The Soviet satirists were surprised. When the writers Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov toured the United States in an automobile in 1935, they encountered many novel people and sights, among them incurious hitchhikers and small towns with names like Moscow. Yet, one specific feature of the American landscape caught their eye: the amount of scenery they observed without having to leave their car. Each turn in the road “obediently opened up more vantage points on a beautiful view.” The Soviet visitors realized that this was no accident and felt guided, as if they were touring through an art exhibit: “Roads like this are laid out with a specific goal: to show nature to travelers, to show it so that they don’t have to scramble around on the cliffs in search of a convenient observation point, so that they can get the entire required quantity of emotions without ever leaving their automobile. In the exact same way, without ever leaving his car, the traveler can get the necessary quantity of gasoline at the gas stations that line American highways by the thousands.”

For these foreign observers, scenic amenities were akin to other roadside features; gas and vistas had become public amenities. Their ridicule had a point: fewer and fewer sights for automotive travelers were unplanned by the mid-1930s. Ilf and Petrov visited the United States at a time when the view from the road was the subject of learned inquiries and intense debates, as well as the result of work by laborers and bulldozers. What motorists should (and should not) see, how and when they should (and should not) see it, and why all of this mattered—these questions and the many ways to answer them delighted or disgusted both drivers and people who wrote about...
driving, kept professionals busy, and ultimately changed the ways in which drivers and passengers would see the world.

Eventually, one of the primary twentieth-century ways of experiencing nature for North Americans and Europeans became to drive through it. As more and more people had access to automobiles, and more and more roads made traveling easier, windshields served to frame a growing number of views. In the United States and Germany—two major car-loving and road-friendly nations—a process of turning the windshield into a picture window was already well underway when Ilf and Petrov embarked on their trip through the American countryside. In both countries, the governments built roads that featured landscapes, instructed drivers to reconnect with the countryside, and aimed at restoring the environments through which motorists moved. Such roads were to be nothing less than acts of reconciliation between nature and technology. That so many drivers and observers of driving not only accepted but encouraged the rise of the automobile as a way to rekindle their relationship with nature speaks to larger issues about technology and culture. In their eyes, the properly managed rise of a new transportation technology in the form of cars and roads would reconnect humans with nature. Previous technologies, especially railroads, had ripped such links asunder, they claimed.

Whether they were called parkways or scenic roads, or they bore specific designations to a place, these corridors of scenery enjoyed copious government funding, writers’ blessings, and much visitation. Two specimens stand out. The most extensive examples in both countries that were sponsored by central governments were the Blue Ridge Parkway, running along the spine of the Appalachian Mountains in Virginia and North Carolina, and the German Alpine Road (Deutsche Alpenstraße) in Bavaria. Under dramatically different political circumstances, construction for both projects began in the mid-1930s. Both were born out of a desire to meld technology and nature into a restorative whole and to reconnect drivers with the environment. Operating a complex, mass-produced piece of machinery on four wheels, on elaborately designed roads, would immerse drivers and passengers in their scenic surroundings.

Investigating the cultural settings, politics, construction, and usage of the Blue Ridge Parkway and the German Alpine Road offers important insights into a central tension of twentieth-century modernity: how to reconcile rapid industrial development with environmental concerns. Nazi Ger-
many and New Deal America were dramatically dissimilar in their ideals and practices regarding individual rights and inclusion; genocide, war, and terror remain the hallmarks of the former. It is all the more striking, then, to realize some similarities between both countries when it came to envisioning and planning new infrastructures for automobility. With the Blue Ridge Parkway and the German Alpine Road, planners in both countries sought to cushion industrial modernity, in the form of the automobile, and to impose a landscaped version of choreographed movement onto the mountainous environment traversed by these roads.

These plans encountered dissent from some locals, who questioned their utility, and from hikers and conservationists, who averred that non-motorized transport came closer to reconnecting humans to their environments. Such criticisms arose in both countries. The histories of these efforts appear to run parallel to each other, but they were also connected. Designers paid close attention to the environmental and roadside politics on both sides of the Atlantic. Professionals and politicians visited construction sites and completed roads in other countries, read travel accounts and scholarly publications, and imitated or rejected ideas and practices for scenic automotive restoration. Their work was referential. Ideas and knowledge continued to travel from one country to another with ease. But when drivers entered these highways or read about them, they were instructed to think of scenic roads as products of a national culture glorifying a nationally charged landscape. Studying the Blue Ridge Parkway and the German Alpine Road as parallel and connected projects, therefore, offers an opportunity to disentangle vernacular and Atlantic trends, and to move away from national notions of exceptionalism.²

In both the United States and Germany, driving was to become an act of restoration of the environment, and of recreation for drivers and passengers. Of these twin goals, however, only the latter survived the second half of the twentieth century. In fact, just thirty years after the initial enthusiasm, and Ilf and Petrov’s visit to the United States, the idea of roads generating scenery became less and less praiseworthy for many drivers, writers, and planners. Increasingly, roads were to ensure traffic flow and safety, rather than produce vistas. By the end of the century, cars and roads became anathema for environmentalists, what with their thirst for fossil fuels and noxious by-products of pollution and noise. In simplified terms, the automobile and its attendant road infrastructures enjoyed a brief career as boons
to nature, only to become environmental villains. More than a historical curiosity, this changing relationship raises important questions about humans, technology, and the environment.³

It is not only for reasons of historical accuracy that we need to understand how cars and roads could be seen as environmental saviors. By the late twentieth century, pollution from exhaust pipes, the urban destruction wrought by multilane highways, and the ecological habitats fragmented by rural roads had firmly established the status of the automobile as an environmental threat. Currently, the transportation sector contributes about one-quarter of all energy-related CO₂ emissions globally and is the single biggest source of greenhouse gas emissions in the United States.⁴ Recapturing an extended historical moment when cars and roads could be seen as a benefit to the environment is not an effort to greenwash these technologies. Rather, it is important to understand how their roles and meanings, and the hopes and fears associated with them, have changed over time. To be sure, automobiles and highways have always been controversial. But the controversies were much more complicated (and much more interesting) than simply pitting cars and roads against the environment. While it would be absurd to deny the real dangers and risks posed by what historian John McNeill has called the “Motown cluster” of cars, roads, and their accoutrements, it would be facile to ignore the enthusiasm for and belief in the environmentally restorative potential of the early versions of this cluster, and to dismiss its manifestations as merely misguided and outdated.⁵

At the same time, many of the proponents of an environmentally benign automobility sought to reorder nature alongside efforts to reorder humanity, in ways that many of today’s observers would find uncomfortable. By law or practice, not everybody was allowed to use these roads; for African Americans in the United States and Germans defined as Jews, such roads were spaces of exclusion, not of common experiences. While allegedly reconciling environment and technology, these scenic infrastructures highlighted social cleavages. Locals protested against them, often in vain. Some of the planners sought to use parkways as eugenic tools to clean up landscapes and people. Vehicles and humans had to stay in racially defined lanes to partake of the scenery. It is precisely these kinds of entanglements that are the subject of this book. In the end, the automobile and its purpose-built roads were neither the saviors that their early advocates envisioned nor the villains that their late-century critics excoriated.⁶
On a larger scale, this book demonstrates how some roads, especially during the middle third of the twentieth century, embodied the idea of scenic infrastructures. Scenery itself needs infrastructures to exist in the eye of the beholder; it cannot exist independently of technologies of access and dissemination, ranging from footpaths to coffee-table books and highways. What is more, infrastructures are not simply imposed upon nature; this book examines how they are one of the meeting places between environment and technology, and thus constitute them. Scenic infrastructures were both the imagined reconciliation among humans, technology, and the environment, and the result of complex and specific disagreements and negotiations over where, how, and at what (and whose) costs to build them. 

Secondly, I argue that scenic infrastructures became desirable and feasible only because of a surge of what I call roadmindedness. As chapter one will show in more detail, roadmindedness was the result of a social, cultural, and political process aimed at establishing roads as fundamental benefits. While other historians have used “airmindedness” to analyze aviation’s meaning as a measure of national superiority, this book’s more terrestrial focus allows for a complementary understanding of the roles that roads and highways had in building twentieth-century modernities. Soaring airplanes conjured up dormant dreams of human flight as well as feelings of terror during air raids. In contrast, road-based transportation was not new during that century, but roadminded individuals and groups transformed it dramatically. Around 1900, it was hardly self-evident that planning, building, and maintaining roads, especially those only for automobiles and designed with scenery in mind, would be beneficial for society as a whole. Proponents of roadmindedness made such claims and argued that roads would bring forth social, cultural, and economic gains. It is evident to anyone today that they have succeeded. However, it is less obvious how roadmindedness became firmly implanted not just in the minds of experts and political leaders, but also cut a wide swath in the public imagination. To be sure, the commercial and professional interests of roadbuilding companies and civil engineers pushed this view. In addition, it acquired social and cultural resonance far beyond the confines of corporations and interested parties. Many others also embraced roadmindedness. The road to modernity was—as it were—a road.

Roadminded advocates elevated these infrastructures to the status of environmentally grounded artworks. Driving on them was to be an act of
appreciation and rejuvenation. But unlike the art gallery that Ilf and Petrov were reminded of, scenic roads were subject to the environmental forces of weathering and overgrowth. Scenic infrastructures, while planned for a fleeting moment of visual intake, required long-term maintenance. Trees grew in undesirable locations and impeded views. Road surfaces required replacing and repaving after seasonal temperature changes and repeated use. Roads aged and changed, as did the environments of which they are a part. In this sense, this book regards humans and their changing views as historical actors alongside roads and their environments. All three played their parts.

Accordingly, the first chapter, “Roads to Nature,” introduces the notion of roadmindedness, the idea that roads are worthy in and of themselves, and even more so when designed with scenery in mind. Local and regional road boosters in Europe and the United States added scenic highways to the repertoire of tourist infrastructures. While these efforts were particular, they arose from an international context of competition, imitation, and adaptation. Professional planners created a design vocabulary for these roads and presented them internationally.

“Roads to Power,” the second chapter, uses the professional careers of Gilmore Clarke and Alwin Seifert, both landscape architects and prominent designers of scenic roads, as a window through which to understand how such plans could receive government funding and cultural resonance in both the United States and Germany. Rather than focusing on their individual achievements, I look at professional patterns and argue that the transformative vision of nature offered by these planners prevailed in both countries.

The planning, politics, and usage of the Blue Ridge Parkway and the German Alpine Road are the subject of chapter three, “Roads in Place.” Both had been introduced as large-scale touristic infrastructures and environmental benefits, but they received funding from national governments only in the 1930s as work-creation projects. Brutal dictatorial simplicity in Germany and a more deliberate, more democratic process in the United States marked the planning phases. While located in different topographies, both roads aimed at scenic surplus by providing views from higher elevations. The inconclusive infrastructural politics of Nazi Germany left the Alpine Road in fragments by the end of the 1930s, while the National Park Service continues to operate the Blue Ridge Parkway, which was completed in the 1980s.

Yet, when roadbuilding boomed, from the 1950s onward, scenic consid-
erations took a back seat to speed and utility. Chapter four, “Roads out of Place,” analyzes the relative waning of scenic infrastructures during this period. Increasingly, roads came to express predictability and uniformity, not surprise and entertainment. Professional power struggles between civil engineers and landscape architects—and a non-expert expectation of roads as consistent and safe—contributed to these changes. In larger terms, such roads were no longer destined to amalgamate technology and the environment; they became technological corridors.

The view from the road, with its checkered history and changing aspirations, is tied to automobiles most prominently. Drivers and the people who spoke for them left records about the sensory qualities of driving. However, leaving these records does not make them the first ones to tie movement to scenery; nor does it mean that recognizing or appreciating what one sees comes naturally.

A starting point is walking and its relationship to views. In Europe’s more stratified societies, walking at a leisurely pace for the purpose of observing scenery—in other words, perambulation—once a privilege of the few, landed at the feet of the emerging middle classes from the eighteenth century onward. Feudal rulers had long enjoyed non-productive, aesthetically pleasing strolls or rides in enclosed gardens and landscape parks. Their designers made sure to plan the scenery consumed on foot to be as attractive and entertaining as possible. At their most skillful, garden designers left little to chance, least of all what privileged walkers took in visually: meadows, hills, plants, and their combinations as sights. In the case of the English landscape garden, contemporaneous images might make those gardens appear static, but their experience was meant to be ambulatory. As one walked, views ahead would unfold as those behind closed. Variety was key; varying kinds and amounts of greenery concealed and revealed sights. As one writer puts it, “the garden was becoming more cinematic than pictorial.”

The management of views extended beyond the confines of parks and gardens. Most students of landscape design history have heard of the “ha-ha,” the unseen ditch in lieu of a wall enabling a vista beyond the property’s boundaries. Its main purpose was to surprise the walker chancing upon it right after having his view blocked; he would then utter an astonished “ha.” Meanwhile, the human effort that had gone into planning and maintaining the views was as hidden as the ditch. The majority of the people in the feudal
park—gardeners and laborers—knew nature through labor by seeding, planting, trimming, weeding, and tending. The privileged stroller, however, knew landscape by seeing it in entertaining ways. Scenic entertainment was tied to feudal privilege.

By the late eighteenth century, elites had literally opened up the views of those who had the time and leisure to experience them. Hunting grounds and feudal parks increasingly became accessible to commoners; the case of the Tiergarten in Berlin, the walls of which came down in 1742, is one of many. Urban residents, in particular the nascent middle classes, added strolling and viewing to their list of appropriate and respectable activities. Recreational walking, which included partaking of sights, and the creation of walking spaces—squares, sidewalks, urban parks—flourished from the late eighteenth century onward in both Europe and North America.

While walking and its appreciation as a cultural activity were widespread, they played different roles, according to gender, status, class, and race. Up until the nineteenth century, most cities had been walkable because of their compact size. Urbanites conducted business and socialized on foot, unless they were privileged enough to be carried in sedan chairs or to ride in cabs. When cities industrialized and grew, commuting between one’s dwelling and one’s place of employment became more common. Factory workers tended to walk to work, even if it meant being on their feet for miles. Mechanized transportation in the form of trolleys and trams remained unaffordable for the daily workers’ commute for several decades. Laborers continued to walk to work and portions of the middle classes began to walk for leisure. As one historian puts it, “Americans who needed to walk everywhere had little incentive to create opportunities for arbitrary strolls, even if there was a set of rich, philosophical ideas available to invest their walking with meaning.” The same, of course, was true for Europeans. With decreasing necessity for the middle classes to walk to their jobs, walking and hiking without purpose became more attractive—and more aesthetically and culturally charged. Relative levels of affluence and concomitant access to mechanized transportation gave some people the choice not to use these technologies, but to walk instead. Public walking and hiking earned their place among respectable middle-class diversions. Many writers stressed the sensory and aesthetic enrichment gained by peregrination. From Keats’s travelogues of the Scottish Highlands to Thoreau’s directionless but ruminative walking,
high-minded bipedalism became a valued middle-class pursuit exactly because it was not utilitarian. The middle-class walk or hike combined sociability, scenery, and slow movement.

But tensions remained. Women of any class learned to avoid certain times of day and night, and certain places, lest they be considered “street-walkers.” In the American South and beyond, walkers, especially those defined as Black, could be harassed or prosecuted for vagrancy. In contrast, the preservationist John Muir famously embarked on a thousand-mile trek from Kentucky to Florida in 1867–68 in pursuit of wilderness. Facing dangers and ruminating on the aftermath of the Civil War, Muir enjoyed the benefit of his status as a white male, which made him an oddity, at worst—but not a criminal.16
Disposable time, dress, and unhurried pace signaled the perambulations of middle-class hikers for recreation or edification. Gradations of wealth and status were also visible when urbanites decided not to walk at all. In New York in the mid-nineteenth century, the richest five percent owned a riding horse or carriage, and Central Park was the place to promenade their equine wealth.\textsuperscript{17} Some of Central Park’s paths were designed exactly for this purpose. Wheeled movement meant a different kind of landscape experience, one that emphasized longer looks and less attention to detail, given the relative gains in speed as compared to walking.\textsuperscript{18}

But what did walkers and riders see, and what did they value? Designed landscapes in formerly feudal gardens and newly designed public parks were prescriptive and Romantic, generally speaking. As a response to industrialization and the growth of cities, designers sought to establish an ideal, harmonious tableau of vegetation. With little thought expended on non-human animals, such landscapes showcased a terrain of non-productive expanses of lawns punctuated by growth markers such as trees, shrubs, and more densely planted islands. For landscape architects such as Frederick Law Olmsted, these ensembles were to calm urbanites and reestablish a connection to an imagined nature. The entire park was a human creation, but its appearance bore as few traces of artifice as possible.\textsuperscript{19}

If parks offered a complete sensual immersion into the sights and sounds of an idealized nature, panoramas and other more obviously constructed sights made visual consumption a common feature of late nineteenth-century amusements. A circular canvas seen from the inside by viewers, the panorama provided a visual narrative of a landscape, a war scene, or other noteworthy vistas, such as a Civil War battle, the Alps, London, or New York. Sometimes these canvases rotated by themselves to provide a sense of motion; sometimes the visitors created the rotation by walking. Since panoramas were housed in specially constructed buildings with targeted lighting, the aesthetic experience was meant to be comprehensive. Their design features aimed at total control of the visitors’ views and an all-encompassing vision of a specific event or landscape.\textsuperscript{20}

In addition to panoramas, observation towers provided access to views for many.\textsuperscript{21} Such scenic infrastructures enabled views from far above with relatively little effort. Hiking associations in Germany often built them at vantage points to offer destinations and visual rewards for exertion. For those less comfortable with perspiration, railroad companies developed
higher-altitude locations or made existing ones accessible. They were able to fill trains on weekends with the promise of scenic entertainment, supervising the entire experience, from boarding the train to the activities on site, as well as the vistas encountered.

In other words, by the late nineteenth century, views and vistas had become a controlled commodity, a destination for travelers, and the result of careful design and business ventures in the context of mass consumption. This was especially true for urbanites with the means to access them. A growing number of visitors would pay for access to these sights, whether obviously manufactured, in the case of panoramas, or less visibly reworked, in the case of rural landscapes seen from observation towers, where environmental forces and human labor were intermingled. The most frequent panoramic view of that period, however, was unintentional.

North from High Rock near Pen-Mar Park (1903). This visitor to a mid-Atlantic amusement park run by a railroad company is surveying agricultural landscapes on the border between Pennsylvania and Maryland from an observation tower. The view from above was a part of the sojourn. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Collection LC-D4-16559
Railroads and Panoramic Travel

Passengers on the premier form of nineteenth-century transportation—the railroad—encountered a new regime of visuality. Simply put, it was a shock. They noticed it, some of them wrote about it, and the historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch memorably labels it “panoramic travel.” Moving in a railroad compartment provided a radically new view of the surrounding landscape: educated travelers who were used to studying the details of the landscape’s foreground, and then proceeded to take into view the themes of the middle ground and the distant background, were now at a loss. Because of the movement of the train, the foreground no longer was an ensemble of identifiable landscape features. Rather, it became a single blur. Observant railroad passengers were thus forced to focus on the background, reducing their vision to large objects contained therein, such as mountaintops. Some passengers embraced this new, modern—if not industrialized—mode of viewing, while others bemoaned the passing of a slower, more detail-oriented pace. In perfectly phrased Romantic fashion, John Ruskin observed that “all travelling becomes dull in exact proportion to its rapidity.” The response to such boredom was another industrial, mass-produced object: entertaining magazines, newspapers, and books provided by merchants in railroad stations.

This new mode of perception and diversion depended on rapid movement: “The machine and the motion it created became integrated into his [the traveler’s] perception: thus he could only see things in motion.” The view was industrial and outside of the control of passengers—unless a passenger could stop the train to enjoy the view. This happened rarely. An anecdote has it that the Austrian emperor Franz Joseph I stopped a train from Vienna that was traversing the Alps on its first voyage. His Majesty wanted to enjoy the view more carefully, thus reclaiming the lost foreground. Needless to say, most passengers did not possess this royal scenic privilege. The view from the train, lateral and accelerated, was one with the operations of the railroad set by tracks, schedules, dispatchers, and train engineers.

Still, some trains, especially those traversing or ascending mountains, advertised the scenic qualities of their rides. In business terms, this was a niche market for railroad companies. In environmental terms, scenic trains stood for the packaging—indeed commodification—of the experience of landscapes through industrial technology and corporate design. On some
trips, passengers left the railroad cars to partake of the views at prescribed stops. Glass-domed cars aimed to merge outside and inside. In the Rocky Mountains and the Alps, with their dramatic heights and, in the latter case, proximity to major population centers, such scenic ventures became commonplace by the late nineteenth century. Consumed by many, such trips drew the ire of John Muir. Given the extent of cut trees and the operation of steam locomotives, Muir rebuked such operations, since “every train rolls on through dismal smoke and barbarous melancholy ruins.” But such views stayed on the fringes; access to scenery, however harmful it was to adjacent landscapes, became a popular commodity.

It was clear to contemporaneous observers that these new transportation regimes remade the environment. Railroad companies demanded growing amounts of commodities derived from nature. As voracious consumers of lumber and steel, the railroads drew on natural resources on a large scale. Tracks and ties, engines and railroad cars were used for construction and, in the case of steel, created demands for entirely new kinds of this metal. The operation of railroads involved coal, of course, the mining of which altered subterranean environments. With up to one-quarter of the annual timber production consumed by the railroads in the late nineteenth century, the nascent conservation movement feared a “timber famine” and successfully pushed for replanting. Commodification was largely invisible to most travelers, unless they set foot in a steel mill or observed the results of clearcutting in a forest.

However, tracks and embankments, and tunnels and bridges, offered some of the most obvious changes to the surface of the earth. While Muir was concerned about forest clearcutting next to railroad tracks, American railroads were known as being less intrusive to the landscape—at least in comparison to Britain’s elaborate railway earthworks. One historian speaks of a “minimalist infrastructure.” Given the relative paucity of capital, early American railroad tracks were laid more quickly and cheaply than British ones. As prominent surface markers, they still left highly visible imprints.

The sights from the railroads were produced technologically. As mental images, they existed long before the trip and lingered long after they had taken place. Guidebooks, reports, and paintings were some of the most important media in producing sights and imbuing them with value. As national and international tourism grew in the nineteenth century, so did concern with these sights.
built environment, tourism outside of (and from) cities targeted scenery and landscapes. The middle-class tendency to imbue rural landscapes and life with beauty, quietude, and attraction even reached the working classes. Some of them had escaped the “idiocy of rural life” (Karl Marx) and agricultural labor for the drudgery of urban wage labor, but they still enjoyed the escape to the nearby countryside for brief jaunts on Sundays. Extended trips were the privilege of the few.

Travelers were by definition in motion—and yet, the scenery they traveled to enjoy was thought to be static, immutable, permanent. Tourists needed to get to new locations, move around there, and then return. But in
a less trivial sense, the journey and the sights—tourism and being mobile—were intertwined: “Landscapes are produced by movement, both of the senses and of the body,” as one scholar of tourism puts it.35

### Cars and Scenery

In contrast to railroads, early automotive promoters claimed that cars would enable them to regain control over their mobile lives. They no longer depended on train schedules and could start whenever they pleased. Early cars did not need special infrastructures to run, nor a central authority to control their movements. But they had eloquent, affluent advocates. As historians have pointed out, upper-middle-class motorists disdained railroad travel as common and subject to corporate control.36 They could purchase the means to get away from the rabble. Self-propelled motion allowed for individual control of sights and vistas; motorists could stop and enjoy the view wherever they pleased. Here is how a writer put it in a German motoring magazine in 1905:

Now the car has arrived and it has delivered the travelling nature lover from the dominating power of space, so that he, with his freedom of movement, can enjoy the speed of the railway and the comfort of the compartment. No one tells him road and purpose, time and departure. He can buzz along from place to place, he can relax at a beautiful, shaded spot with his fellow-travelers, and taste the delicacies from his basket; he can, if he so wishes, change his goal on the spur of the moment and does not have to pass the beauty of regions that are situated off the road as he is forced to do by the insensitive railway.37

The control of the view went hand in hand with control of the trip. However, temperamental gasoline-powered engines forced motorists to stop not only at points of their own choosing. As some historians have argued, the rugged unreliability of this type of motor only added to its allure for leisure-oriented, thrill-seeking early adopters.38 Many of these motorists saw themselves as adventurous explorers encountering dusty roads, being exposed to the elements in open cars and overcoming engine troubles.39

Increasingly reliable and less expensive cars found more buyers after the end of World War I in America. This was a turning point for mobility, as mass production on assembly lines and the growth of disposable incomes allowed for the rapid appearance of the automobile, at least in the United States. By 1927, an astounding 55 percent of American households had access
to at least one car. While wide swaths of Americans, especially those in urban centers and with less purchasing power, continued to rely on public transportation for daily needs, automobiles had become a consumer item owned by a majority. The middle classes, who dominated debates regarding mobility and its meaning, embraced cars for the most part. For rural residents, and especially for farmers in remote areas, cars were adaptable sources of motive power for many utilitarian purposes. Although not commonplace as means of daily transportation, cars were a common sight by the 1920s, and a common means to experience sights for the middle classes by the 1930s.

But even if they owned an automobile, commuters overwhelmingly relied on subways, trams, and suburban trains for daily trips until the 1950s and 1960s. For urban and suburban car owners, weekend and holiday trips became the domain of the automobile. According to a famous sociological study, the automobile had become “an accepted essential of normal living” for the white residents of Muncie, Indiana, by the late 1920s, with one particularly enthusiastic mother of nine children claiming that she would “rather do without clothes than give up the car.” Car owners altered their

El Tovar Point, Grand Canyon (1914). While obviously staged, this image speaks to the automotive exploration of scenic landscapes. Disregarding established tracks and trails, this motorist ventures to the rim of the Grand Canyon in Arizona. Grand Canyon National Park Museum Collection
leisure habits profoundly as the car entered social life and enabled more frequent outings. With relatively little effort and expense, camping with the automobile became a widely shared pastime.43

Taken together, such usages contributed to the rising popularity of the automobile. Privately owned and maintained automobiles were one of the most important and visible tokens of modern consumerism, indicating a general rise in wealth and disposable incomes.44 In the American case, one booster argued that cars and scenic tourism could fight communism and help to transcend ethnic and class boundaries: “It is hard to convince Steve Popovich, or Antonio Branca, or plain John Smith that he is being ground into the dust by Capital when at will he may drive the same highways, view the same scenery and get quite as much enjoyment from his trip as the modern Midas.”45 According to this voice, automobility and scenery would serve as anti-Communist equalizers.

However, the rise of automobiles and roads, and the relative decline of public transport, were neither inevitable nor merely a product of their respective technical properties. As several historians have shown, government policy, social regulation, and cultural valuation all contributed to the competition between road and rail during the twentieth century.46 In this respect, comparisons matter. For the entire twentieth century, the United States was the single largest market for automobiles. By 1940, Americans owned more automobiles than the rest of the world combined.47 In contrast, the automobile was an imagined but no less important commodity to Germans for quite a while. The extant statistics tell us that, on average, car ownership was limited to one in 140 Germans in 1930 and one in six by 1965 in West Germany, with a growth in motorization during the 1930s and a dearth of privately owned cars right after World War II.48 Cars were rare but talked about during the interwar years and received a major, if often rhetorical, push during the Nazi years. However, statistical averages can be misleading: only 27 percent of households had access to at least one automobile in 1962. During the postwar economic recovery, almost three-quarters of West Germans were probably fascinated by cars but lived in households that did not own one. Not until 1973 were West Germany’s car-owning households in the majority and thus at par with those in the United States as measured in 1927.49

While these numbers would seem to indicate that the stories of automotive dominance in the United States and Germany were separated by almost
half a century, they also occurred simultaneously and in an interconnected fashion. Germans looked to America and saw a profusion of automobiles in the 1920s; Americans looked to Germany and saw a profusion of roads in the 1930s. Whether as aspiration or as material reality, automobiles and roads had become part of the cultural vocabulary. Before cars appeared, trains had introduced the idea of velocity and mass movement, as had faster ocean liners. Spectacular new forms of movement such as aviation captured the fascination of many, even if they never flew. Modes of transportation, their concurrence and competition, contributed to a sense of technological modernity.

At the same time, automobiles were part of different modes of consumption in Europe and the United States. Before the mid-1930s, cars remained out of reach for most European households, except for select professionals in urban settings. Consumption was class-based. Operating an automobile often was often seen as a display of power, wealth, and an arrogant protrusion into public space. In Germany, carmakers continued to use quasi-artisanal production techniques. By contrast, Fordism and the triad of assembly-line manufacturing, rising wages for workers, and cheaper, mass-produced automobiles dominated American consumption from the 1920s onward. Even though car culture remained aspirational, rather than pervasive, for many households, Americans had incorporated automobiles into their daily lives to a degree that was astonishing when compared to the experience of Germans and other Europeans.

As the first automobiles appeared just before the turn of the twentieth century, movement and scenery were as closely coupled as railroad cars. Whether by perambulating in urban parks or hiking in the countryside, visiting enclosed panoramas, or traveling on regular railroads or in excursion cars, the experience of landscape had increasingly become a mobile one for travelers, especially those from the urban middle classes. Different modes of mobility provided different genres of views. Speed mattered greatly, as did ownership of movement. Walkers and hikers controlled their own movements in concert with their bodily limitations; a slower pace allowed for more detailed views. At the other end of the spectrum, mechanized transportation enabled the blurred railroad journey. Celebrated by some and rejected by others, this experience remained profoundly modern and industrial. Railroad vistas were the unintended results of considerations of throughput.
and managerial oversight. On the fringes of the railroad enterprise, scenic tours attracted customers who would pay for obviously constructed sites such as cities and indoor panoramas, but also to observe rural landscapes, the results of human and non-human forces.

In early motorists’ travelogues, overcoming the constraints of panoramic travel was a common refrain. Initially, they shared existing roads with other users in often uneasy and sometimes conflictive ways. As the following chapters will show, the shape and meaning of roads in the automobile age were subject to debate and disagreement, delight and disdain.