

Connecting Historical Studies of Transport, Mobility and Migration

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Abstract

This paper argues that the sub-disciplines of transport history, migration history and mobilities studies too rarely interact directly with each other, and that there is much to be gained from the integration and cross-fertilisation of different approaches. Migration historians rarely directly consider the modes of transport used to travel, and although there has been increased interaction between transport historians and mobilities scholars in recent years the full potential of such interactions is yet to be exploited. The experience of travelling, and the convenience of the modes of transport used, can significantly influence later decisions about migration and mobility. This paper calls for a greater focus on such topics and explores some of the potential benefits.

Key words

Transport, Migration, Mobility, History

Author biography

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Introduction

Transport is essential for all forms of movement, be that of people, goods or information. However, all too often studies of human mobility and migration pay little heed to the mode of transport used or to the implications of a transport mode for the experience of movement. This short paper argues that closer integration of the academic fields of transport history, mobility studies and migration history would benefit all three disciplines.¹ Studying migration and mobility with little consideration of precisely how people moved omits a major part of the experience; and studying transport history without considering exactly why travellers chose a particular mode, and the impact that a journey might have had on future travel, likewise provides only a partial picture of travel and transport. Recent mass population movements from North Africa and the Middle East into Europe demonstrate clearly the continuing significance of such connections. People desperate to flee conflict or starvation are forced to travel precariously to the Mediterranean, to then risk a dangerous sea voyage in flimsy craft and often to walk long distances to a border crossing where they may or may not be admitted. Once processed as refugees or asylum seekers they may be transported long distances by bus or train to a country where they have few contacts and often limited powers of communication. The multiple transport modes encountered, and the difficulties of accessing, them all contribute to a potentially traumatic and life-changing experience for such migrants.² Such mass movements are not of course new, and in many ways replicate past migration events such as the trans-Atlantic movement of destitute Irish during the famine years of the mid-nineteenth century,³ and the

movement of refugees across Europe during and following the Second World War.⁴ While the connections between migration, mobility and transport are quite obvious, it is the case that they are only rarely explored in depth by scholars of migration and transport history.

Divergent approaches

In this section I briefly examine the principal approaches adopted in transport studies, migration history and mobility studies, consider the reasons why they often fail to connect, and review some studies that do begin to recognize the significance of such links. Historians of migration have focused mainly on the largest, most visible and potentially disruptive international migration flows, particularly those that crossed the Atlantic from Europe to the Americas.⁵ More recently a renewed focus on global history has encouraged recognition of the equally significant population movements that have occurred elsewhere in the world, especially in Asia and Africa.⁶ Such studies range from wide-ranging surveys of global migration⁷ to detailed analyses of specific migrant streams,⁸ but most focus attention on the reasons for leaving and the experience of arriving and establishing a fresh life in a new community, with little consideration given to the journey itself or the modes of transport used.⁹ For most people short-distance moves within a single country are the most common experience but, curiously, these have been afforded rather less attention by most migration historians.¹⁰ Here too the mode of transport used to travel from place to place is rarely considered, with most attention focused on the impacts on places of origin and destination.¹¹ Whether dealing with international or internal migration there are many common themes, including consideration of gender differences, occupational differentiation, ethnic clustering, transnationalism and chain migration, and the myth of

return.¹² However, exactly how people moved and the possible impacts of their experience of the journey and the transport modes used are barely considered.

Mobility studies have expanded exponentially in recent years with many scholars developing the original concept of the 'new mobility paradigm' proposed by Mimi Sheller and John Urry.¹³ In brief, this argues for the centrality of all forms of movement (of people, goods and ideas) to society, emphasises the ways in which it shapes both the social and physical structures of society, and places emphasis on the experiences and meanings generated through travel. New work has applied these ideas in a wide range of contexts, and to many different travel modes, but only rarely have the historical dimensions of everyday travel been the main focus of attention. Although there are exceptions, all too often past mobilities are dealt with superficially and without reference to strong evidence.¹⁴

This is regrettable because many of the concepts used by mobility researchers are just as applicable to the past as they are to the present. I argue that there are potential benefits to be gained from historians of human movement embracing more fully contemporary mobilities literature, and by mobilities researchers engaging more fully with the past.

Research in transport studies has, understandably, focused mainly on the development and delivery of transport infrastructure, its impacts on the environment through which it passes, and its efficiency at moving goods and people from place to place. The pages of this journal provide many examples of historical studies of different forms of transport on land, sea and in the air. However, interaction with the work of either migration historians or mobility researchers is relatively rare. A quick word search of research articles in the *Journal of Transport History* reveals just two mentions of migration or migrant(s) in the title (or sub-title) of any contributions. Since 2006 authors in this journal have engaged more with

mobility concepts,¹⁵ and a recent editorial is evidence of the increased engagement of transport researchers with mobilities scholars,¹⁶ largely in response to the growing body of mobilities research in the social sciences. I argue that there is much to be gained by transport historians developing even stronger links with mobility concepts and also by engaging with migration historians, to consider more fully the role that different transport modes played in shaping the everyday experiences of migration and mobility in the past.

Beyond this journal there has been more cross-fertilisation of ideas between transport studies and mobility concepts, but very little evidence of research on the role of transport in migration studies. This is surprising given the crucial role that transport – or the lack of it – has played in shaping many of the current and past migration movements that have attracted most attention and have generated the most concern. Key contributions to the development of interdisciplinary research in transport and mobility have mostly appeared in the journal *Transfers*, and in the *T2M yearbook*,¹⁷ with notable contributions from researchers including Gijs Mom, Colin Divall and Peter Merriman.¹⁸ Elsewhere Tim Cresswell¹⁹ has repeatedly highlighted the importance of an historical perspective to mobilities studies, and some transport geographers such as Shaw and Hesse have argued for closer links between transport geography and mobilities researchers.²⁰ The links between population movement and transport systems have also been explored more fully by some urban historians interested in the contribution of migration to urban growth and suburban development,²¹ and there is increased interest in the use of literary sources for the study of mobility.²² Such contributions are very welcome but there is scope to expand such connections substantially to the mutual benefit of all disciplines concerned with human movement.

Explaining the connections

There are a number of ways in which the mode, route, comfort and convenience of the transport used may impact upon the processes of migration and everyday mobility. To use one simple example, the experience of travelling may have a significant impact upon the future propensity of an individual to use a particular form of transport, route or travel time. For instance, experiencing frequent delays or overcrowding when travelling to and from work by rail may eventually lead commuters to turn to travelling by car, thus increasing road congestion and environmental pollution from vehicle exhausts. In both the present and the past most everyday travellers have sought to use the means of transport that is the quickest, cheapest, most comfortable and most convenient.²³ The rich have always had more choice than the poor, but where choice was available – and especially as the range of transport modes available expanded rapidly in the twentieth century – people have made decisions about their everyday movements based in part at least on their previous experiences of travelling. The experience of travelling is, arguably, even more important for leisure travel where the journey becomes part of the leisure experience. However, expectations will vary depending on the type of leisure that is being undertaken: some may seek slow travel allowing interaction with the environment through which they pass, while others may choose to travel as quickly as possible to maximise time at a destination.²⁴ Leisure time and leisure opportunities have increased over the twentieth century and so such choices have become increasingly significant for both national and international transport infrastructures though, of course, some such travel has existed in all time periods. Although residential migration takes place much less frequently than everyday mobility for such purposes as travel to work, school, shop or social activities, the transport modes

available for migration and the experience of a move can influence future attitudes towards further movement, and through communications with those left behind may influence the future migration decision of others. At its most mundane this could include the experience of poor service from a particular removal company, leading to the use of another firm next time by both the original mover and by others who have heard of the experience. More seriously, a difficult sea voyage, or loss of life through a maritime accident – whether crossing the Atlantic in the past or the Mediterranean today – may deter future migrants from making a similar crossing. There is ample evidence from the work of migration historians of the importance of communications between those who have moved and friends and relatives left behind. Many collections of migrants' letters survive and it is clear that the information that was relayed back to those at home, be it positive or negative, had an impact upon future migration decisions.²⁵ As with everyday mobility the significance of the transport mode selected increased as the choice of transport available widened, but choice of transport mode could also be affected by the quantity of personal possessions that the migrant had to relocate. For instance, in nineteenth-century Britain most people had few possessions and these could easily be moved locally on a handcart, or for longer distances they could be carried on a carter's wagon. In the twentieth century, as material possessions increased for most people, the process of moving home became more complicated and potentially more stressful.²⁶

Those situations when transport is not available can also have a significant impact on a traveller's willingness to move, their attitude to a journey and the transport modes selected. In many of the poorest countries of the world mobility options remain restricted for all but the most affluent, especially for international travel where visa restrictions may be severe.

For more local travel, where the only option is to walk then horizons are likely to be restricted and opportunities for education or employment curtailed.²⁷ In most times and societies gender has been an important component of mobility deprivation. For instance, in Britain the ability to access and drive a motor car has been dominated by men for much of the twentieth century: in 1965 50 per cent of men had a driving licence but only ten per cent of women; even in 2014 while 80 per cent of men could legally drive only 67 per cent of women had a licence.²⁸ Moreover, the legal ability to drive (which of course also excludes the young and those prevented from driving by infirmity) does not necessarily mean that an individual has access to a car when needed, and women in particular are most likely to have had their mobility restricted in this way.²⁹ For those using public transport for most everyday travel the gradual reduction of bus and rail services in many rural areas in Britain, and to a lesser degree in urban areas, has caused significant hardship for some, including those elderly who may be no longer able to drive.³⁰ Finally, transport may be withheld or interrupted due to the personal characteristics of a traveller. There are many well-documented incidences of the difficulties faced by Black or Asian people when travelling in Europe or North America today,³¹ but such problems are not new. For instance, in the mid-twentieth century there developed a separate network of motels and other stopping places provided by and for African Americans because of the difficulties that Black motorists encountered when travelling.³²

One factor that emerges clearly from the detailed analysis of who travelled, how they travelled, and the ways in which people interacted with the transport modes available is the diversity of mobility experiences that has existed in most times and places. Not only did this vary with factors such as age, gender, income, class and ethnicity, but they might also vary

for any one individual according to the time of day, companions, journey purpose or weather among other factors. For instance, it can be demonstrated that children often interact differently with the journey to school compared to their travel home, due to the different time pressures involved.³³ Much research in transport studies, both historical and contemporary, tends to work with aggregate data on travel mode. This is not surprising as it is the form in which most data are available. Such statistics are valuable for comparative purposes but necessarily obscure the diversity and variability of travel mode choice and travel experience that existed in the real world of mobility and migration. I argue that it is important to try to get below the surface of transport history to explore these diverse experiences, and in so doing to interact with the world most often explored through mobility studies. Data that enables this to be done are limited, but one approach is to use personal testimonies in the form of diaries, life histories and oral narratives. These are not without their problems of use but can reveal much about the ways in which travellers and their transport interacted and changed over time.³⁴

Next steps

The purpose of this short piece has been to encourage transport historians to engage more fully with both migration history and mobilities studies. I recognize that this is a process that has already begun and that I may be pushing at an open door. I also fully recognize the importance of continuing other strands of research in transport history. But I do argue that there is scope to do much more, and that if scholars who currently deal with rather different components of mobility, movement and transport worked more closely together, and borrowed ideas from each other, this would greatly enrich research. In particular, there is need for transport historians to recognize more fully the ways in which different individual

travellers interacted with and used particular transport modes, and for migration historians and mobility scholars to place more emphasis on the forms of transport available to travellers. There are many ways in which such developments might be further encouraged through both teaching and research. Interdisciplinary undergraduate and postgraduate teaching that draws from across the different disciplines concerned with human movement can work well. Conferences³⁵ and workshops that deliberately explore these issues or theme issues of journals (such as *Transport History*) can be very valuable methods of developing such interaction. Whatever approaches are adopted the rewards are likely to be substantial.

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