

# Editorial

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What is mobility worth? What is the value of a trip? These questions have many answers, which depend on who is doing the trip, and where, for what purpose, and using which vehicle, as well as what happened before.

Is it a bicycle, used to perform the latest Totally Naked Bike Ride recently seen in Greek Thessaloniki, or the violently interrupted ride on a bike bomb (or a bomb bike) exploding on a busy market in Indian Hyderabad?<sup>1</sup> Or is it a trip on a bike that was swapped for a gun in crime-ridden Mexico City as part of a government program?<sup>2</sup> Perhaps it is a bicycle that takes caregivers to households of Zambian children affected by HIV/AIDS. Or is it a trip not done in Paris, where nearly half of the public bikes are stolen or wrecked, especially in the “black suburbs”?<sup>3</sup>

If it is in a car, are we talking youth, who according to the most recent surveys are losing their interest in the iconic contraption that meant so much to their parents? They seem to be more fascinated by being online than on-road. Or are we talking about the growing population of the elderly in wealthy societies for whom the car extends their active life? What of the women drivers who recently defied the Saudi driving ban?

In Europe it seems that a trip is valued less than a decade or so ago: automobility’s VoT (Value of Time), as transport experts call it, has decreased by 16 percent since 1997 in the Netherlands, and now stands at €9. Such experts explain this by pointing to the growing importance of the mobile phone, which makes time lost in a traffic jam less problematic.<sup>4</sup> Cars can no longer be considered in isolation. Cars and phones together make for new experiences, practices, and social meanings.

We are pleased to announce that over the last year we made major progress on two of the three main ambitions of this journal: to integrate media and communication research with more traditional, transport-oriented mobility studies, and to expand our coverage of mobilities in non-Western areas of our globe. Of the 17 peer-reviewed articles we published in volume 3, six were on communication and media, and five were written by colleagues “native” to China, India, and Bangladesh. At the same time we took a more variegated and multi-modal approach to transport research: five articles on human-powered machines (two on bicycles, three on rickshaws, including their gendered use), and one each on railways, trams, aviation, and the struggle between road and rail for passenger transport. Methodologically, the majority of the



articles were driven by historical analysis (mostly archival research), but we also published research based on oral history, diary analysis, film studies, and communication and media studies. Overarching these three ambitions is our commitment to intermodality, which this journal claims should be studied in a transdisciplinary way.

We have made some progress in pursuing our third main ambition: to connect history writing with current-day policy planning and decision-making. This we specifically address in this latest issue, where four out of the six articles consider the relationship between history and contemporary mobility problems. Odette van de Riet and Bert Toussaint, both working at the Dutch Ministry of Transport or its adjacent agency Rijkswaterstaat, address a controversial and highly political topic in their “Learning from a Contested Project in the Netherlands: The Clash over the Amelisweerd Forest, 1957–1982”. This is a case of failed resistance to a freeway that cut right through a forest near the city of Utrecht. Failure has, however, had some good outcomes and this action has since evolved into a historical case to be studied by civil servants about the complexity of road planning and the public legitimation of transport policy. The article is of particular interest because it is co-authored by a historian (the “corporate historian” of Rijkswaterstaat) and a transport expert, both engaged in a long-term project of making history work for policy and planning. Likewise, the three Swiss transport experts Ueli Haefeli, Fritz Kobi and Ulrich Seewer, explicitly deal with the relationship between “History and Transport Policy: The Swiss Experience.” While they deny that history directly informs planning and policymaking in Switzerland, they acknowledge indirect influence, and they hold a plea for enhancing this influence. Both contributions are spin-offs from three consecutive international workshops held in the Netherlands in 2008 and 2009, which produced several articles that were published in previous issues of this journal.<sup>5</sup>

Geetam Tiwari, director of a well-known transport research institute in New Delhi, also uses history to underpin her claim for a special role and protected space for the rickshaw. Her “The Role of Cycle Rickshaws in Urban Transport: Today and Tomorrow” can be read as a sequel to the Special Section on Rickshaws in the last Asia Issue where we published two articles on a similar topic in Dhaka, Bangladesh.<sup>6</sup> Tiwari critiques the arguments used by policymakers against investing in cycle rickshaw infrastructures. Far from creating congestion and having a very limited role in the future, she puts forward a strong case that rickshaws will continue their historically central role in modern Delhi.

While these contributions are mostly written from a policymaker’s perspective, Kyle Shelton’s “Houston (Un)limited: Path-dependent Annexation and Highway Practices in an American Metropolis” follows the opposite route. A Ph.D. candidate in the History Department at the University of Texas at Austin, he investigates the concept of historical “path dependency” to explain and understand the current condition of a major American city.

All four articles constitute as many invitations to our readers to send in more along these lines: historians struggling with the Now, transport students wrestling with the Then.

The other two articles point to other fields of the *Transfers* portfolio. Saubh Arora, who has both an engineering and a social science background and is an assistant professor at Eindhoven University of Technology, engages with the history of the moral and physical “containment” of the so-called “criminal tribes” in colonial India. This is a rich account of the effects of colonial classifications on everyday lives of nomadic and itinerant people, but his main thrust is theoretical. His “Gatherings of Mobility and Immobility: Itinerant ‘Criminal Tribes’ and Their Containment by the Salvation Army in Colonial South India” argues that current theories about mobilities do not adequately account for the many roles played by non-human and non-modern entities in constituting (im)mobility practices, and thereby undercut the diversity of mobility–immobility relationships.

Finally, Nicholas Balais examines the rhetoric of mobility in the 1960s: around mobile cinema in Cuban journals such as *Cine Cubano*, and also in the documentary film *Por primera vez* (1967). In his article “Transporting Viewers Beyond the ‘Hoe and the Machete’: The Rhetoric of Mobility in Cuban Mobile Cinema” he argues that cinema is linked with mobility in two primary fundamental ways: as a virtual mobility stimulated by onscreen images, and as a more literal mobility expressed by the transportation of film into remote rural sites of exhibition. His analysis demonstrates that both kinds of mobility reflect the hopes and ambitions of filmmakers and critics energized by the resurgent nationalism in the wake of the Cuban revolution, and that they are testimony to the excitement of cinema as a “new” technology in rural Cuba.

But we open this issue, traditionally, with something special: a translation from an oral history project on the mule caravan trade of Yunnan in Southwestern China. Ma Cunzhao, a writer who lives in a village in Western Yunnan, conducted several hundred interviews and condensed 47 of them in *The Distant Sound of Mule Caravan Bells: Oral Histories of Yunnan Caravans and Muleteers* (Kunming 2007). The excerpt translated here by our editorial team member and sinologist Nanny Kim presents memories of the only known woman who ran her own caravans and was known as Tenth Sister Guo. From the 1930s to about 1950, she led caravans from Heqing to Kunming and Baoshan, a march that used to take about two weeks.

As usual the remainder of our issue is filled with our regular sections, such as book, art, film and museum reviews and a contribution by Dhan Zunino Singh and Maximiliano Velázquez in our Ideas in Motion forum section. They track the rather uneven career of the concept of “mobility” through the political, academic, and policy circles of contemporary Argentina. Ostensibly a story of the reception and circulation of a term from the “center” into the “periphery,” Singh and Velazquez suggest the critical and creative potential of a

mobilities approach will only be realized through a careful contextualization of the local that subverts those binary terms. Remember, our Ideas in Motion section is designed to extend the geographical and intellectual reach of our conversations in an informal, accessible, and even opinionated form – very different from the conventions of refereed articles. We want to hear about the ideas circulating in your part of the world – please send them in!

Upon closing our third year we find that we can look back on a rapid start, both in the spread of topics and in spontaneous submissions of articles and the growth of readership. We owe this not in the least to an active editorial team as well as a generous and cosmopolitan pool of referees whom we wish to thank for their crucial, although anonymous, efforts.

Welcome to our fourth volume!

## Notes

1. “Fietsbommen in India eisen veertien levens,” *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant (NRC)*, 22 February 2013, 1.
2. Ykje Vriesinga, “Maxicanen ruilen wapens in voor fietsen,” *NRC*, 25 January 2013, 15.
3. “Parijse jongens maken stadfietsen onklaar,” *NRC*, 15–16 August 2013, 11.
4. “Reistijdwaardering auto naar beneden bijgesteld,” *nm magazine* 8 no. 2 (2013), 7.
5. Also see *Transfers* 1 no. 2 (Summer 2011).
6. See *Transfers* 3 no. 3 (Winter 2013).