

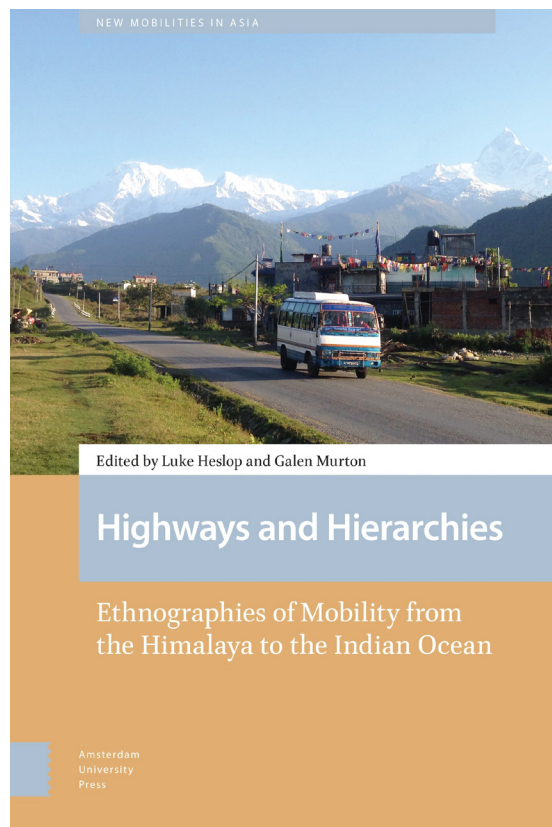
Book Review

Review of *Highways and Hierarchies: Ethnographies of Mobility from the Himalaya to the Indian Ocean* edited by Luke Heslop and Galen Murton

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021. 226 pages. ISBN: 9789463723046

Reviewed by Hasan Karrar

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2218/himalaya.2022.7188>



Recommended Citation

Karrar, H. (2022). Review of *Highways and Hierarchies: Ethnographies of Mobility from the Himalaya to the Indian Ocean* edited by Luke Heslop and Galen Murton. *HIMALAYA* 41(1): 143-145.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

More than other infrastructural forms, roads capture—and represent—state-led development aspirations and imaginaries. Luke Heslop and Galen Murton’s *Highways and Hierarchies: Ethnographies of Mobility from the Himalaya to the Indian Ocean* offers new empirical evidence on the interplay between development and infrastructure, governance and exclusion.

Six case studies from South Asia and the Tibet-Himalaya region (Galen Murton and Tulasi Sigdel; Yi Huang; Swargajyoti Gohain; Jasnea Sarma; Mustafa Khan; Luke Heslop and Laura Jefferey)—plus a preface (Penny Harvey), an introduction by the editors, and a concluding chapter on recent field projects (Katharine Rankin and Edward Simpson)—make this volume a welcome addition to the scholarship on roads and infrastructure.

“Highways and Hierarchies reads well as a single volume. It offers a contemporary snapshot of infrastructure-led development in South Asia, one of the most densely populated regions of the world, and where questions of development are intrinsically linked to political power and regime legitimacy”.

- Hasan Karrar on *Highways and Hierarchies*

Highways and Hierarchies reads well as a single volume. It offers a contemporary snapshot of infrastructure-led development in South Asia, one of the most densely populated regions of the world, and where questions of development are intrinsically linked to political power and regime legitimacy. Conversely, the chapters can also be approached as standalone pieces (as is now becoming common, each chapter has an abstract, a bibliography, and a DOI number for identification).

Highways and Hierarchies posits that the new mobilities engendered by new roads do not affect everyone equally. As the editors argue, “the making of new roads ... (re)inscribes particular systems of order and rank, privileging some and (re)marginalizing others” (p. 24). Simultaneously, inasmuch as roads result in new mobilities, “they also control those movements,” that, in the process, “rewrite relations between such things, as well as between a state and its populations” (p. 25).

The consequences of new infrastructures and mobilities can vary, as Murton and Sigdel describe for Nepal. People may be left behind—figuratively and literally—by development schemas, there may be increased securitization, or capture of the transport sector by powerful lobbies (pp. 40–50). Road building can also serve to create remoteness, as Yi Huang observes in Medong, a Tibetan region which can be connected to the Chinese road network, but not to towns and cities in India (p. 80). Here too, new roads have led to new regulated mobilities, mandating that people who travel the roads carry official identification (p. 88).

Roads are also associated with a new middle class and new consumption practices (p. 99), a relationship that Gohain addresses in her study of *dhabbas*—or roadside eateries—along India’s NH 1 and NH 37. Gohain illustrates how *dhabbas* reinforce ‘class effects’ (p. 109), with particular demographics gravitating towards eateries of a particular type. Situated in India’s northeastern borderland, Sarma’s ethnographically textured account describes how the pursuit of ‘spectacular’ infrastructure is a national project that has not improved the lives of local people, but instead is leading to casualization, contractual labor, and lowered wages (p. 141).

At a time when there is considerable interest in China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—and the massive infrastructure financing that Beijing’s investment regime spurs—*Highways and Hierarchies* offers new evidence on how Chinese-funded projects are materialized on the ground. Describing new roads in south-eastern Pakistan, Khan explores how powerful developmentalist imaginaries today are fueled by the promise of Chinese financing; as a result, projects that had *predated* the BRI are increasingly conflated with it. As Khan notes, under the framework of the BRI “land now [becomes] the central arbiter of power, and for those with access to the land, wild dreams of accumulation can be strategically encouraged” (p. 164). This leads him to wonder what “these exuberant dreams of connectivity and economic prosperity [are] really revealing” (p. 169).

Staying with the theme of Chinese-financed infrastructure, Heslop and Jefferey describe the

Laamu link road in the Maldives archipelago. While the link road was a ‘gift’ from the Chinese government, it should be considered within a larger process of Chinese influence in South Asia (p. 177). Heslop and Jeffery situate this project within China’s turn-of-the-century ‘Going Out’ strategy, one result of which has been the creation of new export markets for raw material from China (p. 186). Adding to our understanding of how large-scale projects appear on the ground, the authors describe how Chinese workers were largely confined to their compounds or construction sites (p. 187). This is similar to my observations from northern Pakistan, where Chinese personnel work and reside in enclaved spaces, rarely mingling with the local populace.

My minor critique of this volume rests on what the book does *not* cover. As the title suggests, the volume prioritizes highways over other roads. Connectivity links that are not highways are mostly left out of the analyses: these could be roads within cities, or those that are built on land which is appropriated for housing colonies. As new land is opened for residential and commercial use across South Asia, it adds significantly to road mileage in a country. This leads me to wonder what proportion of new roads being built in the region are not highways? I also felt the absence of maps—it did not take away from the chapters, but I believe the topic warrants it.

Finally, I noted that the majority of contributors were either from—or had long-term association with—the country or place they were writing about. Working in and coming from the Global South myself, I am cautious about overplaying this hand; but I did appreciate that *Highways and Hierarchies* represented inclusive scholarship and collaborations between institutions and across continents.

Academic reviews often conclude by recommending the volume to advanced students and/or senior scholars. I am going to buck this trend. While students and specialists will certainly engage with this volume, the six chapters on/ from South Asia and the Tibet-Himalaya region that are at the core of *Highways and Hierarchies* are unusually accessible: they are free from jargon, and they have a narrative structure. Any of these six chapters would be a good fit for introductory level courses in anthropology, geography, development studies or related disciplines where students are asked to reflect on questions of statecraft, or how state power is enacted or represented. This is a testament to the empirically driven analyses collected here, and the accessible manner in which the scholarship is presented.

Hasan Karrar is Associate Professor in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) in Pakistan. His research covers economic and political configurations between China, Central Asia, and north Pakistan since the Cold War.