

Editorial

Mobility Studies, a Transdisciplinary Field

Dagmar Schäfer

The inter- and multidisciplinary field of mobility studies is in full swing: at least seven dedicated journals and several dedicated book series now cover the field, and the International Association for the History of Transport, Traffic and Mobility (T²M); Cosmobilities; and related associations and networks are cooperating ever more closely. As mobility studies have gained importance and grown into a field of its own, with its own organizations, other disciplines have become interested in mobilities. While this trend indicates the health and strength of mobility studies per se, it brings with it the obligation to consider new ways to reach out and expand.

Acknowledging this trend, the journal *Transfers*, in its eighth year, is re-organizing under a new editorship. In this issue's Ideas in Motion, the team is presented in retrospect, looking back even as we look forward beyond what has been achieved to what can still be done. The design of the *Transfers* team emphasizes its strong commitment to multiplicity as a methodological strength and the necessity to write about mobilities past, present and future. Experts of human geography, arts, Asian studies, and gender—as well as the history of science and technology, film, and media—have teamed up to merge *Transfers's* role in mobility studies and expand its coverage to new grounds. The makeup of the *Transfers* team also underlines its continuous concern to span the bridge of mobility studies across social studies, the sciences, and engineering as much as the arts and humanities and continue to publish cutting-edge articles from a humanities perspective, decentering the vehicle, the nation, and even history. At this point, we envisage going for an even broader horizon—and thinking beyond regions, ideals, and political division. This wish is included in our call for African and Asian mobilities that aim, as Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga has emphasized in the 2016 call for papers, to prioritize the “voices” emanating out of these regions:

The aim is to promote a scholarship that takes Africa seriously not merely as fodder for imported theoretical constructs, as has been historically the case, but as generative of modes of thought and practice that have theoretical value in their own right. The priority of the portfolio, indeed the litmus test for any articles submitted to this special section, will be to ensure that “engaging” scholarship beyond Africa doesn't come at the expense of locally generated modes of thought.



What Clapperton suggests for Africa is equally true for Asia, Eastern Europe, or South and Latin America and Australia—in fact, any region underrepresented in mainstream scholarship.

Historical narratives of China, for instance, assume a shift from stagnation, or at least continuity, to interactivity, that is, two things interacting with each other. Herein, increased geographic mobility marks the transition from the dynastic to the early Republican/modern era. Similar ideas are invoked in regions such as Japan (from secluded island to naval force), Korea, (satellite state of China or Japan) or Central Asia as a whole. On a broader scale, we see how a region once considered static and immobile, is experiencing a turnaround and becoming a region constantly on the move.

As a historian of science and technology, I would like to add that the epistemic implications of movement and mobility—its local and global impact on practices and theories of knowledge—and the ontological consequences require attention, too. Mobility not only has a physical and a mental side but, as often as not, is and has been an operative process that becomes apparent in multiple ways. This operative process has historical, scientific, and technological dimensions, as well as one in the humanities and arts.

My use of epistemic needs a bit of elaboration: for me, it is mainly about asking how and why thinking about mobility and “being mobile” is important as a way to “understand” mobility and transfers—with your body and/or your mind (as is evident when mobility is restricted through physical disabilities or legal inhibitions). In reverse, mobility studies trains us to see phenomena constituted in motion, such as ideas, individuals, institutions, and identities. *Transfers* can give these issues a voice.

In an article on science, geopolitics, and research assessment, Tereza Stöckelová recently observed that “science policies and science studies largely share an understanding of scientific knowledge and objects as immutable mobiles,” critiquing Bruno Latour’s coupling as a privileging of knowledge claims to travel intact. In fact, in recent years science and technology studies (STS) and science history have increasingly complicated such views, unfolding the dynamic character of both mobility and sciences as “the necessary results of particular epistemological and methodological procedures.”¹ Mobility is an important theme in the history of science, though it is mainly discussed in terms of the transfer, circulation, travel, or exchange of information, knowledge, objects, and people, and even more in terms of mutable and immutable objects.

The historical implications of mobility, the way in which infrastructures were built and a technology’s history shapes its present, are far reaching, and *Transfers* has always made it part of its agenda to give these histories a voice in and for modern policy debates on mobility’s future. Such efforts become even more relevant in an age that shifts its view on innovation discourses toward enabling multiple modernities. Such debates can also be seen as a reflection

of a contemporary ambiguity that seems to counterpoise an enormous supermobility by some actors and agents (such as us represented by political or economic migrants or us cosmopolitan, far-traveling scholars, as well as the mobility of goods in world trade) with virtual mobilities (such as those enabled by IT, or the imagined mobilities in films and arts) or even actual (deliberate or enforced forms of) immobility. The history of technology may offer “nothing certain in a world of complex sociotechnical systems” when it comes to tackling modern mobility concerns, but, as Collin Divall has argued, “history can help us to see how, over the long term, various combinations of power and circumstance shaped choices at the collective and personal levels.”² He delineates a comprehensive list of how history can serve as an empirical basis for the study of decision-making processes. Divall thus propagates the notion history as a key to understanding the popular imaginary of mobility as opposed to its modern reality—in short, a list that delineates history as a key to explaining past causalities and its modern power. The power of history, like art and the humanities more generally, lies in its ability to illustrate possible alternatives in complex ways.

The history of technology specifically has taken a focus on historical processes of repetition, technological momentum, and feedback loops, the terms themselves borrowed from idioms of motion. Studying their historical dimension may provide us ways of reexamining the workings of mobility, transport, and communication. In addition, the self-reflexivity of STS could also equip us to further challenge the normative good of certain aspects of mobility, beginning with the desirability of speed and connectivity—markers to be aware of—like “science,” “rationality,” and “objectivity” of the modern.

Transdisciplinarity is a wonderful aim, but, as we all know, it also has important implications on scholarly methods. Research with a mobility agenda can only profit from a multimethodological approach. While the single-authored article is still the norm in many of the fields that *Transfers* addresses, collaborative work has long gained significant currency. The *Transfers* team will thus explore how we can give such collaborative efforts the legitimation and the respect they deserve

A historical and transdisciplinary perspective forms, in my view, the identity of *Transfers* within mobilities studies: (1) not subscribing to modernity’s conceit, I personally would welcome more pieces in *Transfers* on mobilities in time past; and (2) taking a more active role in displaying mobility in its multiple expressions and forms of representation. This is a world not only with a textured and variegated geography but one with a history of that sort as well.

I envision *Transfers* as the venue to give room to varied disciplinary expressions and, in particular, research that embraces this transdisciplinarity in multiple ways. Over the course of 2018, this editorial will provide a forum for the in-depth presentation of the thoughts of its new formative team.

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Notes

1. Tereza Stöckelová, “Social Technology Transfer? Movement of Social Science Knowledge beyond the Academy,” *Theory and Psychology* 22, no. 2 (2012), 148–161, here 151.
2. Colin Divall, “Mobilizing the History of Technology,” *Technology and Culture* 51, no. 4 (2010): 938–960, here 941.