

Seeking a (new) ontology for transport history

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For the past 64 years, the *Journal of Transport History* (JTH) has been disseminating research results and new ideas. It has been a long, bumpy and rich adventure. And we have, fortunately, a detailed and critical history of the JTH in its first 50 years,¹ which to this day offers many hints about this Journal and, more importantly, about the whole field of transport history. JTH was for decades a British voice, ‘firmly positioned within the framework of economic and social history’,² and largely devoted to big companies. This involved – more or less consciously – investigations of (British) railway companies, or shipping firms (the ones offering rich archive sources). The outcomes were the results of transport history cosily considered as a sub-field of economic history, from which it derived methods and questions.

Today, what a change of landscape! First, in the 1970s, interest in the role of automobility increased, and soon the focus switched to car infrastructures and later on transport networks as a whole. ‘At the same time women’s history, urban history and, especially in the United States, the history of racial and ethnic minorities were discovered by the “new social history”, a trajectory JTH did *not* follow’.³ We can argue over the extent to which JTH was unable to keep pace with novelty, but there is no doubt that the tumultuous and engaging shifts in the past two decades have shaken concepts of the Journal’s quest to the very core, and put its semiotics, targets and tools under pressure. While JTH repositioned itself in this new landscape, the need to break the predominance of a North-Atlantic model is still on the agenda, as is the necessity of gendered perspectives.

Let’s face it openly: the concept of ‘transport’ has been deeply investigated, defined and criticised as insufficient to understand the movement of people, things and ideas. The rise of the term ‘mobility’ has redefined the horizons, often taking over from ‘transport’, giving room for a ‘mobility turn’.⁴ Therefore,

mobility (a complex assemblage of movement, imaginings and experience) is not only an object of study but also an analytical lens, promoted by those who talk about a mobility turn in social theory and who have proposed a new mobility paradigm to reorient the ways in which we think about society.⁵

Such a new mobility paradigm encompasses ‘new ways of theorising how people, objects, and ideas move around by looking at social phenomena through the lens of movement’.⁶

This 'turn' is re-framing categories, challenging not only transport studies but the very basic understanding of our societies, and transport history has, in time, lost many of the original symbiotic connections to economic studies, embracing a cultural turn.⁷ This vibrant and sparkling debate leaves us with many opportunities (and some challenges). The opportunities lie in actively opening a theoretical historical discussion, to look for new directions of scrutiny and research. Nevertheless, as a result, today we also face troubles: it is an extremely difficult task to properly define 'transport' and how to investigate it. It has been already suggested that we are moving toward a 'transport-cum-mobility' history,⁸ which asks for a new understanding of our own ontology.

In openly triggering a speculative understanding of *what* transport history researches and *how* transport history researches, we do not move in a vacuum. JTH's editors and contributors such as John Armstrong, Peter Lyth, Margaret Walsh, Gijs Mom, Colin Divall, George Revill, Michael Freeman, just to mention a few, offer insightful pages about transport history discourses, as well as innovative research paths.⁹ Among others, Michael Robbins, as early as 1991, defined 'transport history' as a combination of elements, claiming that transport history had to travel new landscapes, explore its boundaries, shape new methodologies, question its own foundational concepts:

It can be urged that it is all really economic history; perhaps it is all business history; or historical geography; or social history; or even a kind of industrial archaeology. That there should be so many conceivable slots into which to drop the subject shows that no single one of the disciplines suggested will accommodate transport history. It has elements of economic and business and social history and of geography, too; but it is none of these alone, and it must always be firmly grounded on knowledge of the techniques and technologies at men's [sic!] disposal at different times to achieve the transport ends that they desired . . . What is now wanted is essentially transport history; not history of roads, or vehicles, or railways, or ports, or shipping or airlines. We need history of the movement of people and things between places.¹⁰

We should indeed embrace a more holistic view of transport history research, framing our investigation within a wider perspective of a 'history of movement of people and things between places'. In this landscape, no more than two years ago, Gijs Mom argued that transport history was in 'crisis',¹¹ and I agree. I agree if for crisis we define not a lack of arguments or potentialities, which are actually rather abundant. Here crisis relates, in my eyes, to the need to take a new research agenda *seriously*, approaching the history of transport in a much more rounded way.

We must face that *transport-cum-mobility* history is severely under-theorised, as much as the concepts of 'movement' and 'transit' are. As noticed by Martin Dusenberre and Roland Wenzlhümer writing about ships, 'they have so often been studied merely as objects that pass by or that connect one point to another'.¹² This *reductio ad unum*, which defines movements as neutral transits, focuses mainly on the technicality of the devices, and too often assesses travelling as an eventless period. We know too well how 'connections' are not neutral vessels of people and

goods: 'They do not merely bring their endpoints in contact; they interject themselves as mediators and thereby gain a strong bearing on that which is connected'.¹³

Like transport, many other spaces (industry, tourism, theatre, food, etc.) play similar or identical roles of interaction: so why does transport history matter? Here, we meet the very core of a transport history research agenda, namely mobility discourses which 'are irreducible to other social or technological processes',¹⁴ discourses carrying their own ontological characteristics. We need to better assess the extent to which transport is indeed 'special', as I think it is, and which are its characterising elements. We need to appraise the ways of understanding transport, defining innovative point of views, investigating movements, their social values, the human interactions related before, during and after connections happen.

Here comes the necessity of strengthening the deep theoretical concepts of our field, aiming to define 'an alternate route for developing decentred ontologies of connection',¹⁵ one which goes further than the simple undertaking of movement from A to B: changing our approach and putting, seriously, the movements as the central point of our investigations. In other words, we should go beyond *history of movements* and towards *movements as history*. It will be an exciting, but long journey, also because, in a broader view, the whole discipline of history is losing terrain. Following a decades-long discussion on the declining role of humanities, the debate raised by the book *The History Manifesto* shows how severe the state-of-the-art for history is.¹⁶ The bridge to policy makers, as proposed by *The History Manifesto* authors, is not painless: making history purely agenda driven will kill our very constituency, and will deprive history of curiosity-driven outcomes, often the most intriguing and fruitful ones.¹⁷

Therefore, moving back to transport, it is true that policy makers and a wider audience are doubtful (with the exception of The Netherlands and maybe UK) about taking advantage of what Colin Divall has insightfully called the 'usable past'.¹⁸ The social, energy and environmental failures of 20th century Western mobility regimes have not pushed, yet, for proper self-reflexive, critical and long-term analysis. It has, conversely, promised a replica of new technological fixes, which was up to 10 years ago the electric car, and now is the autonomous vehicle. Much like debates over technology, transport debates in academia and policy-making circles have largely focused on innovation, production and incremental trends. The fascination for innovation has been embedded in a progressive story, tracing development from 'poor' and 'inefficient' preconditions to 'smart' and 'proficient' outcomes. Consequently, we notice how transport debate became obsessed about time- and budget-savings, in which engineers and planners are the only ones recognised to have a sacerdotal role. We can comfortably say that transport perception is still under the spell of 'Darwinist' thinking, in which the fittest technology wins. But here comes the twist: under which parameters do we define the fittest? Is it speed? Cost-saving? The Western model (glamorised and motorised) of mobility? And why not CO₂ emissions? Here an historical analysis is indeed indispensable to appraise, critically, today's debate, and to implement a sustainable future.

We should also move one step further, and abandon the dominant silos approach – so familiar to universities, research centres and policy makers – and stop treating transport as isolated from energy, water, communications and telecommunications. There are plenty of reasons why such compartmentalised investigations are so popular, but we should still always keep in mind the invaluable advantages of framing transport together with other flows. Combining communication and transport, or energy and mobility will offer insightful outcomes. The driver-less vehicle is a shining example of digitalising transport; the electric engine used in motor vehicles is a combination of transport device and electricity networks. This goes together with an understanding of other disciplines' developments. For instance, global history is strongly focusing on movements, communication and connections. The success that has accompanied the 'mobility turn', the thrilling debate among geographers working in mobility, or the fruitful anthropological research on the same topic, all speak out loudly about the pivotal role that mobility has gained in the social sciences, with its implications in terms of research agenda and social/political recognition.

It is time to retool our way of debating, targeting audiences beyond peers and academia.

The role of history and the role of JTH

Mobility is thus not only a way of researching how people and goods move around but it is a way of thinking about human societies. Therefore, while seeking our (new) ontology, we should also consider which roles history plays in transport and mobility studies. The incredible growth of mobility associations and journals – having a humanities or social sciences background, or both – is a welcome signal of strength. And we witness a more interactive amalgam of multi- and interdisciplinary approaches. In this vein, as historians we should feel comfortable in sharing our expertise. I feel that JTH is perfectly positioned to offer a significant contribution to the current and future debate by providing a long-term analysis of regimes of mobility.

As new editor-in-chief of JTH, I want to be clear on this: JTH will remain a journal of transport history. History is JTH's approach. However, let me repeat that JTH must ship out toward uncharted seas. We do need the appropriate tools to navigate in a changing seascape, in which the concepts of both transport and history suddenly appear obsolescent. This means that JTH has to be ready to face the current challenges, whether or not its contributors are historians by profession and familiar with the methods of historiography; this should go beyond academia and it should encompass museum curators and staff. The latter can offer a valuable understanding of the materiality of transport history, and, equally relevant, of its symbolic values, keeping in mind their need to approach general audience's interests. It is an asset which must be conveyed in JTH.¹⁹

In order to achieve a renewed transport history, we must focus on users, policy-makers and entrepreneurs; we must think globally, engaging scholars in

all the continents, exploring non-dominant mobility regimes. We must use a long-term and comparative perspectives, bringing together clues and tips from the fields of urban studies, sociology, ethnography, anthropology, cultural studies and geography. We must cover a variety of countries and regions, investigating how various actors have shaped transport systems, creating models of mobility that differ along a number of dimensions such as gender, ownership (public vs. private), operation (individual vs. collective), technical mode (motorised vs. non-motorised), availability (affluence vs. scarcity), and hegemony (dominant vs. subaltern).

In other words, we should make a history of movement of people and things. We must leave our comfort zone and adventure in a new research landscape. We must do so by challenging our paradigms, our beliefs and our assumptions. We must engage with literature that at first seem beyond our immediate concern. We must be proud of being historians. We must offer our knowledge to other disciplines and other actors, including policy-makers, who define mobility based on a largely de-historicised knowledge.

A new leadership for JTH

As things change, so do editors. This issue is under the watch of a new editorship, which encompasses a new editor-in-chief (the author of these pages), a largely renewed Editorial Board, including an in-depth shift in the book review curators list and no fewer than five associate editors: Michael Bess, Greet de Block, Mike Esbester, Valentina Fava and Dhan Zunino Singh. A big thanks to all the Editorial Board members for sharing this journey together.

A new editorship is, however, not the only change. From September 2015, after some decades spent at Manchester University Press, SAGE became the new publisher of JTH. This change has carried not only a fresh stance, but also new plans, which encompass – from 2018 – a third annual issue for *The Journal of Transport History*. As new editor-in-chief, my main duty is to retain the Journal's reputation and to cope with the very challenging tasks of the next years. The third issue is a great achievement, but also a demanding duty.

As I said at the beginning of this editorial, if JTH can still experience challenging new adventures it is also because of the efforts of the past editors. This naturally includes Gordon Pirie who, in the past six years, successfully put JTH back on track. Similar appreciative words have to be extended to many other former Editor-in-chiefs and members of the Editorial Board. The incredible work done by the past editors can be carried on in the future only if accompanied by an engaged Editorial Board and by an engaged readership. The (welcome) move to an internationally well-known publisher, the addition of a third annual issue and the recognition of JTH in the Web of Science are key resources. JTH's readership must bring to those opportunities and to those challenges the necessary energy and enthusiasm.

This issue

The 2017's issues still enjoy the former editor's touch and support. The first offers a special issue devoted to 'East-West Cooperation in the Automotive Industry: Mobility, Production and Flows'. I am particularly pleased about this special issue: the investigation into the development of the automobile industry in communist Europe keeps its fingers in the hard core of production, in metal and iron things. However, as readers will discover, what is equally engaging is how the promise, or the mirage, of private motorised mobility was a precious asset in forging consensus not just in the 'Western' countries. Therefore, to some extent, making a history of automobility in the Soviet Union satellites is also making a broader history of those countries. The role and expectations of people's democracies, leadership and laypeople alike, towards motor-cars are indeed suggestive of how motorised mobility could be framed as a universal desire, in which technological, political and ideological projections are intertwined.

I see another appealing element in this special issue, which is a fresh and innovative contribution to mobility studies from business history. The role of enterprises (in both the socialist and capitalist worlds) in shaping and nurturing mobility dreams and attitudes (but also in failing to feed those promises) seems central. Economy and entrepreneurs, including communist parties' leadership, have been both factory of (metal) dreams and vessels of (technological and cultural) connections. Thus, we can trace here two streams of flow: first, the exchange of knowledge and the analysis of the agencies triggering those exchanges; second, the object of this knowledge, namely motor-cars as a mobility device.

Two other papers make the issue. Ben Meyer writes a long view history of the airline company *Swissair*, pointing out the key elements of its successes and failures. Maxime Huré and Arnaud Passalacqua analyse the forgotten but pioneering case of a French bike sharing program in 1970s La Rochelle, challenging the classical timing of those initiatives, but also giving attention to the role of users in shaping the system.

Finally, this issue witnesses the establishment of a new section, called *Panorama*, intended as a comprehensive state-of-the-art review of research in the field of transport history, presenting synopses of recent research, international reviews of research across many countries, thematic reviews and retrospective assessments of classic works in the area. *Panorama* papers should provide essential and comprehensive overviews, as well as aiming to fill the gap created by the transformation of the successful T2M yearbook *Mobility in History* into a blog. Submissions can also take the form of a combined review of several different books (or articles), presented together by one reviewer. The latter is the case of Peter Cox's paper on 'Cities, States and Bicycles. Writing Cycling Histories and Struggling for Policy Relevance', which offers us the state-of-the-art on that issue.

JTH's new Editorial Board will devote greater attention to 'Surveys and Speculations', that is speculative essays which are argumentative pieces aiming to open up new lines of enquiry by suggestion, provocation and reflection.

They are theoretical and methodological, and should suggest new research and thematic pathways, fitting our aims of an innovative understanding of our disciplinary enquiry. This section should be one of the main tools to open the debate about a new ontology of transport history.

Some final words are left, last but not least, about the Book Review and Museum & Exhibition Review sections.

The Museum & Exhibition Review section has been an important asset for the journal, and my appreciation for the editor, Marie-Noëlle Polino, goes together with the need for a new commitment and a fresh consideration of public history, heritage and museum staff's work. The visual and material representation of transport and mobility artefacts should assume the forms of innovative approaches and new methodological understandings. The new Editorship of the Journal is already engaged in this duty.

At the very end, let me add that we have seen an incredible increase in book production related to JTH's field, and the book review team – Mike Esbester and Robin Kellermann – has been able to cope, with exceptional ability, with this wider production. It is time to further expand the Journal's grasp on new volumes. I am delighted to inform readers that a larger (and less North-Atlantic) team will work on book reviews, aiming to target volumes previously less accessible and published beyond the well-established languages. The aim remains constant: inform readers about new publications in our field, and encourage insightful debate.

Notes

1. G. Mom, 'What Kind of Transport History Did We Get? Half a Century of JTH and the Future of the Field', *The Journal of Transport History*, 24:2 (2003), 121–38.
2. P. Lyth, 'John Armstrong', *The Journal of Transport History*, 23:1 (2002), no page number.
3. Mom, 'What Kind of Transport History Did We Get', 123.
4. See M. Sheller and J. Urry, 'The New Mobilities Paradigm', *Environment and Planning A*, 38:2 (2006), 207–26.
5. N. B. Salazar, 'Keywords of Mobility: A Critical Introduction', in N. B. Salazar and K. Jayaramhere (eds.), *Keywords of Mobility. Critical Engagements* (New York, Oxford, Berghahn, 2016), pp. 1–12, here 2.
6. N. B. Salazar, 'Keywords of Mobility. Critical Engagements' pp. 1–12, here 2.
7. C. Divall and G. Revill, 'Cultures of Transport. Representation, Practice and Technology', *The Journal of Transport History*, 26:1 (2005), 99–111.
8. C. Divall, 'Mobilities and Transport History', in P. Adey, D. Bissell, K. Hannam, P. Merriman and M. Sheller (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Mobilities* (London and New York, Routledge, 2013), pp. 36–44.
9. See John Armstrong, 'Transport History, 1945–95: The Rise of a Topic to Maturity', *The Journal of Transport History*, 19:2 (1998), 103–21; John Armstrong, 'Editorial', *The Journal of Transport History*, 14:2 (1993), vii–ix; Peter Lyth, 'John Armstrong', *The Journal of Transport History*, 23:1 (2002), p. iii; Margaret Walsh, 'Gendering Transport History. Retrospect and Prospect', *The Journal of Transport History*, 23:1 (2002), 1–8; Colin Divall, George Revill, 'Cultures of transport. Representation, practice

- and technology', *The Journal of Transport History*, 26:1 (2005), 99–111; Michael Freeman, "Turn If You Want To". A Comment on the 'Cultural Turn' in Divall and Revill's 'Cultures of Transport', *The Journal of Transport History*, 27:1 (2006), 138–43.
10. M. Robbins, 'The Progress of Transport History', *The Journal of Transport History*, 12:1 (1991), 74–87, here 83, 85; italics in original. See also M. Robbins, 'T. C. Barker and Transport History', *The Journal of Transport History*, 23:2 (2002), 178–9.
 11. G. Mom, 'The Crisis of Transport History. A Critique, and a Vista', *Mobility in History*, 6 (2015), 7–19.
 12. M. Dusinberre and R. Wenzlhuemer, 'Editorial – Being in Transit: Ships and Global Incompatibilities', *Journal of Global History*, 11:2 (2016), 155–162, here 157.
 13. R. Wenzlhuemer, 'The Ship, the Media, and the World: Conceptualizing Connections in Global History', *Journal of Global History*, 11:2 (2016), 163–86, here 165.
 14. Divall, 'Mobilities and transport history', 37.
 15. P. E. Steinberg, 'Of Other Seas: Metaphors and Materialities in Maritime Regions', *Atlantic Studies*, 10:2 (2013), 156–169, here 160–161.
 16. J. Guldi and D. Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014).
 17. For a critical debate on Guldi and Armitage's volume see the special issue of *ISIS*, Volume 107, Number 2 (2016), and the one published by *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 70th Year, issue 2 (2015). Among other voices, see D. Cohen and P. Mandler, 'The History Manifesto: A Critique', *American Historical Review*, 120/2 (2015), 530–42.
 18. C. Divall, 'Mobilizing the History of Technology', *Technology & Culture*, 51:4 (2010), 938–960; see also C. Divall, J. Hine and C. Pooley (eds.), *Transport Policy: Learning Lessons from History* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2016), in which the cases of the UK and the Netherlands are outlined.
 19. C. Divall and A. Scott, *Making History in Transport Museums* (London, Leicester University Press, 2001).

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