Getting to Know the Culture on the Road

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What, where, why hitchhiking?

On a bright summer's day, with backpacks prepared for a week of hiking and a cardboard sign in hand saying "Skye"; we stand on the side of the road ready to set off for an adventure. Another time it is autumn. We already had waited on the road for a while so we decide to entertain ourselves and hopefully attract the attention of passing drivers – we start waltzing on the layover. As winter comes the temperature drops but we wait on the side of the road again. This time our adventure is already over and though excitement after a good hike warms us from the inside, we shudder from the strong gusts of wind and heavy hail. Tired and soaking wet, with plastic bags in our shoes to keep our feet warm and dry, we face the road with our thumbs raised up. Finally someone pulls over. We hop in and introduce ourselves and I ask: "Do you often pick up hitchhikers? What makes you do that? It is not that common these days." The driver recalls that when he was my age, he used to hitchhike himself all the time, and now he feels that it is his turn to give a lift to someone else.

His answer reminded me of circle of reciprocal exchange practiced in many small islands and by inland North American Indians, where receiving a gift entailed an obligation to reciprocate it (Mauss 1967). At first, this immediate connection puzzled me; how the elaborated circle of donating, receiving, and returning gifts within a settled society can be comparable to hitchhiking – a practice which in its very nature is accidental, geographically unrestricted, and only temporarily relational. Hence, I decided to investigate this connection and to find out if fleeting relations spontaneously made on the road between random individuals can actually establish a geographically unrestricted and lasting circle of exchange which maintains a non-authoritative sense of obligation.

Hitchhiking is a free mode of travelling based on generosity and mutual trust, allowing the traveller to reach one's desired destination without making a payment of a definite value. A hitchhiker stands on the side of the road with one's thumb raised up – a signifier for the driver that one needs a lift. Usually a hitchhiker has a cardboard sign with the name of one's desired destination on it to let the driver know where one is going. The road is a place of transition or, in Augé's (2008) words, 'a non-place' with which people do not establish any substantial relationships and use just for functional purposes – to get from point A to point B.

My ethnography on hitchhiking took place in Scotland, the place where I came to study as a foreigner. Not having been to Scotland before my years at university, I was keen to explore not only the academic but also the natural landscape. Whenever there was a longer break from studying, my friend and I would look up interesting hiking routes and locations of the bothies (free to access shelters in the mountains) and set off to explore different corners of this beautiful country.

At the beginning we chose to hitchhike because it was a handy way to save some of the limited student funds. Additionally, some of our chosen destinations were outside of the public transport routes. However, although hitchhiking was initially determined by economic and

logistical reasons, I soon realised that the conversations I had with the drivers familiarised me with Scotland just as much as the actual destinations where we anticipated to go. My current knowledge about Scotland: its culture, history, traditions, and people is to a huge extent built from the stories that generous drivers shared with me on the road. Thus, through hitchhiking, to me the road transitioned from a 'non-place' and became an 'anthropological place' which "is a principle of meaning for the people who live in it, and also a principle of intelligibility for the person who observes it" (Augé 2008: 42).

This paper is based on a compilation of hitchhiking experiences in the summer, autumn and winter of 2018 and 2019; I was never hitchhiking alone and was always accompanied by a friend. Using hitchhiking both as a subject and as a method, I look at it through the framework of reciprocal exchange, within which my own knowledge of Scotland took shape.

Empathy and the reciprocal exchange

As mentioned in the introduction, a specific encounter between the hitchhiker and the driver is purely accidental and is possible only because they happen to share the same geographical location at the same time. In order for a driver to stop and pick up a hitchhiker, they also need to share the same destination in the closest future. When my friend and I hitch, we try to find a place on the road where most of the cars would be going in the direction we need. Nevertheless, we still usually wait between ten minutes and an hour before we get a lift. I cannot speculate about the opinions, prejudices, feelings, or plans of those drivers who pass by without stopping; however, there must be something that determines the fact that the hitchhiker is picked up by certain drivers and not others. Those drivers who decide to stop, share a certain resonance with a hitchhiker before the lift happens; they decide to stop before actually getting to know the hitchhiker. Thus, what makes the driver empathise and stop are not the personal qualities of the hitchhiker, but rather the personal experiences or feelings of the driver.

As I mentioned in the vignette, it is not rare to hear that one of the reasons why the driver decides to pick up a hitchhiker is because they hitchhiked in their youth and now wish to return this favour. Another frequently mentioned reason was that the drivers had children of a similar age, and wished that someone would similarly help them, should they be in need. Both answers situate the particular encounter between the hitchhiker and the driver within a larger framework of reciprocal exchange. Some of the drivers who decide to stop, do so not only through reacting to the figure of a hitchhiker standing on the road, but simultaneously refer (consciously or unconsciously) to their own past experiences or future hopes.

In Marcel Mauss' ethnography, the societies which he frequented had very strict rules for the gift exchange. During special occasions it was an obligation to give a gift as well as to adequately receive it. More importantly, if a recipient was given a gift, one could not keep it for oneself as that would destroy the spiritual force – mana, activated through the practice of exchange; one was obliged to donate something either backwards or forwards in the circle of exchange. Thus, the value of the exchanged objects was spiritual rather than material, as it sustained social relations between members of the society (Mauss 1967).

Some islanders held that a certain length of time needs to pass before the receiver can further reciprocate (Purkis 2012: 158).

This conception of time brings me back to the case of hitchhiking. The drivers who were hitchhikers in their youth, had already received a favour and now, as some time had passed and they drove their own cars, they returned the favour to those who had just started their adventures on the road. Similarly, those who decided to help a hitchhiker while thinking of their own children, did a favour hoping that in one or another way it would be returned to their children in the future.

The practice of hitchhiking radically differs from that of reciprocal exchange maintained in the places studied by Mauss' as it is not restricted within the boundaries of one specific society. A lift – a favour given by the driver and received by the hitchhiker does not create a long lasting relationship. However, this lack of direct and immediate reciprocity eliminates the possible materialistic reasoning behind such an encounter. The driver gives a lift primarily because one empathises with hitchhiker's position and is willing to generously ease his journey; the hitchhiker in turn can brighten up the dull solitude for a long distance driver. The spiritual force equivalent to mana described by Mauss is kindness shared between the driver and the hitchhiker, it also serves as an affirmation that strangers can be generous and helpful and that people should dare to trust each other more. When a person is treated with generosity, one is compelled to do good for others despite one's geographic locations. Consequently, hitchhiking continues to exist over distance and time.

The usual becomes unusual as the strange becomes familiar

In Mauss' account in Polynesia, the spiritual force activated through the gift exchange originally comes from the donor and one's land. When a person gives something, he or she simultaneously gives a moral, physical, or spiritual part of oneself which remains in that object even after having been exchanged. By accepting that object the receiver also accepts that intimate and spiritual part which belongs to its original donor and land (Mauss 1967: 10). Returning to the practice of hitchhiking, where the driver is a donor and the hitchhiker is a recipient, similar forces are at play. I propose that when a driver picks up a hitchhiker, one not only does a generous favour but simultaneously shares something intimate and private of oneself.

Firstly, the driver shares his or her physical privacy – the tiny space of the car. By accepting other's presence in the car, the driver limits one's individualism as well as accepts potential risk to their safety and privacy, and comfort (Laviolette 2017: 81). The usual private space becomes unusual as the hitchhiker intrudes it. Secondly, the driver shares his or her trajectory of action.

Take Christoph, a driver who had to stop for a short meeting during our drive. He offered that we could wait for him and then continue the journey together or, alternatively, that he could leave us on the road to wait for another car. As we were in no rush, we accepted the offer to wait and happened to visit a remarkable place. The driver's colleague was living in a beautiful mountain valley; we wandered around while waiting. I took some pictures there and after coming back home, printed them and hung them on my wall. Now I have a beautiful, tangible memory of that valley I am always happy to look at. If Christoph had not had a meeting there at that time, I would not know that such a place existed (Figure 1). Thus, a personal trajectory of the driver gave me a chance to explore a beautiful place as well as to create a long-lasting memory.

The latter example demonstrates the way in which I built my knowledge about Scotland. Hitchhiking gave me a unique perspective on the landscape we were riding through, as it was narrated by personal stories and experiences of the drivers.

The third element that a driver shares with a hitchhiker is the personal knowledge and relationship they have with the land. When Christoph was finished with the meeting, we got back into the car and moved forward. As we were approaching Fort William, Christoph glanced through the side window and pointed his finger towards the fields on the right. He explained that when he was a young teenage boy, he used to shepherd there. Having looked at the field he was pointing to, I barely noticed any sheep. Christoph sadly noted that now there is around ten times fewer sheep than when he was young. According to Christoph, it's not beneficial to breed sheep, and in some places in Scotland we see them only because the government subsidises the farmers to maintain the tradition.

On hearing this, I started to think of how different the landscape must have looked thirty or forty years ago, and how changing socio-political and economic climates changed people's relation to their land. After that ride I realised that as a foreigner not used to seeing sheep in the landscape, I always romanticised such a view. However, for the local farmers the same view brings sadness, as they see not the sheep in the fields but rather the scarcity of sheep in the place where there used to be many.

According to Mike Crang, the "'hereness' of destinations are not natural features but rather socially inscribed values and meanings layered onto the landscape" (Crang 2016: 211). The enchanting landscapes which I used to admire due to their natural qualities became less generic once I looked at them through the personal lens of the local drivers. Now if I go through the same place in Scotland for the second time, I look not solely at its natural features, but I also recall the conversations I had with the drivers in that specific place. The road which primarily used to be a 'non-place', became 'a place of identity, of relation and of history' created through social interactions with the drivers (Augé 2008: 43). Moreover, memories and experiences shared with the drivers who introduced me to Scotland remain with me now, contextualising what I see.

Not only have the drivers talked about their relation to the land they cross but also about the history, culture, and people of Scotland. Once, on our way back from the Highlands to Glasgow, we were picked up by Clyde, a fluent Scottish Gaelic speaker and teacher who travels around Scotland gathering tales, myths, and folk songs from people who still speak or remember Scotland's native dialects. This time, as we were crossing the picturesque landscape of Glen Coe, he introduced us to part of Scotland's history. He told us about the inn which still has a sign on its door saying, "No Hawkers or Campbells" referring to the Massacre of Glencoe which took place in the 17th century. Campbells are still not welcome in the place where their ancestors broke the code of Highland Hospitality by betraying their hosts the MacDonalds, who were then massacred.

The generic landscape was again enlivened by the stories of the driver. Clyde talked about the Highland Clearances and the oppression of Gaelic language and culture; about the current efforts to revive the local dialects which for many years were facing decline. As we were approaching Glasgow, Clyde surprised us

by puirt a beul the vocalised instrumental Gaelic music. He sang a song about a girl who desperately wanted to leave her local village for Glasgow. However, her dialect would always betray her and she did not fit in in a big city. When she returned to the Highlands, she no longer found that she belonged as her values had changed and she counted time according to the clock rather than by the sun. After singing this song, Clyde shared his own disgust for the rushed pace of city life, saying that if he could, he would stay in the Highlands for good. It was both beautiful and blue to listen to Clyde singing as the urban landscape came into sight. The song became a symbolic metaphor for my own experience in Scotland.

While the city is a place of rigidly structured days and time measured in terms of productivity, in the Highlands time loses its quantifiable value; against the majesty of nature, appreciation for the moment in time and place replaced the urgency to rush and chase 'all the important' plans. I entered Glasgow wondering how many more girls whose hearts belonged to the Highlands were inescapably stuck in the inertia of their routines.

Conclusions

In this work I have shown that hitchhiking is not merely 'a free mode of travel' but a way to make sense of a place through the creation of social relations. The relation based on spiritual and not material actions is the key point of comparison between hitchhiking and the circle of reciprocal exchange described by Mauss. However, people do not need to be confined under the definition of 'a society' in order to be good and generous to each other – that is the reason why hitchhiking continues to thrive over distance and time. Accident and good will can connect people and create very interesting and unexpected experiences which broadens the perception of the road as a 'non-place' used solely for functional purposes. Hitchhiking creates a unique lens through which a traveller is invited to discover place and culture. The personal narrative of the driver shared with the hitchhiker becomes a significant part of the experience the hitchhiker has while travelling and the narrative they create and recount. After all the rides I was given I turned my focus from the visited places and generous drivers to myself. The final questions I raise are these: where is my own place in this circle of good will and generous exchange? And when there comes a day that from a thankful receiver I will become a generous donor, myself?

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

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