Editorial

Gijs Mom, Georgine Clarsen, Cotten Seiler

Last year President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela announced the appearance of what a Dutch national newspaper called an “anticapitalist car.” The two models, named by Chávez himself as the “Orinoco” and the “Arauca,” after rivers that run through Venezuela, are locally assembled under a preferential license agreement with the Chinese automaker Chery. The cars are sold for half the price of other makes and are marketed to the expanding Venezuelan middle class. They are intended as “new attainments of the revolution” that are meant to raise the “standard of life of the people.”¹ This new venture was in a tradition that Chávez’s opponents claim started in 2006, when he came close to making a similar deal with Iranian president Ahmadinejad.²

The car is a highly political vehicle in Venezuela, as elsewhere, and this example reinforces how transport cannot be conceived without taking transfers into account. Here between China and Venezuela, but also between bicycles and cars, as the contributions in this issue show. Chávez can even boast of a “speedy socialist” now: the Venezuelan race-car driver Pastor Maldonado who won the Spanish Grand Prix formula 1 competition in May this year.³ History shows that soon after as the middle class discovers the attractiveness of cars, there emerges a class of have-nots whose mobility is limited to feet, bicycles, or public transport. It generally takes some decades before those have-nots realize that they should not accept this “declassification,” but rather craft or resuscitate counter-practices (accompanied by counter-stories) such as “slow traffic,” “green traffic” or some such descriptor of transport alternativity.

This issue of *Transfers* is about one such alternative—and precursor—to the car, the bicycle. As a counter-practice bicycling is now situated mostly in urban settings, although Tiina Männistö-Funk’s contribution in this issue makes clear that rural cultures also knew how to deploy this amazingly versatile vehicle. As Ruth Oldenziel and Adri Albert de la Bruhèze, the co-organizers of a workshop in May 2011 at the Rachel Carson Center in Munich, from which the papers stem, argue in their Introduction to the Special Section on Global Cycling, bicycles have all too often been represented as a step-up vehicle to the car. They deserve more attention to their own history. That is why *Transfers* dedicates so much space to this topic: if the bicycle is not a first stage of motorized modernization, then what is it? According to Oldenziel and Albert de la Bruhèze, bicycles illustrate key assertions in David Edgerton’s *Shock of the Old*.⁴ Even if

bicycles have followed the same kind of high-tech development as cars, they are the moving proof of the limitations of taking contemporary innovations as representative of the technical state of the art. We must acknowledge the simultaneity of the old within the new.

Our Special Section opens with Hans Peter Hahn's "The Appropriation of Bicycles in West Africa: Pragmatic Approaches to Sustainability," an anthropological approach to African bicycle culture. Hahn emphasizes the "local knowledge" of all technology through a rich ethnographic analysis of the customs surrounding the bicycle in rural West Africa, with an eye to their modification for the specific needs of villagers. To this, Tiina Männistö-Funk adds a cultural-historical approach in her "The Prime, Decline and Recalling of Rural Cycling: Bicycle Practices in 1920s' and 1930s' Finland Remembered in 1971-1972." She similarly insists on local differentiation of practices, but adds to her analysis an account of the ways in which the early days of cycling in Finland are recalled, and burnished, in the memories of the generation that came of age with the bicycle.

The two other contributions to this international overview of the variety of cycle cultures deal with Japan and China respectively. M. William Steele's "The Making of a Bicycle Nation: Japan" and Edward J.M. Rhoads' "Cycles of Cathay: A History of the Bicycle in China" show how these nations have their own specific expressions of bicycle culture, which have been informed by global trajectories but have been shaped by their own cultural, economic, political, and environmental imperatives throughout the last one hundred and twenty-five years. Steele and Rhoads deal with transfers of modernity. Whereas the former even suggests a relationship between the bicycle's popularity and the recent decline of car ownership, the latter, with his impressive selection of diverse sources, debunks the myth that the Communists made the hand-pulled rickshaw disappear.

We close this section with a comment from a transport planner, just as we did in the previous issue when we presented a Special Section on roads. John Dudley has been invited to comment on the relevance of historical research for current-day planning and policy-making. Through contributions like Dudley's we hope to strengthen the interdisciplinary character of *Transfers*. Convincing policy-makers that history matters is as much on our editorial agenda as our invitation to historians to draw explicit connections between past and present practices, debates, and problems. We believe that this initiative is beginning to bear fruit. As the next issues of *Transfers* will demonstrate, we are starting to receive more submissions from transport experts who, though without formal historical training, nonetheless feel it imperative to venture into the past in order to explain the present and shape the future.

Wrapping up our debate about road safety, Bill Luckin's "Motorists, Non-drivers and Traffic Accidents between the Wars: A Provisional

Survey” is an application of those principles. In his international overview of the secondary literature, Luckin explores the connections between the social relations of mobility and larger political contexts when it comes to managing differences between pro-motoring conceptions of safety and “traditional” uses of highways. He considers how France, Britain, the U.S.A., Germany, and Sweden all adopted different policy responses to the alarming rise of traffic accidents in the interwar period. He concludes that in Sweden the shared values of a democratic “people’s home” worked to achieve a motoring culture that reduced the incidence of dangerous driving. We consider Luckin’s contribution as typical for *Transfers*: it is general enough to form a starting point for further research, while at the same time it forms a welcome target for subsequent critique and nuance from detailed local studies.

As usual, we offer our readers additional review sections on films, books, art, and museums. As to the latter, this issue is the moment to say goodbye to our museum review editor of the first hour, Dr Kurt Möser from Karlsruhe Institute of Technology and the Technoseum in Mannheim, and thank him for his efforts to furnish this important corner of our journal with high-grade reviews written by museological specialists. With the new team, consisting of Deborah Breen (herself a former museologist) and Katariina Mauranen (until recently connected to the Maritime Museum of Finland), we intend to continue this approach of museologically well-founded reviews, but we will expand our vista more systematically to the non-European and non-North American worlds. We are working on plans to do the same with our book review section.

Last, Johan Schot is our next guest in the debate section Ideas in Motion, with a book review essay on Europe’s common transport policy. True cross-border transfers of sovereignty in this case!

We hope you enjoy reading this issue as much as we did making it.

Notes

1. Allart Hoekzema, “Chávez geeft zijn revolutie vaart met de antikapitalistische auto,” *De Volkskrant* (September 7, 2011), 2.
2. <http://lasarmasdecoronel.blogspot.com/2009/09/iran-venezuela-farce-where-are-autos.html> (accessed 8 April 2012); we thank Rodrigo Booth, Chile, for bringing this website to our attention.
3. Jules Seegers, “Grote Prijs gaat naar snelle socialist,” *De Volkskrant* (May 14, 2012) 26.
4. David Edgerton, *The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History since 1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).