthy of inscription in the name of the town.

Slowly the road followed the people – in turn accelerating the migration process. By 1941 it had reached the far bank of the river. But this was now a major trading route, with mule trains of up to 200 hundred animals bringing goods down from the Andes to service
the miners who were now swarming into the region. There was work loading and unloading the animals as goods for the shops were winched across the river on pulley systems while the animals swam across below. However many things were brought in there was never enough, because there were so many people now living in the area. These were outrageous people who moved between a violent and basic existence in the jungle and ostentatious wealth in the city. Bestia Human (the Human Beast) was the most notorious of these. A miner from the Andean town of Abancay, he was friends with the highest authorities in Cusco. He was excessive in generosity and in cruelty. Many people repeated to us the story of how he’d been out with friends and had gone into a shop (bar) to buy drinks for them, and had simply taken over the premises until he and his friends had satiated their desires. In the jungle he worked alongside his men, stripped right down, naked, dirty, shameless. ‘Uncivilised as a native’, he worked on a different ethos, grabbing all he could, extracting without restraint, killing those who demanded pay, those who tried to leave. His exploits were renowned but he was not exceptional.

We were told that there were people from all kinds of places there (gringos, Russians, Poles, Germans, Yugoslavs) – all bad people, outsiders who came and took the gold, people who were violent and threatening, who didn’t pay, who put nothing back, who put a pistol to your head when they asked you what they owed you. They were times without authority, law, security. And they must have been times of deep desperation for many as well. The Quechua name ‘Quimsa Challwa’ (Three Fishes) was replaced by the Spanish name ‘Quince Mil’ (Fifteen Thousand), this time registering the business failure of a Russian who had come looking for gold with machinery and all sorts of equipment. But he was looking in the wrong place, and lost everything – his last his fifteen thousand soles.

Pichi (the name is short for Pichicatero, literally ‘the drug peddler’) is another former colonist who has lived in Quince Mil since the 1950s. He lived down by the river in the old settlement and had been the last to leave, long after everybody else had moved up to the new road, and the jungle had grown over those bits of the old site that hadn’t been swept away by the river. He lives on his own now in an abandoned building. He says people think he’s mad but he didn’t seem bothered. He said he was on his own as people in Quince Mil only love money, and if you have no money then you are worth nothing. Both Pichi and Braulio remember the times when gold was cheap, there was so much of it. People would get two, three, four kilos a day – up to ten kilos. The nuggets were like grains of corn. But it was dangerous work. People died from snake bites and insect bites. They got ill. They lost their investments. Gold does not necessarily reward those who make the effort. You get into debt to get started, and there are no guarantees. Many die. And people don’t know how to use the gold to get rich. They spent the money on alcohol. As Pichi remarked: ‘having risked everything to get the gold out of the water, they piss it back into the river’.

Despite the large numbers of foreign migrants who came into the area during this period, attracted by the state-led migration programmes that provided them with land, the people who now remain in the area are those like Pichi and Braulio who migrated not from abroad but from parts of the Andes adjoining this region. The presence of the Russians, Japanese and Germans remains only in memory, and inscribed in the naming of towns like Quince Mil and the Japanese-derived ‘Masuko’ a little further down the road. It is no coincidence that Benedicto Kalinowski, with his Polish heritage, is now living in the urban centre of Cusco and no longer in Cadena on the side of the road.
Although the influx of migrants produced excessive and ongoing connectivity between the Amazon, the Andes and beyond, neither the excessive masculinity of the gold frontier nor the total displacement of the agricultural model by the search for gold was anticipated by state colonisation plans. However, the gold rush (and the lumber industry) took the development process forward, drawing resources into the area from both state and private investors – the road, the airport, the bridges, the shops and banks. Quince Mil is thus a typical frontier road-side town, one that emerged in an uneasy truce between hope and despair. Pichi commented that the gold corrupts the land in this region, the poisonous gases that collect around the gold deposits turn the trees yellow. His focus on the deadly vitality of this place, reminds us that despite the waves of global mobility, there are many among those who travel long distances as inter-regional or trans-national migrants who do not manage to stay mobile. We found Braulio literally unable to get to hospital for the X-rays he needs, and Pichi, an impoverished squatter in an abandoned house – staying there because the climate is kind to a person with no money.

The contemporary migration along the road has continued, with the majority of migrants coming from the departments of Cusco and Puno to pursue opportunities in gold mining, logging and trade (Kuramoto & GRADE 2001; Radcliffe 1990; Morcillo 1982). With the current interoceanic highway construction project, a whole new wave of mobile labour has appeared in the form of itinerant workers from all over Peru who are hoping for jobs as manual labourers, to work alongside university qualified engineers from the large cities and from Brazil, whose work takes them from one construction project to the next wherever they might be in the country. Engineers working on the interoceanic highway project told us of the dangers of transitory gold mining populations in settlements like Masuko that are renowned for being rife with AIDS, a rumour that was later refuted by the nurses in the health post in the town. Local residents of Masuko, the site of one of the construction camps which will house several thousand (mainly male) workers, told us, on the other hand, of the problem they had with local women wanting to get into relationships with engineers and wishing to leave their towns, leading to a haemorrhaging of the local female population or a proliferation of single mothers who end up being left by their short-term partners who had no intention of honouring their paternal responsibilities. Meanwhile the detrimental environmental impacts of a further influx of mining and logging workers as a result of the new, faster road poses another problem for the construction consortium and the national government who have to work to reassure potential international investors like the Credit Suisse bank, of the ethical robustness of the project in this maelstrom of forces, influences and effects. From handing out free toothbrushes to improve the health of populations living along the road, to providing health insurance to employees, to convening conferences of international environmental NGOs and universities to discuss the way in which the consortium might mitigate the indirect effects of the road, the road building process is an ongoing negotiation of how to put in place predictable frames and how to deal with the excesses they reveal, a process in which the cultural politics of the economy is negotiated in ways that constantly surprise.

Conclusions

Roads building projects are public works, material infrastructures built through explicit engagement with the promise of economic development. In the regions we studied, the sense of resource frontier was intrinsic to the histories of road-side
dwelling – and we have referred to the fluctuating opportunities offered by the markets in rubber, gold, timber, agriculture, tourism and, most recently, bio-pharmaceuticals that connect local communities to the interests of the national state and international capital and abruptly disconnect them as circumstances change.

In these contexts we have also shown how statecraft is inherently experimental, responsive to an unstable physical and social environment. In its current neo-liberal form, the modern state strives to ‘manage’ uncertainty through a particular configuration of the social in economic terms. As Wendy Brown explains, ‘neoliberal rationality, while foregrounding the market, is not only or even primarily focused on the economy; it involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social actions’ (Brown 2005, p. 40). And in neoliberal regimes where the cost/benefit ratio becomes the measure of all state practices, ‘where the state must not simply concern itself with the market, but think and behave like a market actors, across all its functions, including law’ (Brown 2005, p. 42), we find the citizen (and public officers) urged to be entrepreneurial and calculating rather than simply law abiding. In such contexts ‘corruption’ flourishes as boundaries between public and personal benefit are more easily blurred. Differential possibilities for a calculating approach to ‘law’ render some more lawless than others, some more visible as socially valuable entrepreneurs than others.

It is remarkable that planners, state officers and NGOs express concern that on the margins of the state people do not know how to create possibilities for themselves, to organise and take responsibility for their actions, and are in some sense responsible for a state and an economy that has systematically failed to embrace them as desirable publics. Needless to say such creativity is everywhere in evidence. We were told of a network of shamans who moved to live on a roadside in Northern Peru, and who subsequently started to work with international NGOs on the development and commercialisation of pharmaceuticals. These same people, living in an area where game animals have now all but disappeared, take airplane journeys to go hunting further into the rainforest – managing thereby to continue their core commitments to the patterns of sociality and commensality that hunting game entails. These are not people who resist the modern state through an incapacity to embrace change, or to understand how to take advantage of new markets and/or opportunities. In and around Quince Mil, the profusion of derelict and abandoned sites around the town is evidence of previous desires for economic development. Ruins and abandoned spaces, and the stories that people like Braulio and Pichi tell, are reminders of engagements that did not work out. But these failed experiments do not erase the desire for such connectivity. The frontier continues to entice people to make their fortunes anew. Local desire for economic development is not a blind faith in modernisation, but rather an ongoing and anxious engagement with the appearing and disappearing opportunities provided by the land, by passing trade, and now by the new road.

This history of road building in Peru began with an interest on the part of the state to recuperate the transport infrastructures from foreign control, and to rein in the regional elites in order to create a viable national economy. The creation of an integrated national territory involved a certain standardisation of space into socially and administratively defined domains, which in turn enabled the structures and mobilities that came to constitute the very fabric of a cohesive and integrated state. National road construction in Peru has, in this respect, had powerful integrative effects. Road building provokes the nomadic movement of professional engineers whose projects bring employment and skills
to ‘peripheral’ regions. Peasant communities have also experienced new kinds of mobility in their colonisation of newly accessible lands where they are encouraged to create wealth through entrepreneurial endeavour. However, such mobilities are equally liable to be cast as destructive of the social fabric. The mobility of the rural poor is easily recast as displacement, and economic migrants are seen as dangerous outsiders unrestrained by established social norms or responsibilities of stable moral ‘community’. The dramatic bursts of activity that characterise boom and bust economies have had devastating consequences for vulnerable social groups and physical environments. And in the face of such tangible devastation, the claim that social cohesion can be achieved through projects of territorial and technical connection encourages the promoters of such projects to draw distinctions between cohesive and disruptive forces, and to stabilise these distinctions to contain the disruptive energy of those whose activity renders them marginal to the self-image of a modern nation-state.

Roads afford connectivity, and promise to integrate diverse populations, enabling more intense (and more productive) economic integration. The core equivocation around the issue of ‘development’ and ‘progress’ continually re-energises all those involved to see the solution to their problems in terms of enhanced ‘connectivity’ – which for some implies effective technical connection, for others a more profound notion of engagement. For those who plan from a distance, the goal is to achieve a speedy and smooth flow of goods, people and ideas. But there are obstacles, and such obstacles are easily (lazily) cast as cultural excess, and banished to the space of ‘externality’ produced by the abstractions of the technical response. In this framing, ‘the cultural’, although displaced, is recognisable and even potentially valuable to some economic models – a traditional or predictable response, governed by enduring semiotic logics. However when we view the situation from the perspectives of the ‘obstacles’, it is clear that smooth, speedy integration involves erasures, removals, and disappearances that draw forth active responses. Those who do not fit, and who thereby reveal the discontinuities of the technical models of integration, are cast as ignorant, recalcitrant and inappropriately engaged – the cultural now configured as both excessive and lacking. In such contexts, training, laws, repression, and abandonment stand in for the far more difficult task of negotiation across difference. We have argued that an ethnographic understanding of life on the roads reconfigures the ‘disengaged’ as the ‘otherwise engaged’, and suggests that at best ‘integration’ involves a bumpy, open-ended experimental attempt at conversation, that aims towards mutual understanding despite the constant spectre of equivocation.

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4. We are indebted to Marisol de la Cadena and to Mario Blaser for the way in which we have elaborated this idea.
5. For a historical account of the importance of roads in the making of Victorian Britain as a liberal society see Joyce (2003).
6. Three episodes of 'The Secret Life of the Motorway' were screened on BBC4 in August 2007.
7. See Kemp (2002) for discussion of the struggle between rail and road transport as a struggle of national elites against international capital.
9. Santos-Granero and Barclay (2000) make a strong case for differential treatment of Peru’s various frontier economies – pointing out that prior state presence in Loreto in fact did much to enable the national (and regional) economy to prosper through the rubber boom, in ways that were not possible in Madre de Dios.
10. See Huertas and Altamirano (2003) for detailed discussion of the battles between the Peruvian and Bolivian rubber barons.
11. See Santos Granero and Barclay (1998) for a particularly fine account of the gradual extension of the Carretera Central beyond Tarma to the central Amazon.
12. It seems likely that this was part of the colonisation programme financed by the Leguía regime in 1929 (Eidt 1962, p. 265).
14. Eidt (1962) discusses the Russian exodus from the region, and suggests that of the 200 Russians to be given land by the Leguía government in 1929, just one migrant remained in Peru by 1960.

REFERENCES


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