Panel “Revisiting Railways: Sociality, Mobility, and Infrastructure”

Co-Organizers: Stephanie McCallum (University of California, Santa Cruz), Peter Schweitzer (University of Vienna), and Olga Povoroznyuk (University of Vienna)

Mobility and the transport of goods have rested on transportation infrastructures since times immemorial. While railway technology characterized the industrial transformations and nation-building processes in Europe during the 19th century, technological advances of the 21st century, the production of new frontiers by geopolitical and resource extraction interests, and the increased density and sprawl of urban centers have renewed interest in railways. Railways, however, produce particular configurations of remoteness and (dis)connection, linking certain places and disavowing others, and their promise of progress is often entangled in complex histories and haunted by the specter of failure.

In the growing body of anthropological literature on transportation infrastructures, railways have largely fallen out of the main research focus, particularly in recent studies with their methodological shift from a developmentalist paradigm to one focused on material culture. This panel aims to extend the scope of topics connected to railroads as well as to revisit the approaches to the studies of (transportation) infrastructures existing in anthropology and social sciences. We invite papers focusing on railroads as (post)modern projects engendering new forms of (im)mobility, remoteness and (dis)connection, social engineering and interactions, involving human and non-human agents. How have railroads been used to engineer particular configurations of remoteness and dis/connectivity? How do the particular affordances of railroad infrastructure, in specific ethnographic locales, shape (im)mobility? What are some of the entanglements and encounters with human and nonhuman others engendered or enabled by railroads? What is the affective and material life of railroads in contexts of modernization and ruination?

We welcome ethnographically-informed explorations of these and other questions. Interested participants should send a tentative title, abstract of no more than 250 words, three keywords, and institutional affiliation and current status (PhD candidate, post-fieldwork, postdoc, faculty) by April 10th.

Please direct all questions and abstracts to Stephanie McCallum (smccall1@ucsc.edu) and Olga Povoroznyuk (olga.povoroznyuk@univie.ac.at).