

'Speed Governors and Black Spots: Manufacturing Opportunity on the Margins of Road Safety in Kenya'

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Thirty years on, David Parkin's (1979) examination of road construction in Kenya and its socially pluralizing effects provides key lessons about the ambivalence of all weather, tarmac roads in this eastern African country. With exuberant enthusiasm for the promises of automobility in more recent years, particularly since the beginnings of the Kibaki administration in 2002, the expansion of new road networks throughout Kenya brings opportunity in myriad forms to all manner of social actors, just as it also threatens to unbuckle life itself through the wider impacts of roads, particularly road crashes. This paper examines some of the paradoxical effects of road safety in Kenya over the past decade by examining how assessments of risk are offset by evaluating opportunity. Two ethnographic foci provide the context for discussion: traffic enforcement and road engineering, and the production of risks that these practices enable along Kenya's roads.

The new emphasis on governing automobility through reformed policing is examined through attention to 'corrupt' practice at Kenyan roadsides. Corruption is largely viewed as a bane within Kenya, the gainsaying of 'development', but this paper examines how certain practices deemed to be unlawful, such as paying bribes to keep traffic routes open, can be seen as productive in light of opportunism. Outside of police, however, the new re-regulation of the commuter transport sector has meant considerable opportunity for local road-side mechanics, as well as importers of second-hand vehicles, both actors associated at some level with 'corruption.' These morally questionable practices reveal some of the unintended effects of enforcing road safety in Kenya.

With respect to the massive road building projects taken on in the last few years, this paper also turns its attention to the ways in which road safety engages with engineering and construction, marking out potential 'black spots' in both road building and transport policy. What do new highways mean for the informal workers and traders that formerly occupied spaces of opportunity on the side of the previous road system? What does the building of six-lane autoroutes suggest about class formation in Kenya? In this paper, 'black spots' refer simultaneously to faults in road design, as well as the contradictions of transport policies that lead to danger, risk, or the loss of livelihood for those servicing the automobile.

This dual focus on enforcement and engineering is intended to spark conversations about the limits of road safety policies and interventions in contemporary African states.