Mobility and the Environment

Veranstalter: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC), Munich; Marguerite Avery (MIT Press); Uwe Lübken (RCC); Clapperton Mavhunga (MIT); Gijs Mom (RCC/Eindhoven University of Technology)
Datum, Ort: 03.06.2010–05.06.2010, Munich
Bericht von: Agnes Kneitz / Marc Landry, Rachel Carson Center München

This workshop, hosted at the Rachel Carson Center and convened by Gijs Mom, Uwe Lübken, Clapperton Mavhunga, and Marguerite Avery, had as its objective the discussion of an emerging field that the participants are involved in launching: the New Mobility Studies. One of the primary reasons for holding the workshop was to reflect on the possible structure of the new field. At the outset, Gijs Mom and Clapperton Mavhunga outlined some of the main tenets they envisioned for this new area of research. As the title already suggests, the impetus to create the New Mobility Studies sprang from the desire to rethink how mobility has been studied in the past.

Following a 'kaleidoscopic introduction' to the workshop and the new field, the second panel on animals saw UWE LÜBCKEN (Munich) reflecting on biomobility in a historical perspective. Using the example of the Ohio Valley, bridges were detected as critical points at the intersection of natural and societal mobility, especially in the case of natural disasters. This led to the consideration of how the amalgamation of political and biological categories and thus the construction of a „national nature" dangerously neglects the natural migratory process in favor of arbitrary decision-making. The effectiveness of animal mobility as a methodological tool for analyzing the mobility of peoples was shown by SANDRA SWART (Stellenbosch) using a case study of southern Africa. Here the elision of the subordinated groups of animals and Africans were reflected in Pass Laws, with which the regimes controlled the movement of people via the movement of (their) animals, the latter being an additional form of structure within society.

The third panel offered new perspectives on Africa and Asia. ABEBE ZEGEYE's (Johannesburg) paper focused on the mobile phone as a tool used by Africans to shape and transform their communicational and social environments, for example by enabling farmers and peasants to control market prices. U.S.-Western visions of Chinese automobility was the topic of COTTEN SEILER's (Carlisle) presentation. Although powerful U.S. institutions have been constructing different images of China from the eighteenth century onwards, this paper identifies a distinct shift in image after the end of the cold war and the start of Chinese economic growth. This change is ultimately leading towards a new idealization, drawing on the neoliberal rhetoric of „identicality" conveyed by depictions of the „automobilizing" Chinese landscape and population.

Movements in general were addressed in the fourth panel: DEBORAH BREEN (Boston) opened with a recent history of the ship breaking industry in Bangladesh, explaining the various constellations of mobility and the politics of environment in this very pollutive industry, thereby adding oceans to the discourse as an important site of mobility. Following on from this, CLAPPERTON MAVHUNGA (Cambridge/MA) advocated another kind of automobility, namely the one of living organisms. His paper drew attention to microbes and the ways in which their mobility shapes human behavior toward the animal as an „organic vehicle" in the south-eastern part of Africa.

In the panel on 'Peoples and Pedals', GOPA SAMANTA (Burdwan) used the example of rickshaws in Burdwan, Bengal to explore the importance of this means of transportation in generating sustainable modern urban environments, and especially in creating livelihoods for a large number of urban poor; also discussed was the difficulty of confronting the municipal government's hostility to 'viable' modes of urban transport. A more optimistic picture was drawn by MANUEL STOFFERS (Maastricht) and PETER COX (Chester), who presented the bicycle renaissance in the last quarter of the twentieth century: the collective image of the bicycle has changed from an outdated necessity to a modern lifestyle vehi-

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cle of choice, demonstrated with reference to a range of different perspectives and interests.

'How It Feels to be Run Over' was the title of GIJS MOM's (Munich/Eindhoven) paper, in which he established (travel) literature as a source for a New Mobility History, a form of research he names 'auto-poetics.' He explored the experiences of early car drivers and the shift from the open to the closed car during the first decades of the twentieth century. A transnational approach was taken by CLIFF O'NEILL (Cumbria) and JOHN WALTON (Bilbao), comparing the images, ideals, landscape and terrain in the English Lake District and the Basque Country during the interwar period as constituted by the use of motor cars, especially from a tourist perspective. They were able to show very clearly how distinct differences between the two regions were shaped by human attitudes and expectations, as well as the cultural contexts in which they operated.

New perspectives from the UK and Italy were offered by BARBARA SCHMUCKI (York) and FEDERICO PAOLINI (Siena). Presenting the culture of walking in the U.K. from a historical perspective, Schmucki described the twentieth century pedestrian as an endangered species. British pedestrians are gradually being ousted from their prominent position on the road by other traffic participants, with support by urban legislation which pits pedestrian mobility and safety against maintaining traffic flow. Paolini's paper showed the ways in which extensive car use in the second half of the twentieth century polluted the environment and damaged the health of urban Italians despite constantly changing legislation and technical improvements, adding weight to the seemingly vain quest to find a solution to these problems.

One word that surfaced again and again during the workshop was „decentering." Participants agreed that the New Mobility Studies should call into question certain tendencies which have anchored themselves in the study of mobility. Thus, for instance, the New Mobility Studies seeks to go beyond the intense focus on the automobile. Additionally, it seeks to challenge the connection between modernity and mobility that is so often emphasized in the Western paradigm. As demonstrated by the diverse background of the participants, the New Mobility Studies will be an interdisciplinary field, thereby decentering the traditional dominance of historical approaches. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the New Mobility Studies will actively seek dialogue with policymakers and planners, operating under the assumption that scholars can – and must –contribute constructively to current mobility debates.

Conference Overview

Introductory Session

Gijs Mom (RCC/Eindhoven University of Technology) and Clapperton Mavhunga (Massachusetts Institute of Technology): Inside Mobility: A Kaleidoscopic Introduction

Animals

Uwe Lübken (RCC): Nature on the Move: Biomobility in Historical Perspective

Sandra Swart (Stellenbosch University): Pass Laws for Animals? Control of Mobility by the State: A Case Study of Southern Africa

New Perspectives on Africa and Asia

Abebe Zegeye (University of the Witwatersrand): Switching on: How Africans are Shaping and Using Mobile Telephones

Cotten Seiler (Dickinson College): U.S.-Western Visions of Chinese Automobility

Movements

Deborah Breen (Boston University): The Explanatory Power of 'Movement' in the Recent History of the Shipbreaking Industry

Clapperton Mavhunga (Massachusetts Institute of Technology): Vehicles Organic and Inorganic: Provisional Notes on the Automobile

Peoples and Pedals

Gopa Samanta (University of Burdwan): Rickshaw and Rickshaw Pullers: The Issues of Urban Transport and Livelihoods for the Poor in Bengal, India

Manuel Stoffers (Maastricht University) and Peter Cox (University of Chester): Beyond Technology: The Bicycle Renaissance as a Case in the History of Mobility

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Other sources, other Approaches

Gijs Mom (RCC/Eindhoven University of Technology): How it feels to be run over: Using Literature as a Source for a New Mobility History

Cliff O'Neill (University of Cumbria) and John Walton (Universidad del País Vasco, Bilbao): The Motor Car and the Tourist Experience: Images, Ideals, Landscape and Terrain in the English Lake District and the Basque Country, 1918 - 1939

New Perspectives from the UK and Italy

Barbara Schmucki (University of York): From the King of the Road to an Endangered Species: The Culture of Walking in Historical Perspective

Federico Paolini (University of Siena): Country with „Cars up to the Neck": Automobiles and Environment in Italy, 1950-2008

Panel Session
Panel members: Margy Avery, Clapperton Mavhunga, Helmuth Trischler and Uwe Lübken

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