

State Space and Public Works: an ethnographic approach to the road construction industry in Southern Peru.

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This paper approaches the topic of political formation and deformation in the Andes from the perspective of a road construction project in the Southern Peruvian Andes. The road in question is Route 26, more commonly known as the Interoceanic Highway. Since 2005 Hannah Knox and I have been working ethnographically on tramos II and III of this project, a 700+ kilometre stretch between Urcos in the Department of Cusco, and the small town of Iberia on the border between Peru and Brazil. The consortium building the Inter-oceanic highway draws together Brazilian and Peruvian expertise – its key directors and the parent company are from the Brazilian trans-national Odebrecht. The Peruvian state is the client and supervises the works, and the consortium is accountable to the Ministry of Transport. But the money comes from loans from multilateral agencies – and from Brazilian Banks. The Peruvian state is in turn answerable to these agencies as the loans come with conditions and terms that they must fulfil. These include agreements concerning local employment and participation directly implicating the local state at municipal and community level.

This road construction project has offered us a particular way into the issue of how to think about neoliberalism and the contemporary Peruvian state. This paper offers an *ethnographic* perspective on the interplay between territorial sovereignty and capital flows in the shaping of a ‘national political economy’, a perspective which implies an attention to the detailed ways in which such relations play out in specific spaces. This attention to the detail of how politics plays out in the course of everyday life, reveals things that are not usually considered to be of significance in the world of politics and international relations. The central argument of the paper relates to the way in which investments in and enthusiasms for infrastructural connectivity obscure the deeply disjunctive expectations of what infrastructural ‘integration’ ultimately achieves. Two key ethnographic examples are used to discuss the multiplicity of state space, and to reveal how such multiplicity produces conditions of ambiguity with respect to the territorial politics of state/citizen relations. In conclusion I discuss an emergent minority territorial politics that seeks to reconfigure established state/citizen distinctions in the articulation of a concern with material relations that are sidelined by contemporary enactments of territorial sovereignty.

The examples focus on the ubiquitous use of the road block as a mode of political protest in which people struggle for visibility in a political climate where the voices of minority groups are not easily heard. Such road blocks produce sites of political confrontation by blocking the free flow of vehicles, goods and people. Such blockages are not necessarily political. Roads the world over are used as spaces of mundane sociality and the blockage might be caused by rituals, markets, or meetings of all kinds. The political block is a provocation resting on the ambiguity over whom roads belong to – traders or travellers, states or citizens, corporations or publics: who activates and protects the social potential of roads, who ensures that they are not misappropriated, who decides what kinds of state space roads are? In what follows I

present two contrasting road protests. The first one emerged as an instance of organized citizenship, a valid way for a marginalised population to make a claim on the state, producing a possibility for convergent interest and effectively drawing the state into spaces which had, until then, been primarily perceived as spaces of abandonment. The second example, by contrast describes a protest which was less overtly political but which provoked the construction company to call on state forces to disperse a protest which was seen as a threat to the wider 'public interest' of the construction process.

Protest 1: In 1999 President Fujimori of Peru had signed a new Forest Law (Ley de la Selva) as part of an on-going strategy to promote bilateral agreements with Brazil, particularly with respect to the search for oil, and the development of hydro power. Within this agreement there was a commitment to the improvement of the transport infrastructures, which included provision for the asphaltting of a stretch of existing road which would extend the trans-continental network and ultimately offer Brazil a route to Peru's Pacific ports. But Fujimori never followed through on this commitment. His priorities were focused elsewhere as he struggled to alter the constitution to secure himself a third term of office. By 2000 he had fled the country and an emergency interim government was trying to stabilise a volatile situation of deep-seated corruption in a country only recently emerging from over a decade of war between the state and the Maoist guerrilla movement of the Shining Path. In fact it was only after Fujimori had left the country that the people of Ocongate (a small town in the Southern Peruvian Andes where I have been working on and off since 1983) found out about the legal provision for a road. The agreement was about to expire. A few key local actors began to petition the government and eventually on September 11th 2001 – when the eyes of the world were turned elsewhere – they managed to gather around four thousand protestors and occupy a bridge not far from the highland city of Cusco, effectively blocking one of the key arterial highways of Southern Peru. Their demand was that the new government commit the funds and build the road. The protest was effective. The Government agreed to extend the time-frame of the Forest Law, and funds were committed to the building of the Inter-oceanic highway.

We cannot know how much impact their demonstration actually had on those empowered to fund such projects. But the demonstration left its mark on those who participated. When people told me about the occupation of the bridge the event was framed as a heroic claim on the state - they stressed their determination and their success in working to ensure that the new road would not by-pass their town. They spoke of their passionate longing for this road as a way to improve their everyday lives. They talked about the dust that they were forced to swallow, and of the risk to their lives every time they travelled. Their accounts of the demonstration graphically described how they had chained themselves to the bridge, how they slept in the open air without food, how they mustered the support not only of the other communities along the route but also of a powerful miraculous Christ figure whose shrine is located in the sacred mountains that dominate the landscape in this region.

The passionate desire for the road seemed to align local interest to a general enthusiasm for road construction – embraced not just by the governments of Brazil and Peru, but supported by multilateral lenders such as the World Bank – and even for some by the protective agency of an Andean deity. The protest mobilised the idea that

political and economic stagnation stem from a missing relation – a gap – that is felt to impede progress. In this mode of reasoning networked connectivity, economic progress and democratisation are understood to be mutually constitutive. The formula has driven investment in Latin American road construction programmes since the 1920s when roads emerged as the technology of choice for the consolidation of the modern state. It also paved the way for the expansion of US markets and cultural orientations. In 1919 the Pan American Commercial Conference was dedicated to the promotion of US building methods to the Latin American states.

“Penetrating Latin America through roads was functional to an imperial vision that presented technology as an instrument for hemispheric integration. Selling cars and building roads were means to exhibit to Latin Americans the achievements of a technologically superior society. Hence the project of an intercontinental highway encapsulated both foreign-policy dreams and business objectives. It projected into a mechanical package (automobiles + highways) the expectation of the American middle class and the political dreams of its leadership. At last, “Latin” and “Anglo-Saxon” America could be united by a technology that was representative of American mass consumer culture” (Salvatore 2006: 677).

In Peru itself the road building programmes were played out as a technological confrontation with the natural world - a drama enhanced by established imaginaries of a divisive and racialised national geography: a narrow coastal strip, divided from the resource-rich Amazon forest by the huge barrier of the Andean mountain range. The new roads were designed to cut through these barriers – meeting the interests of banks, governments and local people all equally invested in the idea of connectivity as public good – a way to increase the circulation of raw materials, commodities, people, and information for the benefit and progress of all.

In contemporary times the Inter-Oceanic highway was also justified in these terms. The common purpose is of course relatively superficial and obscures important discontinuities. The local way of addressing the need for a new road surface had little to do with the macro-economic ambitions of Brazil, the development of the Amazon region or the integration of the Peruvian state. From the perspective of the Ocongate campaigners their protest for the road was a bid to change their conditions and expectations of life – to reconfigure how they connect to others. Their protest was not radical. They were calling on the state, as righteous citizens, to remember their condition, and to fulfil the constitutional obligation to ensure parity of inclusion through the provision of a stable and reliable ‘state space’. Their protest demanded a recognition of a just claim, an acceptance that their needs had not been met in the past, that the state had failed to integrate them as citizens and was cutting them off from entrepreneurial futures. Their pasts and their futures were thus at stake – and in this grabbed space of opportunity their demand was for an engineering solution: they wanted a fast, reliable, asphalt road which would address their specific condition of geographic isolation and marginality and make their space continuous with and equivalent to other spaces in the more developed regions of the country. Ultimately they were looking for transformations in their daily lives and were less invested in the logics that drove the move, at another scale, to develop market potential by ensuring networked connectivity. In fact they were somewhat sceptical about the integrative capacity of the road, schooled as they were in the experience of differential inclusion. They knew that their town was not remote to those with expensive vehicles, they

knew that the engineers could get back to the East coast of Brazil in less time than it took them to travel a few hundred kilometres down the road in old trucks and buses. Nevertheless it was clearly politically expedient to play up the image of a homogeneous and bounded isolation to bring the much desired road their way. By packaging the problem in the right way they could get a solution to other problems that nobody else was interested in.

In accounts of networked connectivity it is common to find that the ways in which connectivity is achieved matters less than connectivity itself. Indeed in network thinking the relation itself is not what's interesting. And since the relation is taken for granted, there is a tendency to think of networks via an inventory approach - the connection is either on or off - you are in the loop or out of it. We are familiar with this trope from Castells' work on the network society - and from the ways in which this framing has been rhetorically adopted by the World Bank and by governments and local councils across the world eager to enhance their own connective presence, or to get their citizens to join up - to the market, to e-governance, to community building. The preoccupations that this emphasis on connectivity produces tend to play into the notion that the absence of a specific connection is somehow tantamount to an absence of relationality per se. This attitude was certainly characteristic of campaigners for the road in Peru who were terrified of being left out of the loop. When we began our fieldwork, at around the same time as the construction company was finalising the routing for the new road, people were expending tremendous effort in trying to find out exactly where the new road was going to go, deeply concerned about the possibility of further marginalisation should the road not run close enough to their front door! However while road construction projects might appear to offer sites of social cohesion, not only offering material integration but also addressing shared desires for connectivity - in ways that allow a protest to become an effective means of communication - it is also the case that as roads begin to materialise this sense of common ground gives way to deeper concerns about whose expectations take priority.

Protest 2:

The road construction was well underway when the second Ocongate protest happened. Indeed the progress was what brought the problem to light. After much debate it had been agreed that the new road would not cut through the centre of the small and densely populated Andean town. Instead it would run around the edge opening up a new space between the houses and the river, ensuring that the town square remained intact. Some agreed that this was the only way. Others were disappointed. They knew that even this minor detour would effectively preclude the traffic from stopping. There was little advantage to them. Nothing would change. And this was the problem. The road was supposed to change things. In the campaign to bring the road to the town much had been made of the ways in which asphalt concrete would put a stop to the dust - the dust that they had to swallow when they travelled, the dust that swirled in clouds around moving vehicles, and in particular the dust that the school children were forced to inhale in and around their playgrounds. The schools lie to one end of the town and became a focal point for local protest. The townspeople asked the construction company to asphalt an extra stretch of road - the stretch that ran past the school. This short stretch had come to index a future that teetered between progress and stagnation - it had always been assumed that the new

road would come this way. The company refused. From their perspective they had to work to a tight budget and a tight schedule. The works that they were contracted to deliver could not be diverted to deal with every local concern along the way. Ocongate was just one point along a 700 km stretch of a route where the affective force of deprivation and expectation would constantly generate demands. But their refusal made no sense to local people. The construction company was there. They had the materials and the machinery. The short stretch would hardly detain them and people knew that in other circumstances deals were struck, other modes of compensation or equivalence were conjured to allow the works to proceed. And so the Director of the school organised the parents to march on the construction camp demanding that the Engineer in charge of the works negotiate with them. There were hundreds of people and from inside the camp it felt as if they were under siege. Inside they were scared. Outside people were angry but they had no real sense of being on a demonstration – they wanted to talk. Many were there simply because the parents association demanded they participate or pay a fine. They were told that the Engineer had gone to the city but that he was on his way back and would speak to them when he arrived. What actually arrived were bus loads of special forces, armed police who dispersed the crowd with tear gas and batons – pursuing the parents along the streets and into their home. The protesters clung to their designation as parents in their accounts to emphasise that they had protested, as before, as citizens, family members, women and children alongside the men. By contrast to the larger and more dramatic seizure of the bridge during the first protest, this blockade was treated as an attack. The police force was brought in to protect the public works and the private company contracted to deliver them.

Fortunately nobody was killed. But the incident was hugely significant in the unfolding relationship between the company and local residents. From that point on the construction camps were patrolled by armed guards. The local police were formally sub-contracted to protect the company. The lines of protection and of threat were articulated in ways that located public interest firmly on the side of the corporation. The road that they had longed for and campaigned for so ardently had opened them to capital in ways that they had not anticipated. The new connectivity turned out to involve a militarisation of their immediate environment, a closing off of rights to peaceful protest, and a closing off of expectations of protection from the local police. The road had become a space that seemed to amplify discrimination and differentiation. The anxieties about the future had folded back into the present and provoked both the demonstration and the armed response.

Finally I would add that in this folding the road also emerged as a site through which an implicit politics of scale became explicit. From the beginning the expectations for this road configured the construction project as a site of convergence where the slippage between the ambition for inter-continental connectivity seamlessly morphed into the site of local development and improvement. But the ‘win-win’ formula collapsed as in the process of construction the company felt itself compelled to explicitly impose a scale at odds with that which would enable local people to feel that this project might, in the end, have something to do with them.

Protest and the Corporate State

In what Deleuze refers to as ‘control societies’, businesses take over from the institutions of the disciplinary society as described and analysed by Foucault, or rather such institutions become businesses, reconfiguring the modes of control. Deleuze is interested in thinking through how the mutations of capitalism relate to other social forms and forces, and by extension, presumably, the space of the state¹. In such scenarios the flow of information and of services, the control of codes and circuits becomes the central concern, and as the quality of flows become more urgent, so the road block is reconfigured as a site of radical politics, as opposed to normative protest that reinstates a smooth state/citizen relation. Such road blocks can now only ambiguously or tangentially enact a claim by citizens on the state. To block a road entails an edgy space of uncertainty between the enactment of responsible, organised citizenship and the criminal disruption of the ordered state. The ambiguity has everything to do with the deep and enduring compromise between the territorial state, and the deterritorializing flows of capital, the source of corporate energy, on which the state depends. And today the state increasingly finds itself obliged to defend the integrity of flow over that of territory. Free trade agreements are entered into in precisely this spirit. So what can the roads – both as the smooth surfaces and sites of blockage and protest - reveal about contemporary political formations and deformations in the Andes?

The first thing to note is that the state becomes less tolerant of blockage. The solid and durable surface that the civil engineering profession produces for state integration has always had to negotiate the tensions that arise between national interests and local needs. These dynamics are particularly acute in the ambit of the extractive industries. In these contexts the normative road blocks to initiate dialogue between state actors and citizens are increasingly interpreted as transgressive lawless acts and dealt with as declarations of war. The recent massacre at Bagua in which native people blocked a road to protest against the sale of concessions for mining and oil exploration is the most recent and dramatic confrontation of this kind.

Keeping the businesses going then takes priority over keeping the road open. As noted above private capital and entrepreneurial energies have always been central to the constitution of state territories. From the mercenary armies of the early frontier settlers, to the entanglements of state and business interests of generations of state officials, and now arrangements whereby the Peruvian state seeks to generate income, and force, by converting the space of the territorial state into the space of flows between the more powerful economies of Brazil and China (in the case of the Interoceanic Highway). Armed with the rhetoric of business, the Peruvian state declares its vocation as a mining nation, and seeks to broker alliances with capital to extract and market its natural resources. It also offers a re-branding (and concessionary rights) for international tourism so that its territories can realise their potential as a space which others will pay to pass through. Armed with the public resources of the police force, the construction and extraction companies cut through public protest, they close the road when their work requires, on the explicit authorisation of the President, and with their own calculations of ‘reasonable force’. Indeed business responds to the counter-claims on territory with its own territorialising response – the fenced construction camps, the exclusive use of 4x4s to

¹ G. Deleuze (1995) [1990] ‘Postscript on Control Societies’ in *Negotiations*, Columbia University Press.

move around, the spatial enactments of difference which manifest so clearly how the connectivity which they produce and enjoy is not devised to enhance national integration.²

It is important to emphasise however that the territorial state does not disappear in the space of flows. And the space of place (as Castells puts it) is not external to the space of flows, but is their material grounding. It is thus to be expected that in these spaces we might find a minority politics in which new political relations emerge. The ambiguity of the territory/flow relation does not only create opportunities for the exercise of state power, it also creates spaces for the emergence of new alliances that reconfigure the terms and categories of the political. Territory is reappearing as a central focus of many contemporary social movements across Peru, as a means of articulating and making visible the discontinuities and gaps that the smooth space of flows gloss over. In Andean and Amazonian traditions the earth has always been respected as a volatile force. Historically the political agency of the earth has been invoked and celebrated for its potential to reassert not a bounded territory of state, but a territorial relation, an earth politics with consequences that demands a grounded ethic of care. As state/business territory increasingly goes under-ground through the widespread sale of mining concessions, the notion of territorial politics emerges with a new force, no longer the focus of a politics of integration, but an ontological politics of matter that questions the right of state actors to conceptualise the territory as marketable resource.

² See James Ferguson (2005) 'Seeing Like an Oil Company: space, security, and global capital in Neoliberal Africa' *American Anthropologist* 107:3, 377-82, for elaboration on the distinction between the point to point connection of enclaved territory, and the disciplinary grid of integration to which James Scott refers in *Seeing Like a State*.