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CAPITALIST CARTOGRAPHY: ROAD MAPPING IN INTERWAR CANADA

Jeff Allen

University of Toronto

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Introduction

Road maps do not only show people how to get from A to B; they also include capitalist messages that have the power to influence and persuade. This was especially true in Canada during the interwar period (1919-1939), which was a time of soaring private automobile ownership and road construction, and with this, an increasing use of road maps. At their surface, road maps provided motorists with useful geographic and navigational information. At closer observation, businesses and governments used road maps as devices to advance capitalism. They did this in three ways: they used maps to advertise products and ventures, they incorporated information in maps to promote auto travel, and they used strategic cartographic design to persuade travel along certain routes and to certain destinations. These practices evolved over the interwar period, and by the early 1940s, they were ubiquitous in Canadian road mapping.

Background

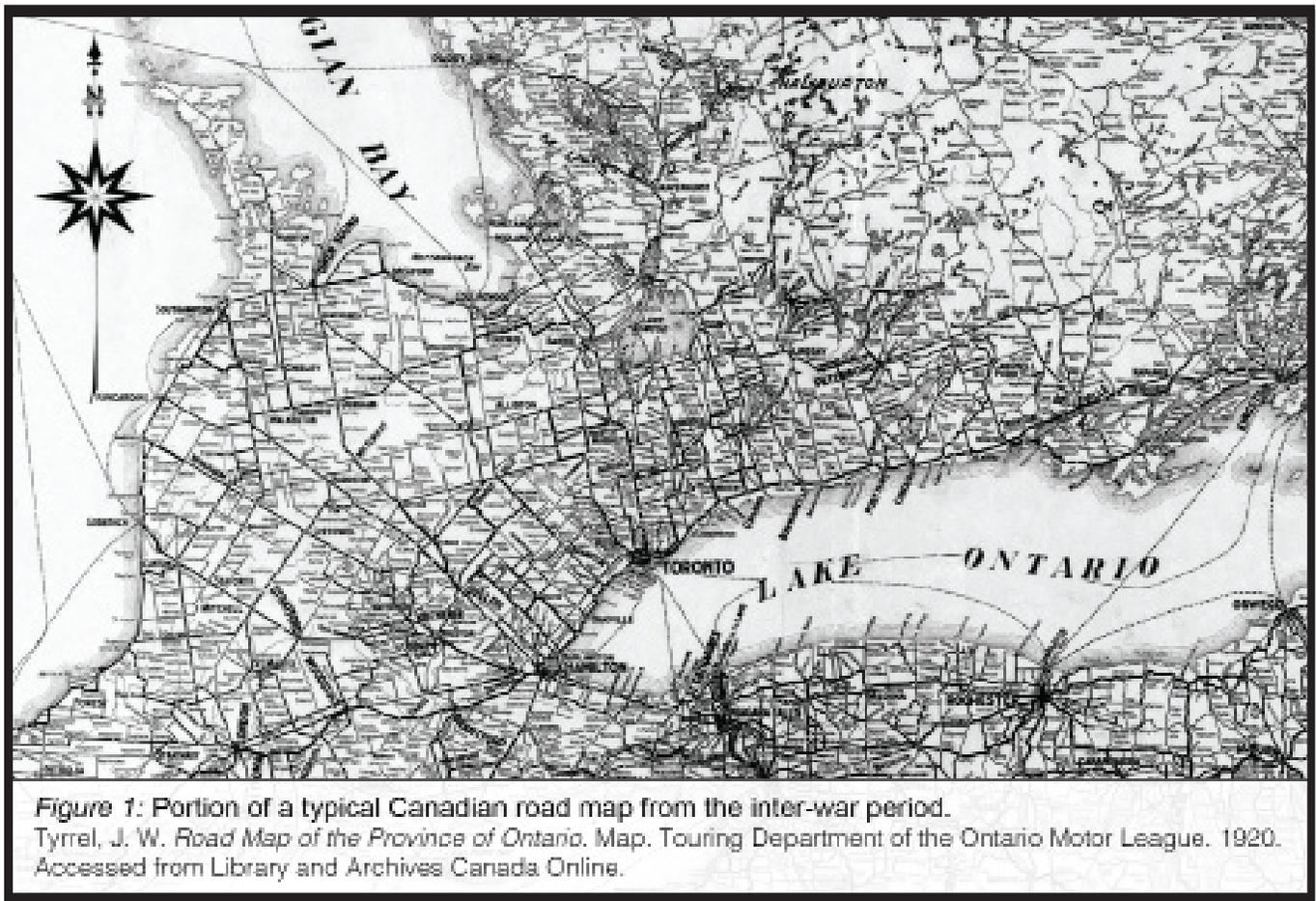
The private automobile arrived in Canada near the turn of the 20th century, but it wasn't until after World War I that auto ownership rapidly increased. Post World War I, the costs associated with manufacturing automobiles had decreased and the economy was on the rise. Private vehicles, once thought of as luxury items, became much more common. In 1913, there were less than 55,000 registered vehicles in Canada; in 1919 there were nearly 350,000 registered vehicles, and by 1930 there were over 1,200,000.¹ The government heavily invested in road

construction projects to accommodate the growing number of motorists. Old gravel and dirt roads were paved over with concrete and thousands of kilometres of new roads were built across Canada. The length of surfaced roads in Canada nearly doubled from 1922 to 1930.² Both short and long distance travel by road became more common. In cities, people increasingly drove to commute between home and work. In the countryside, people increasingly drove for tourism, with wilderness parks becoming popular destinations. Various businesses also made use of newly surfaced roads to transport goods. Roads and private vehicles had become a driving force in the Canadian economy.

As more people used private vehicles for travel, the more they needed to rely on themselves for navigation. Road maps became essential navigational tools for motorists. Road maps displayed the network of roads that connected populated places as well as the location of major geographical features (Figure 1). This allowed motorists to locate where they were, where they needed to go, and which route they should take. Roads were often depicted hierarchically; those roads with better surfaces for driving or with higher speed limits were often indicated with more prominent lines. Places were also often shown hierarchically with cities shown using a larger point and corresponding type size than small towns and villages. Road maps varied in coverage area and scale. Some maps showed all of Canada, while others mapped at a regional or provincial level. There were

¹Larry McNally, "Roads, Streets, and Highways," in *Building Canada: a history of public works*, ed. Norman R. Ball (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 36-37.

²Ibid.



also urban road maps that showed the network of streets in a city. Most road maps were printed onto large sheets, but were able to fold up into a much smaller size so they could easily be transported.

Mapping has a long history in Canada. Early Canadian maps included those used during exploration, land surveying, and defining property boundaries.³ Specific industries like infrastructure and natural resources relied on maps for uses like construction plans and logistics.⁴ Most of these maps were designed for specific purposes and they were not widely used by the public. Maps became widely used after World War I when people took to private vehicles for travel and used maps for navigation. Road maps became ubiquitous products sold in general stores and gas

stations across the country. With an increasing demand for maps, came a growing number of cartographers who designed and published them. Most of these cartographers worked for governments (federal, provincial, or local), private industries, or community groups. These cartographers did not design without motive or external influence.

Maps are often thought of as neutral – that they accurately represent the geographical world without subjectivity. Many people look at road maps and think that what is shown on the map should accurately correspond to a feature in the real world, and vice versa, what they see in the real world should be depicted on their map. But a map is not the real world; it is an analogy of it.⁵ It is like the real world, a representation of it, not a replication.

³Hayes, Derek. *Historical Atlas of Canada*. Vancouver, BC: Douglas & McIntyre Ltd., 2001.

⁴Ibid.

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As representations, all maps make generalizations of the real world. Road maps use symbology, particularly in the form of lines and points to represent real world features at a reduced scale. There are a number of choices a cartographer has to make in map design. When designing a road map, a cartographer decides what roads will be depicted, how they are depicted (choices of colour, line type, and label styles), and which roads will be omitted entirely as well as what images and text will accompany a map. All maps have a certain rhetoric, which can be deconstructed to understand their meaning beyond their visible geographical representations.⁶ Road maps too are inherently political documents. During the interwar period in Canada, road maps were not only used for geographic and navigational information, but as devices to advance capitalism as well. There were three ways that road maps were used for capitalist motives: by being a vessel for visual advertisements for products and businesses, by incorporating information in the form text and images that encouraged auto travel, and subliminally through cartographic design to influence the choice of route and destination.

Advertising Brands & Products

The first way that road maps were used to advance capitalism was through advertising. As maps became indispensable products for motorists, they became an opportunity for businesses to promote themselves. Businesses began to superimpose advertisements onto maps so more people would be aware of their brands and buy their products. The production of road maps was time consuming and expensive and advertising was a way to keep the sale prices of road maps down. Advertising imagery on maps are explicit examples of how businesses used maps to advance their objectives.

Oil companies benefitted from increased auto travel. The more people drove, the more fuel they would sell. During the interwar period, oil companies were expanding their network of gas stations to

sell fuel and other products to a growing number of motorists.⁷ Several oil companies were in direct competition with each other, and they started to use maps to promote their brand. Oil companies hired cartographers to produce road maps tailored to their needs. Their road maps depicted regular features like a hierarchical network of roads, populated places, and other geographical features. Thus, their maps were useful for navigation. However, they would also include brand logos and other visual advertisements on their maps for the gas stations they operated and the products they sold. Advertisements were often placed as insets or on the versos of maps as well as on empty spaces on the map itself like bodies of water. Standard map elements such as titles, legends, and north arrows often incorporated advertising imagery and brand identity as well (Figure 2). By including these types of advertising imagery on maps, oil companies were anticipating that, as motorists used their maps, the more likely they would buy their products.

Several community groups in Canada also produced road maps during the interwar years. Motoring clubs, composed of local motoring enthusiasts, often hired cartographers to make maps. Local business groups, like boards of trade, also produced road maps that encouraged auto travel and tourism. Maps produced by these community groups were usually at a local or regional scale, at the level where they were based. These maps included the main features found on most road maps, such as road networks, populated places, landmarks, and other geographical features. These road maps often included advertisements as well (Figure 3). Most advertisements were for local businesses and locally available products. Businesses would often pay for advertising space on these maps and these advertisements would offset some of the costs of map production and publication. By including advertisements on their maps, local businesses promoted themselves to motorists in aims to sell more products.

⁶Roger Downs, "Maps and Metaphors." *The Professional Geographer* 33. no. 3 (August 1981): 289.

⁹J.B. Harely, "Deconstructing the Map," *Cartographica* 26, no. 2 (1989): 3-4.

⁷*The Canadian Encyclopaedia*, "Gasoline Stations" accessed April 5, 2015 <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/gasoline-stations/>

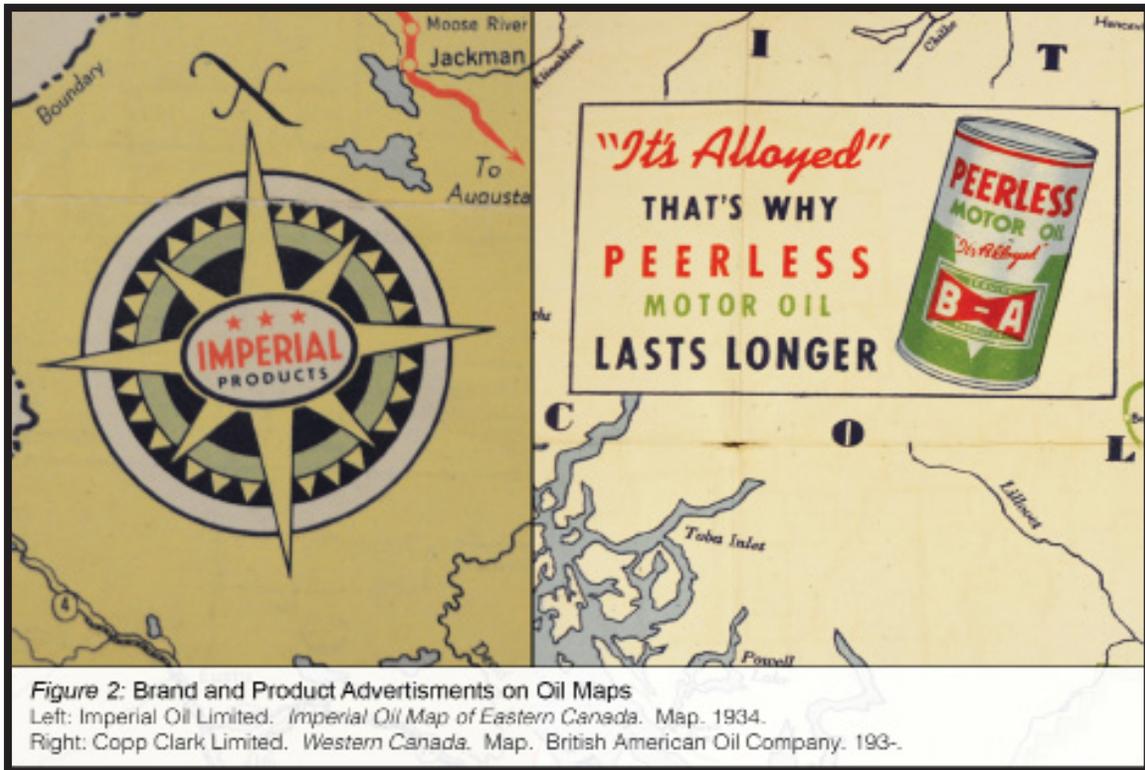


Figure 2: Brand and Product Advertisements on Oil Maps
 Left: Imperial Oil Limited. *Imperial Oil Map of Eastern Canada*. Map. 1934.
 Right: Copp Clark Limited. *Western Canada*. Map. British American Oil Company. 193-.



Figure 3: Local Advertisements on the verso of a road map published by a local Board of Trade
 Carruthers, H. K. *Official road map of eastern Ontario and part of Quebec, New York and Vermont*. Map. Perth Board of Trade. 1927.

Promoting Auto Travel

The second way that road maps advanced capitalism was by including text and imagery on maps to further promote auto travel. Several industries benefited directly from increasing auto travel during the interwar period including oil companies, auto manufacturers, and tourism. The more people drove, the more money these industries would make. So road maps often included promotional imagery or tourist information to further encourage auto travel. The iconography of these promotional images incorporated romanticized depictions of the open road, the great outdoors, and freedom of mobility that auto travel could provide. The publishers of these maps hoped these images would persuade people to become motoring tourists.⁸ Some road maps also included tourist information in the form of promotional text that encouraged people to visit specific places, many of which were only accessible by car. Private industries, as well as government bodies that benefitted from increased auto travel,

often included this information on their road maps.

Oil companies were heavily invested in increasing auto travel. The more that people drove, the more fuel they would sell. Not only did they produce road maps that encompassed images that promoted their brand and products, they also included images that idealized auto travel. These images were often included on the front cover of fold out road maps. Some images showed romanticized depictions of roads traversing scenic landscapes, while others depicted cheerful motorists. These were strategies to create a motoring culture that would encourage more people to drive for leisure. Other images emphasized a freedom of mobility and endless destinations that auto travel could provide. For example, in 1933, the oil company Shell published maps with a cover image of a motorist in front of a collage of license plates from all over North America (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Front Cover of a Shell Road Map
H. M. Gousha Company. Shell Metropolitan Map, Ottawa and Quebec. Map. 1933.

⁸James Akerman, "American Promotional Road Mapping in the Twentieth Century." *Cartography and Geographic Information Science* 29, no. 2 (July 2002): 175.

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In some cases, promotional imagery fused brand and product advertisements with images that encouraged auto travel. Several images on map covers showed motorists being assisted by gas station attendants. By including these romanticized images on their road maps, oil companies were attempting to persuade motorists to drive more often, and thus purchase more of their products.

Even the Canadian government promoted auto travel with their road maps. Several government bodies, at both the federal and provincial levels, produced yearly road maps. Although these maps were void of overt advertising found on maps produced by private industries like oil companies, government issued road maps were not objective; their motives were just not as apparent. Government bodies were

spending millions of dollars in expanding the road network and were also expanding their network of public wilderness parks. Road maps were a vehicle to promote these ventures. Government issued road maps included scenic images of modern highways winding through picturesque landscapes or iconic images of natural phenomena (Figure 5). Government issued maps often included text as insets or on the verso of maps describing popular landmarks or nature that drivers might encounter during their trips further encouraging travel to certain places. By including these images and texts on road maps, the Canadian government was attempting to sway the public to travel on their roads and visit their public parks. Also, the more people drove, the more money the government would make in fuel tax.

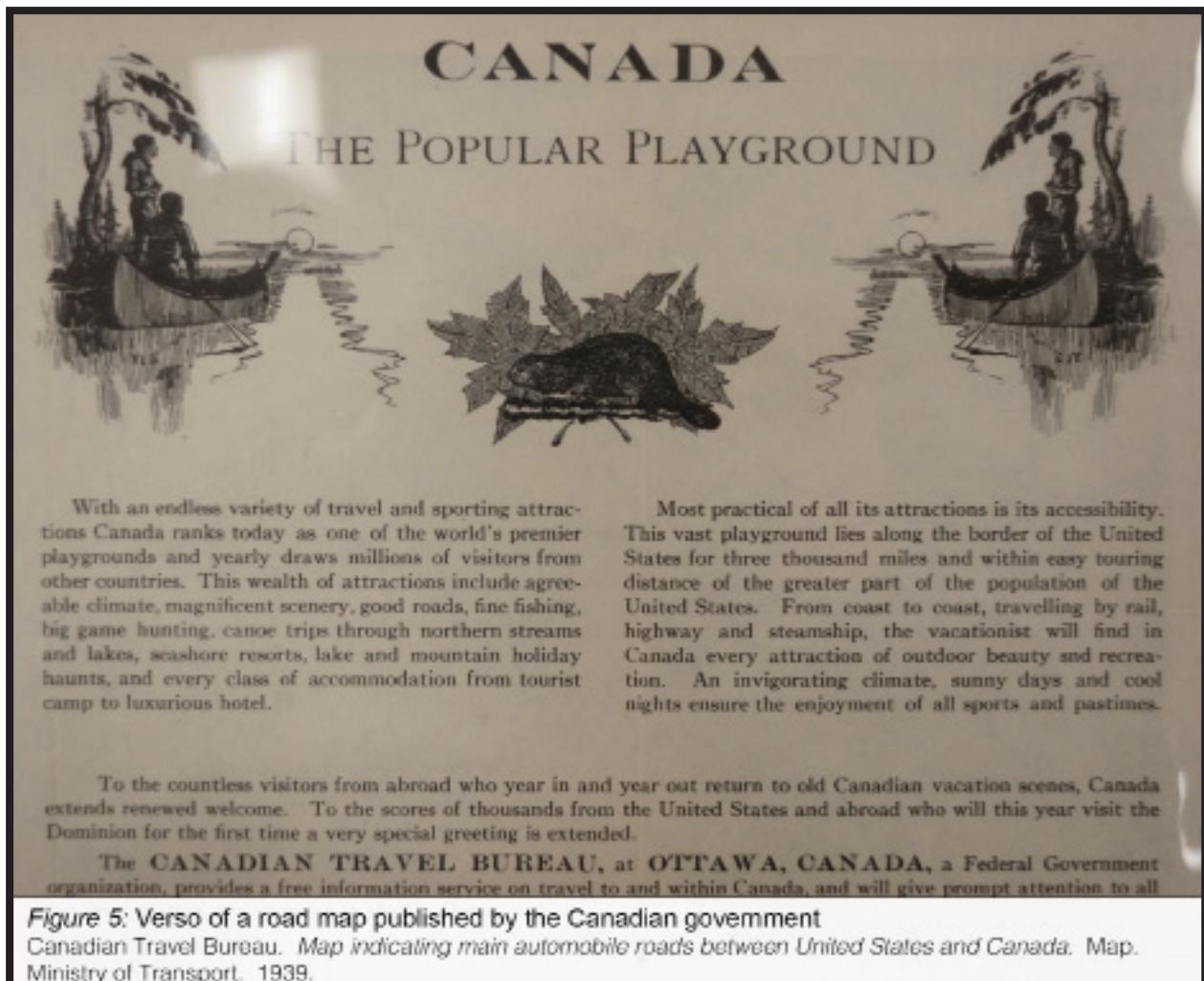
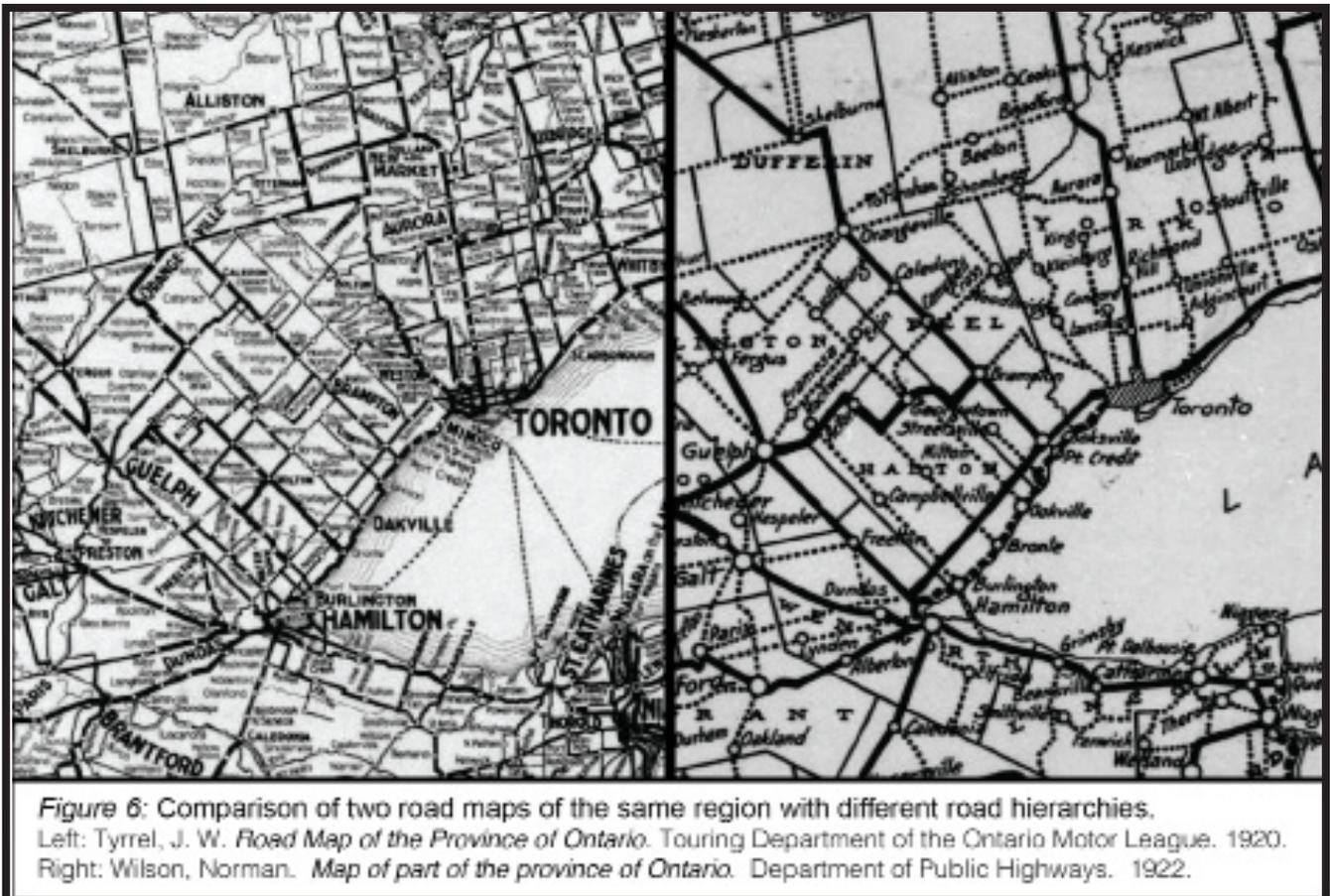


Figure 5: Verso of a road map published by the Canadian government
Canadian Travel Bureau. Map indicating main automobile roads between United States and Canada. Map. Ministry of Transport, 1939.

Strategic Cartographic Design

The third way that road maps were able to advance capitalism was subliminally through cartographic design. The signs and symbology on maps are often designed to be instruments of persuasion.⁹ Through processes of cartographic generalization - how information is selected and represented on a map - cartographers are able to influence route selection and choice of destination. For example, if a road map shows two different routes connecting two cities, most drivers will take the route that is depicted with a more prominent line on the map (Figure 6). In some circumstances, businesses or governments would benefit if motorists drove along specific routes or visited specific places rather than others. Strategic cartographic generalization was a method of persuading motorists to do so.

Auto insurance companies delved into road mapping during the 1930s. Similar to oil companies, they hired cartographers to produce road maps, which they then provided to their clients or sold to promote their brand. Their maps included the main features found on most road maps as well as company logos and contact information. Insurance companies attempted to influence motorists using their maps. The fewer motorists got into accidents, the fewer insurance claims, and the higher their revenues would be. Their maps showed significant detail of road surface type, depicted hierarchically. The more prominent roads on their maps were usually roads that were safer and less likely for cars to get stuck or break down. By persuading motorists to drive on certain roads, the insurance companies were anticipating fewer claims.



⁹Dennis Wood & Fels, John. "Designs on signs / myth and meaning in maps." *Cartographica* 23, no. 3 (September 1986): 54.

Government issued road maps also attempted to persuade motorists through cartographic design. The government produced road maps partly to promote publically operated tourist sites, like wilderness parks and campgrounds. These parks often relied on entry fees to help fund operating costs. Government issued road maps highlighted the location of these parks, while those parks and campgrounds that were privately operated were less likely to be depicted on their maps. Also, provincial governments were developing new networks of provincial highways. They used cartographic design to promote these newly paved roads. Their maps depicted roads hierarchically; their newly paved roads were drawn with thicker lines than older roads. By doing this, the government was influencing motorists to drive on their newly paved roads. By persuading people to drive on their roads and visit their parks, they were promoting their efforts to their tax base.

Conclusion

Governments and private industries used road maps as vehicles of power, influence, and persuasion to advance capitalism during the interwar period. This was done in three ways: by including explicit advertisements on maps, by incorporating information that encouraged auto travel, and subliminally through strategic cartographic design. These methods were successful as they continued to be used after World War II. Even the term “road map” entered the modern lexicon as an analogy for planning and forethought. Auto travel increased throughout the 20th century; use of road maps became even more prevalent; and cartography continued upon the capitalist traditions established during the interwar period.

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Jeff Allen studies human geography, GIS, and spatial analysis at the University of Toronto. His current study interests include researching the history of road maps in Canada, combining web-cartography with open data, and exploring Toronto's urban geographies with GIS. He is currently working as a research assistant building a municipal election GIS for Toronto. Contact him at jeff.allen@mail.utoronto.ca or view a few of his mapping projects at <http://jamaps.github.io/>.