

MOBILITIES RESEARCH IN THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE*

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A DISTINCTIVE NEW FIELD?

Is there something distinctive about mobilities research being carried out in the Southern Hemisphere? This question arose in the course of a conversation I had with Professor Gordon Pirie over lunch at the Berlin Transport Museum, during the inaugural T²M Summer School held in September 2011.†

Two contributing factors potentially led us to this discussion. First, both historically and in contemporary times, to some people in the top half of the globe, the Southern Hemisphere is an attractive lesser known (oftentimes ‘exotic’) travel destination vis-à-vis research object. Just prior to our lunchtime conversation, for example, I had given a presentation about the writing of Georg Forster, a German ethnographer who travelled to New Zealand and other regions of the South Pacific on Captain Cook’s second major voyage of 1772–1775. Indeed, over centuries New Zealand has remained a utopic destination for German travellers (both armchair and physical) and thus it is not surprising that New Zealand is the Guest of Honour at this year’s Frankfurt Book Fair.

The second issue which perhaps sparked our conversation was the apparent need to decentre mobilities research from some of its main Northern Hemisphere hubs. When perusing the application form for the T²M Summer School last year, I found that submissions were encouraged from students in which mobilities studies is under-represented. Although this criteria would certainly not preclude participants from some Northern Hemisphere countries, as the

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† The Summer School is hosted by the International Association for the History of Transport, Traffic and Mobility (T²M), which has a website at <http://t2m.org/>.

only postgraduate student to my knowledge conducting mobilities research in a country of a mere four million inhabitants, I felt a need to represent the faraway New Zealand. I also admit to gaining a kind of novelty status as the participant who had travelled from the furthest away destination to reach Berlin.

RESEARCHER PERSPECTIVES

So what are we, mobilities researchers located in the bottom half of the globe, actually researching? And, is it so different from the work carried out in Lancaster, Berlin or Philadelphia? What challenges and opportunities does our region afford us? One would certainly approach such questions tentatively and describe the field of mobilities studies in the Southern Hemisphere as an emerging, yet contextually rich and diverse landscape. I asked four researchers – Professor Gordon Pirie, African Centre for Cities, University of Capetown, South Africa, PhD Candidate Claudine Moutou, Institute of Transport and Logistics Studies, University of Sydney, Australia, Dr Martha Bell, Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, University of Otago, New Zealand and Dr David Bissell, College of Arts and Social Sciences, Australian National University, Australia – about: (i) how their location in the world informs their research, (ii) their perspective on the emerging scene of mobilities research in their respective country, and (iii) what they see as potential future directions of scholarship in the Southern Hemisphere.

THE INFLUENCE OF LOCATION ON MOBILITIES RESEARCH

Pirie notes that while he is interested in the new mobilities paradigm in relation to his work on motility, this paradigm is otherwise not well-known in South Africa. However, there are a number of South African-based scholars with great research strengths in the related areas of transportation studies and cross-border migration. In Sydney, Australia, Claudine Moutou is conducting work on understanding the phenomena of business opposition when suburban town centre streets are changed to accommodate more public transport, cycling and pedestrian infrastructure. To that end, Moutou is using the concept of motility to observe how businesses exchange and create value from the accessibility features of their business street – which in Australia's car culture requires challenging the deeply held belief that businesses need car parking to survive. This highly interdisciplinary research could well serve as a nodal point from which to establish connections with other Australian researchers. She explains 'I am a transport sociologist studying transport studies within a business school'. David Bissell is also commencing research in Sydney: 'I'm about to start a new project on commuting stress in Sydney so clearly there

are going to be some significant issues coming out that relate to the social-cultural-political context of this city.' In his analysis, Bissell plans to consider the difficult question of whether there is something specifically 'southern' taking place in Sydney that could be extrapolated in a way that is significant to the wider Southern Hemisphere context. Across the Tasman in New Zealand, a country well-known for the outdoor lifestyle it offers, Martha Bell works, broadly speaking, with the phenomenology of movement and the ways that physicality, ability and dis/ability have created or inhibited the social organisation of work, sport or leisure for different social groups, such as women, children, and families. For example, she is currently working on an in-depth social history of adventure racing.

EMERGING RESEARCH SCENES IN SOUTH AFRICA, AUSTRALIA AND
NEW ZEALAND

'Under-researched' is a term that Pirie uses to describe the current state of mobilities studies in South Africa. As he writes on topics of urbanisation, Pirie is trying to figure out whether a traditional discipline such as English, Geography or Sociology may take advantage of 'the great potential for inter-/trans-disciplinary mobility inquiry on our big, exploding continent', in spite of 'the dire shortage of money, space and minds'. Concerning mobilities research in New Zealand, Bell says: 'Here we are faced with an intricate paradoxical history and a number of contemporary contexts to unravel. Yet, I certainly think that the area ripest for research here in NZ is sport, leisure and changing patterns of work'. In my own research I compare mobile experiences in travel texts, (writing and film) in the two time periods of 1770–1830 and 1989–2010, from a cultural perspective. Looking at these texts from a mobilities point of view can shed light on how, for example, Georg Forster's experience in New Zealand and his respect for Maori problematised barbarian/civilised cultural dichotomies in the early European context. Bissell has recently collaborated on a project with Australian-based researchers Drs Maria Hynes and Scott Sharpe on Air New Zealand's humorous safety demonstration videos, (soon to appear in *EPD Society and Space*). Bissell explains: 'We have been thinking about the notion of an "Antipodean affect" in the southern context, that is, whether there is something about the experience of mobilities in this part of the world that draws on a particularly Antipodean humour to generate particular feelings'. Rather unexpectedly, Moutou's first encounter with mobilities researchers was not in Australia but in Berlin at the 2011 T²M Summer School. While somewhat unfamiliar with the emerging mobilities scene in Australia, Moutou is excited by this idea, and sees great potential to build on the already well-established transport studies scene.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF SCHOLARSHIP IN THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE

While there exist New Zealand-specific contexts for mobilities researchers, such as the culture of rugby, it is imperative to embed such studies in global processes, in Bell's opinion: 'I don't think the decline in amateur rugby has occurred independently of the huge forces enhancing mobile communication and travel and that is not just referring to global professional labour migration'. Moutou is not certain what direction mobilities studies in Australia or the Southern Hemisphere will take. However, she identifies a number of areas in this region that could benefit from a mobilities perspective. These include the colonial past and the migratory present, especially 'the distances we need or are willing to travel to connect with what we deem our "home" or our "community"'.

Environmental concerns in relation to everyday and international travel is also of relevance. Finally, Moutou makes a connection between the capacity of mobilities research to influence socio-cultural outcomes: 'I think mobilities research could help cultivate more understanding of people's perspectives, which hopefully will reduce the ability of politicians to use it so divisively'. Looking to the future, while Pirie is not entirely convinced that there will be South Africa-specific or Southern Hemisphere-specific insights made in mobilities research, 'there's a discernible mood in the air that the realities of cities in the global South are about to have a significant impact on our knowledge and imaginaries'.

GEOGRAPHICALLY BOUNDED MOBILITIES?

According to these scholars, it seems that mobilities research in the Southern Hemisphere is still in a process of emergence as we begin to establish particular contexts of research and develop Southern networks. Still, there is much to be excited about – all researchers see great potential in their respective countries of scholarship and interest is growing at a rapid pace, as the following examples from Australasia indicate: the third Aotearoa New Zealand Mobilities Symposium will be 14–15 June, at the University of Auckland; the inaugural conference of the Travel Research Network will be held at the University of Melbourne, 18–20 July; and *Sites: a Journal of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies*, which focuses on the Pacific Region, will release a special issue on mobilities in June.

An ideal future may see mobilities research in the Southern Hemisphere responding to academic and social challenges, from the establishment of new

trans-disciplinary connections in South Africa, to new political understandings of cultural diversity in Australia, to new policies that address public health and dis/ability issues in New Zealand. All in all, one thing is certain – we cannot argue with the words of Gordon Pirie: ‘It’s a fascinating time to be around’.