

## Boundary Crossings

# Transport, geography and the 'new' mobilities

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In this short essay we discuss two elements of contemporary geography that are concerned with movement. We focus on 'mobilities' (Cresswell 2006), or the 'new mobilities paradigm' (Sheller and Urry 2006), and the more 'traditional' approach of transport geography (Goetz *et al.* 2004; Keeling 2007 2008 2009; Knowles 2009). Our claim, in short, is that while these two different strands of thought and scholarship have been practised more-or-less separately, there ought to be closer working – or at least a better understanding – between mobilities and transport geographers. We should be clear that we are not arguing for a complete blurring of the distinction between the two approaches, but we do see opportunities both for the development of a more sophisticated appreciation of movement and for a stronger articulation of the case as to why this is important within and beyond academic human geography.

Mobilities has increased in prominence not just in geography but across the social sciences, where it collects a growing number of proponents; Sheller and Urry rather grandiosely position the new mobilities paradigm extremely broadly, as an approach to inquiry and analysis which, by challenging the 'a-mobile' nature of much social science, requires academics to 'change both the objects of [their] inquiries and the methodologies for research' (2006, 208). Transport geography, on the other hand, is rather less fêted. Often perceived as conventional, and despite its vintage frequently absent from major human geography texts – it was almost omitted from the *Encyclopaedia of human*

*geography* (Kitchin and Thrift 2009) – the sub-discipline has been characterised even by one of its own as a 'quiet ... some might say moribund corner of the discipline ... [that] has remained within the analytical framework of the 1960s' (Hanson 2003, 469, 481). This view has not gone unchallenged (see Goetz *et al.* 2009) and certainly Hanson's characterisation is provocative, but it is probably fair to suggest that transport geography is often regarded as peripheral by many human geographers.

At least in Anglophone geography, the intellectual journeys of these approaches to the study of movement have followed generally different trajectories on account of being taken by different types of academic, interested in different aspects of movement and speaking different kinds of language. In considering the implications of this we draw and build upon the outcomes of a panel session at the 2008 Annual Conference of the Association of American Geographers (AAG) in Boston, Massachusetts.<sup>1</sup> We invited geographers and sociologists associated with the mobilities agenda as well as transport geographers to think about the apparent schism, and existing and potential synergies, between their areas of/approaches to scholarly inquiry.<sup>2</sup> The session tied in with events at previous conferences and a growing literature that have focused on the role and disciplinary position of transport geography (see Goetz *et al.* 2009; Hall 2010; Hall *et al.* 2006; Hanson 2003; Horner and Casas 2006; Keeling 2007 2008 2009). In this context, panellists were asked to consider four main questions:

- To what extent are transport geography and mobilities compatible?
- How far do they already coincide?
- How far is it desirable, practical and/or profitable for them to coincide?
- What are potential ways forward in terms of theoretical and methodological development and empirical data collection?

### **Mobilities and transport geography: two sides of a common boundary?**

There can be little doubt that the concept of mobility has gained increasing attention among geographers in recent years (see, for example, Adey *et al.* 2007; Bissell 2009a 2009b; Crang 2002; Cresswell 2006; Dodge and Kitchin 2004; Laurier 2004; Massey 2005; Merriman 2008; Middleton 2009; Spinney 2009; Thrift 2004). Johnston *et al.* (1995) noted that mobility would surely be recognised as one of the touchstones of the late 20th-century, although writing a decade later (admittedly in a different context) Cresswell still felt that much remained to be done in mobilities geography:

Mobility ... is more central to both the world and our understanding of it than ever before. And yet mobility itself, and what it means, remains [sic] unspecified. It is a kind of blank space that stands as an alternative to place, boundedness, foundations, and stability. This space needs examining. (2006, 2)

While the rise of mobility as an indicator of current developments is closely aligned with phenomena in which geographers take a keen interest, the increasing popularity of mobilities within the social sciences is multi-disciplinary. The 'new mobilities paradigm' emerged particularly in sociology, initially associated with John Urry and colleagues at the Centre for Mobilities Research (CeMoRe) at the University of Lancaster (see Hannam *et al.* 2006; Larsen *et al.* 2006; Sheller and Urry 2006; Urry 2002 2007). Networks of scholars (such as *Cosmobilities*) have emerged, alongside a dedicated journal, *Mobilities*, launched at the AAG's Annual Conference in 2006 and co-edited by Urry. Transport geographers remain conspicuously under-represented in its pages.

Mobilities is about far more than just carrying people and/or commodities from A to B. Indeed, mobility is seen not just as a means of providing access to workplaces and amenities, but more broadly as a constitutive framework for modern

society, providing opportunities and constraints – freedom and limitation, justice and inequality and so on – over time and across space (Hannam *et al.* 2006). Cresswell writes that to a certain extent mobility is 'brute fact – something that is potentially observable ... an empirical reality' (2006, 3). But it is also, he goes on to say, imbued with meaning through various cultural representations such as film, photography and literature, and further is 'a way of being in the world' in that it is 'practiced, it is experienced, [and] it is embodied'. Thus mobilities fills a major research gap in the geographical study of travel and transport by setting out to (dis)cover a range of topics behind and beyond 'traditional' transport geography: it elucidates the framework conditions underpinning the generation of movement, the experience of movement and the implications thereof, and the wider impact of movement across a whole range of socio-cultural, economic and political milieux.

Although Hanson's (2003) reflections on the state of modern transport geography should to a degree be read as hyperbole, default approaches to the sub-discipline – in basic terms the study of the spatial aspects of transport (Goetz *et al.* 2004) – are generally associated with empiricist/positivist assumptions, methods of data collection and modelling. The British textbook *Modern transport geography* was as late as 1998 privileging the 'pursuit of objectivity and truth' in transport analysis (Hoyle and Knowles 1998, 5). This is, of course, different from suggesting that transport geographers have not been at the forefront of important developments in human geography; indeed, among the first and most prominent 'scientists' in the discipline were transport geographers modelling network patterns. Among other innovations was Ullman's 1954 *Geography as spatial interaction*, which pointed to the basic role of the interplay between site and situation, referring to 'local, underlying areal conditions' and 'the effect of one area on another area, the connection between areas' (Ullman [1954]1980, 13). His view emerged from the critique that human geography was putting too much emphasis on areas and territories, based on the gravity-model, at the expense of considerations of behaviour, situation and interrelation. His contribution, which still has purchase today, was to consider site and situation as inevitably linked, finding that almost no one single place is (economically/socially) independent but is bound up in a network of interaction and interdependency (Hesse 2010). Still others have

triggered lively theoretical debate across the discipline in exploring the significance of movement in spatial interaction and development (see Janelle 1969).

Hanson's (2003) critique implies that a large volume of subsequent transport geography work has had a contrary effect, in essence constructing a popular imagery of the sub-discipline as outmoded and/or seeking refuge in its connections with economists and civil engineers. In reality, of course, transport geography has a broader base and an increasing number of interventions are both theoretically and methodologically innovative. The long-accepted understanding of mobility within the sub-discipline – essentially the ability of individuals to move around – is being augmented by authors responding to a range of intellectual stimuli. For example, Tim Schwanen, Mei-Po Kwan, Glenn Lyons and colleagues have been instrumental in furthering debates on the inter-relationship between transport, geography and information/communications technologies (Lyons 2009; Schwanen *et al.* 2009). John Farrington (2007) has recently focused on the importance of linking a key concern of transport geography, accessibility, with dominant narratives such as sustainability, globalisation and, indeed, the new mobilities. While such developments are extremely welcome, we would suggest that they have had less overall impact on the direction of geographical scholarship than those associated with the broader mobilities agenda. Perhaps increasing recognition of the significance of movement within the social sciences offers a promising opportunity to reposition transport geography.

### Compatibility and coincidence: rethinking current trajectories

Despite differences between the two bodies of work with regard to focus, methods employed and the epistemological underpinnings that guide inquiry in the first place, there are discernable areas of *compatibility* between transport and mobilities geography. For a start, and rather obviously, the basis of both sets of scholars' interests is movement of one form or another. Of course, not all movement is accounted for by transport systems and the travel they enable – Spinney (2009, 819) refers to movement as a concept having been 'strait-jacketed as transport' and so rendered 'overwhelmingly utilitarian in nature' – but indubitably there is a strong link between transport activities

on the one hand, and their socio/cultural/political meanings and representations, and corporeal and (en)gendered experiences on the other. Stereotypical views of both transport and mobilities geography tend falsely to assume a significant degree of homogeneity within each. Transport geographers might regard mobilities as 'too cultural' and mobilities scholars sometimes see transport geography as 'too traditional', but in practice there is considerable heterogeneity evident in both approaches. We have already mentioned the likes of Schwanen and Kwan, whose work has a distinctly progressive and critical edge. Others advancing qualitative and culturally aware analyses in the *Journal of Transport Geography* and elsewhere include Juliet Jain (who along with Glenn Lyons has drawn on sociological theory to reconceptualise travel time as a 'gift'), Colin Pooley (who has undertaken detailed analyses of mobility change in Britain over the 20th century) and Selima Sultana (who has investigated issues of race in the context of commuting) (Jain and Lyons 2008; Pooley *et al.* 2005; Sultana 2005). All of these works fall within the remit of the journal *Mobilities*. Rather than opposing extremes, transport geography and mobilities contain various approaches that might be thought of as distributed along a continuum. Traditional empiricist or model-based inquiry (e.g. Rose *et al.* 2009) may well populate one end and discussions of, for example, 'affectual circulations that flow through the sedentary body' (Bissell 2008, 1697) may be found at the other, but around the middle there is already overlap.

There are distinct advantages in trumpeting and building on this *coincidence* of interests. Obviously there is the view that transport has for many years been underplayed in mainstream geography, and remains peripheral notwithstanding the activities of the 'new generation' of transport geographers (Hanson 2003; cf. Goetz *et al.* 2009). And while under the banner of mobilities the purchase of movement as an idea has gained new popularity among human geographers, it is often associated with the cultural turn and perhaps for this reason remains beyond the immediate concern of many within the discipline. As transport and mobilities geographers we appreciate the centrality of movement to geographical phenomena, but at the same time is not our belief that this should be understood by a wider audience genuinely held rather than driven by reasons of self-aggrandisement? Shaw and Sidaway (2010) see transport as a kind of 'Cinderella' theme, present in

any number of geographical analyses but playing second fiddle to what their authors (and readers?) regard as higher order empirical and theoretical points associated with economic, or political, or environmental – as opposed to transport – geography. Consider, for example, the discourse of geopolitics: the railway is key to Mackinder's ([1904]2004) ideas about 'heartland' in *The geographical pivot of history*, and the advent and capabilities of sea and air power featured strongly in subsequent writings, but geopolitics is not seen as being especially associated with transport geographers.

Thus transport and mobilities geographers would do well to further advance mobility as a foundation concept in geography alongside those relatively accepted (though hardly uncontested) notions of space, place, scale, landscape and so on. A starting point here is the argument that mobility is inherently geographical since in its most basic form it is about movement between places across space. Taking this further leads us to Cresswell's (2006) thesis that human geographers (and others) have developed their thinking on the basis of a 'sedentarist metaphysics' – i.e. a fixation with fixity (see also Sheller and Urry 2006) – which resulted in certain forms of mobility being thought of negatively, to an extent because of their association with placelessness or other 'undesirable' phenomena such as transience. Part of the mobilities 'manifesto' is to address this misconception: for Cresswell (2006) and Sheller and Urry (2006), the term mobility reflects processes of theorisation that bring previously absent conceptual sophistication to ideas of movement. Such theorisation highlights how mobility and movement are key to current understandings of space, place (etc.) as boundless, connected and contested. By the same token, of course, mobility cannot be fully understood without reference to fixity, or 'moorings' (see Adey 2006; Hannam *et al.* 2006). In this light, positioning mobility as a more explicit facet of geographical analyses is to the benefit of the discipline as a whole rather than just transport or mobilities geographers. The blurb on the back cover of Tom Vanderbilt's (2008) highly acclaimed book *Traffic* asserts that '[d]riving is about more than getting from A to B ... it's actually the key to deciphering human nature and ... well, pretty much everything'. Even in the (likely) absence of such an enthusiastic embrace, there is potential for debates about differences and complementarities between transport, travel, movement and mobility, and their

relationship with wider geographical concerns, to benefit from scholarly input from across the spectrum of human geography. Active representation of both transport and mobilities geographers in these debates should help avoid the perspective of one set of protagonists automatically being privileged at the expense of the other, but transport geographers would no doubt be alert to how accessibility – recognised by many as a higher-order concept than mobility (Farrington 2007) – constitutes a valid dimension to the dialogue.

There are also opportunities to both widen and deepen the intellectual preoccupations of transport and mobilities geography by learning from – or at least not being (deliberately/ostensibly?) ignorant of – the motivations and practices informing each other's approaches to inquiry and scholarship. For instance, it is often said that transport geography is theoretically light, detached from key developments in conceptual thinking evident in other areas of human geography and social science more broadly. Conversely, while mobilities work draws upon primary empirical data – Laurier *et al.*'s (2008) study of driving and 'passenger' and Bissell's (2009a 2009b) recent papers on rail travel spring to mind as examples – it is nevertheless perceived by some transport geographers as over-theorising and over-conceptualising issues at the expense of a solid, empirically based assessment of how mobility works. Perhaps transport geographers are wrongly viewing as representative landmark contributions such as Cresswell's (2006) *On the move*, or maybe there is an ongoing suspicion of the status of data gathered by methods such as auto/ethnography (see Watts 2008; but also Letherby and Shaw 2009) or of arguments resting on the practices of one respondent (see Laurier 2004). In any event, there are examples of work that draw on both 'traditional' transport geography approaches and key mobilities thinking, and of authors who have used both approaches in separate studies depending on the issue under investigation. Gray *et al.* (2006) used large data sets from Scotland and Northern Ireland to develop some of Urry's (2002) ideas on social capital/networks and mobility in the context of community transport and social exclusion in rural areas. Simon Kingham has been involved in analyses of the social impacts of raising driver-licensing age in New Zealand (Kingham *et al.* 2004) and of cultural-geographical aspects of 'boy racers' in the same country (Falconer and Kingham 2004). And perhaps a topic

worthy of more detailed analysis from both perspectives is daily mobility. Transport geographers have observed and attempted to explain patterns of daily mobility using 'traditional' assumptions such as demand and supply or utility maximisation (e.g. Chapin 1974; Giuliano 1998), while mobilities work seeks to uncover its more human qualities (e.g. Law 1999 2002). As a result we know that it is simultaneously bizarre and exotic, trivial and quotidian, and what emerges is an understanding that daily mobility is based on both apparently automatic sequences of behaviour *and* rational decision-making. How, then, to better get to grips with the daily journey? We do not seek to suggest that matters are as easy as combining the 'best bits' of each others' work to improve scholarly results and analyses, but synthesising some aspects of traditional and new approaches would seem a reasonable point of departure.

Questions of policy relevance are also pertinent here. There is a tradition of policy-driven work in transport geography – notwithstanding debates about the position and influence of geography more broadly in relation to key policy decisions (on 'relevance', see Johnston and Sidaway 2004) – but transport geographers who overlook the potential contribution of the mobilities literature to their work will miss out on key insights into the underpinnings, experiences or representation of transport and travel. Conversely, mobilities geographers not engaging with policy debates will diminish the likelihood of their work having an impact beyond immediate academic circles. While those in mobilities are frequently keen to foreground the 'intangible and ephemeral, the meanings that accrue in the context of the journey itself ... the sensory, kinaesthetic and symbolic aspects ... [and] affective factors' (Spinney 2009, 821) in order to gain more realistic understandings of people's mobility, we might well ask, so what? One reason would be to better engage with broader socio-economic or political issues and processes. Spinney himself notes that

[w]ith cycling [the mode of transport with which he is concerned] firmly back on the policy agenda, there has never been a better time to rethink how urban cycling is conceptualised and researched. (2009, 830)

In other words, bringing a mobilities perspective to cycling is important because it could lead to better policymaking. Some authors are already doing this: for example, work on the functions of travel space which challenges the approach of judging potential

transport improvements in terms of the time saved by a new and possibly expensive investment (Lyons and Urry 2005; Jain and Lyons 2008) is prompting new questions – if not yet garnering new practices – in the British Department for Transport. Whereas conventional thinking assumes that travel time is wasted time, the arrival of ICTs reminds us of ways in which travel spaces can be productive working and leisure spaces. Geography is doubly important here: we don't just travel across space, we also travel in it. There are implications with giving ministers and civil servants the idea that they can get away with cutting back on large-scale infrastructure investment, but if focusing on travel spaces leads to greater efforts on the part of governments and transport providers to improve journey quality, reliability and safety, it will have been of clear practical as well as intellectual benefit (Shaw *et al.* 2008).

In making the most of what transport and mobilities geography have to offer there are obviously new discourses to learn and/or appreciate, and potentially previously rejected world-views to accommodate. Yet none of this need come at the expense of one's basic principles as either a transport or mobilities geographer: responsible interpretation still lies with the author(s) and there is an established tradition of mixed-methods research (see Philip 1998) pursued by academics of different epistemological convictions. And on the subject of methods, a flurry of recent literature (see Fincham *et al.* 2009; Merriman 2009; Sheller and Urry 2006; Spinney 2009; Urry 2007; Watts and Urry 2008) argues that the study of mobility requires the development of new 'mobile methods' on the basis that mobilities 'as a wide-ranging category of connection, distance and motion transforms social science and its research methods' (Watts and Urry 2008, 862). In our view this merits further critical reflection, for surely what is at stake is only the tweaking of particular methods capable of harnessing the power of existing methodologies in mobile situations (Letherby *et al.* 2010).

## Development: where do we go from here?

In concluding we stop short of calling for – and certainly of attempting to define – a new agenda for the development of transport and mobilities research (such agendas of course are common: for transport geography and mobilities examples see Horner and Casas 2006; Knowles 1993; Sheller and

Urry 2006). We admit there is a broad range of core questions that could be dealt with jointly as they represent challenges to both 'conventional' transport geography and 'new' mobilities approaches (see, for example, Keeling 2007 2008 2009), but here we see no need, and nor do we have the space, to outline what would be a well-meaning but ultimately partial and situated articulation of 'how the future should look'. We do think, though – as by now should be very apparent – that transport and mobilities geography have exploitable commonalities, and that at the very least a better working knowledge of and active engagement with each other's approaches and ideas would benefit and promote not just transport and mobilities as areas of study, but also the presence and nature of mobility as a concept within human geography as a whole. This will require a degree of cognitive (and institutional) adaptability, aimed at connecting new/unfamiliar approaches and concepts with accepted findings, theories and discourses, but should help build mutually beneficial dialogue around shared themes rather than perpetuating almost completely separate approaches to a common subject.

That said, we would be naïve to assume that such an enterprise would be acceptable to, or seen as necessary by, even a majority of those geographers with an academic interest in movement. At the least there are likely to be ongoing tensions between the two communities. Aligning their academic output with key policy concerns will remain a turn-off for some mobilities geographers – perhaps because it is 'just too traditional' – in the same way that some transport geographers will likely remain uneasy with studies of mobility at the scale of the body (see Bissell 2008; Cresswell 2001; Lorimer and Lund 2003) – because 'it just isn't transport'. Indeed, there will always be researchers who, despite their better judgement, fail to see much point in the work of others or regard it as a hindrance in terms of how they think the broader ideas of transport/travel/mobility/movement should be conceptualised and 'mobilised'.<sup>3</sup> And transport geographers are probably justified in raising an eyebrow at the deployment by some in mobilities circles of the prefix 'new': certainly the current emphasis is new in terms of its own specificities, but there is a longstanding appreciation of the significance of movement to the functioning of societies, including, for those who have drawn on authors such as Hägerstrand (1970) and Eliot-Hurst (1974), from cultural/behaviour-

al/progressive perspectives. Ultimately, though, such differences that do exist should be seen as a strength in that they bring more to the study of movement overall, and a work of synthesis – maybe an edited text on Travel and Mobilities Geography pairing a scholar from each school of thought to write each chapter – is long overdue. Knowles *et al.* (2008) moved some way along this track in *Transport geographies: mobilities, flows and spaces*, although Pooley notes that

repeatedly ... the authors attempt to move beyond transport to engage with the mobilities agenda, but usually the two glide past each other and never become fully engaged. (2008, 443)

In his review of *On the move* (Cresswell 2006), transport geographer Gordon Pirie laments that while

All transport geographers should be thrilled by the appearance of a title that is so central to their work [i]n practice only those working at the 'softer' end of the sub-discipline are likely to revel in the publication of a conceptually sophisticated and historically pregnant scholarly monograph ... This is precisely because mobility is treated so differently in a sanitised, totalising sub-discipline that has worked so hard to generalise and abstract the phenomenon of movement. (2006, 471)

It doesn't have to be this way, and nor should it.

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## Notes

- 1 The panel was jointly organised by the transport geography groups of the AAG, the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) (RGS/IBG) and the German Society of Geography (DGfG). The views we express in this paper represent our interpretation of key points emerging from the discussion and should not be read as an established consensus among panel members.
- 2 Panel members were: Tim Cresswell (Royal Holloway, University of London), Andy Goetz (University of Denver), Markus Hesse (University of Luxembourg), Rob Kitchin (National University of Ireland, Maynooth), Sven Kesselring (Technical University of

Munich), Tim Schwanen (University of Oxford/Utrecht University) and Jon Shaw (University of Plymouth).

- 3 One mobilities scholar told a colleague of one of us that 'policy is boring'; another emphatically was 'not a transport geographer' on apparently having been mistaken as one. By the same token one of the transport geographers cited in this paper was 'extremely worried' about the direction of mobilities scholarship which seemed to be 'missing the point' of mobility in pressing human concerns; another wrote off the entire mobilities agenda simply as 'the emperor's new clothes'.

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