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Mobility: Absurdity and Poetry, Economics and Stubbornness
[Pieter Leroy]

At which moment an express train, brightly lit and rumbling like thunder, shook the pointsman's cabin as it passed.
'They're in a great hurry,' said the little prince. 'What are they looking for?'
'Not even the engine driver can answer that,' said the pointsman.
At which there rumbled past, in the opposite direction, a second brightly lit express train.
'Are they coming back already?' asked the little prince.
'Those are not the same ones,' said the pointsman. 'It's an exchange.'
'Were they not happy where they were?'
'One is never happy where one is,' said the pointsman.
At which the thunder of a third brightly lit express train rumbled past.
'Are they chasing the first passengers?' asked the little prince.
'They are chasing nothing at all,' said the pointsman

(Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, The Little Prince (Le petit prince, 1943).

These days, whenever the word ‘mobility’ is uttered in Flanders and the Netherlands, chances are that it is being used in a very limited sense, in terms of both time and space. In fact the word has come to be more or less synonymous with automobility, a concept that often implies the opposite of mobility: bumper-to-bumper traffic jams, inaccessible downtown areas and endless searches for that one last parking space - only to stop there too.

The quote from The Little Prince shows just how limited such a definition is and along with that how deep-seated our need for mobility is, and thus how much more radical, absurd and stubborn the phenomenon of mobility is. And while we’re on the subject of absurdity: if the little prince had paid a visit to our planet in 2004, he would undoubtedly have been astonished at the sight of all those children being driven to school by their fathers (or more likely by their mothers). After asking around a bit, he would have learned that parents are afraid to let their children walk or bike to school because it’s not safe, on account of all the cars on the road, driven by parents taking their kids to school...

In short, mobility is much more than the technical phenomenon of people
moving from one place to another and using infrastructure, taking up space and getting in the way of others in the process. Yet it is essentially this definition that is used in all sorts of conversations, in research, in the positions of pressure groups and in policy documents. On the basis of such a limited definition, ‘policy’ is automatically reduced to an attempt to restrict automobility, move away from automobility in favour of other forms of transport and provide a modicum of protection for forms of ‘soft’ mobility that have been driven out by that same automobility. We will return to this later. Understanding mobility, to say nothing of regulating it, also demands a grasp of its deep-rooted, absurd and intractable character. Let us begin by examining this.

‘One is never happy where one is’: mobility as exploration

Children explore the world: crawling and walking, they get to know the unknown world beyond the playpen, the living room or the kitchen and later beyond their own gardens, and through exploration they gradually make that outside world a part of their own world. Exploring goes hand in hand with naming, because naming reassures. To name is to tame, or even to appropriate: our
football field, our clubhouse, our hang-out. People and societies do the same thing, travelling beyond the borders of their own cultures, driven by the almost irresistible urge to explore the foreign. But along with attraction there is also fear: attraction to and fear of the strangeness of the foreign. And just as for children, naming and classifying are reassuring activities for cultures as well: sometimes possessive (mare nostrum), sometimes disparaging (hoi barbaroi), sometimes totally incorrect (Indians). Running from Alexander the Great to Christopher Columbus to Neil Armstrong is a long historical line of crossing borders and exploring what lies on the other side, of naming and appropriating, of conquest and subjugation. At the same time that the distant and foreign are being explored, the foreign must also be made to conform with the familiar. And if this does not occur voluntarily, then it will be accomplished by force, as witness the crusades, the reconquista and many battles before and since. Only a few manage to summon the self-control and take the freedom simply to contemplate the distant and the foreign and use them as a mirror: fortunately Homer, Petrarch, Goethe, and Cees Nooteboom make up an equally long, though socially less influential, line of travel stories and reflections, without the drive to conquest but with a sustained astonishment.

In fact, these littérateurs do not merely reflect; they also hold out a certain promise to the reader: they present the distant as even more exotic, attractive and exciting than it already is, and in doing so they invite others to go exploring themselves, to give in to the irresistible hunger for exploration and thus mobility. In his Dreaming of Cockaigne (2001) Herman Pleij writes how that uncharted place called Cocagne, the promised land of the Middle Ages, was an ideal image, a version of the way things must have been and how they ought to be again some day: a Garden of Eden, an earthly paradise, forfeited by sin.

Today Cocagne is called El Dorado. The tourist industry lures us to secularised paradises: after the Balearic Islands in the 1960s and the Canaries from the 1970s onward, the Caribbean and the Gambia are the new destinations where you can enjoy the contemporary illusion of earthly paradise. And if you find those places too touristy, you can take the ecological route instead and go
Good old Dutch sluggishness: towing barges near Leiden, on a drawing by Paulus Constantijn La Fargue (1765).

on a biking holiday or hike through a distant land or - to stand out from the crowd yet again - somewhere close to home: new dreams to meet new needs. Fulfilling these needs begins at home, where you can anticipate the exotic with the help of brochures and the Internet. And even that prelude to mobility has a long tradition: the beginning and the end of a trip must be marked, and special buildings and special surroundings contribute to that. Train stations - not the ones that have been mass-produced, but those which hold out the prospect of a genuine journey - literally mark the transition to another world. Harbours also have that indefinable ‘What lies beyond the horizon?’ quality, while at the same time functioning as a safe haven that welcomes the traveller back home. Airports don’t have it nearly as much, since they have to be so frightfully functional in order to handle those large numbers. But occasionally you see new beauty which approaches the beauty of, say, St Pancras Station in London. In Satolas near Lyon you can see that, even today, functional architecture at a junction of mobility can be an invitation au voyage and a recognisable beacon for the homeward journey.

‘Cleverly conceived publicity’: mobility, inequality and democratisation

Today the charm of mobility seems to have disappeared; the elitist aura that once surrounded it is a thing of the past. Now it seems that everyone is mobile; everybody is flying to Spain and to destinations much farther away than that. And to a large extent that’s true. And yet even now, mobility is unequally divided. That has always been the case. Anthropologists have described how only the tribal chief himself, or more often a trusted aide acting as his emissary, was permitted to leave the village. After all, apart from being attractive and irresistible, mobility was also dangerous: physically dangerous obviously, but also culturally risky: the confrontation with the foreign could lead to surprise at and criticism of one’s own culture. Travel had and has a revolutionary potential; it
Flying was fun in the 1950s: it was safe, there was a sturdy porter to carry your luggage and the air hostess was a real looker who'd take care of your offspring (poster of the now defunct Belgian Airlines Sabena).

puts new ideas into people's minds. In order to maintain the status quo, it was necessary to restrict travel. House arrest is still a tried-and-true method of conservative regimes; banning plays and films from 'distant lands' is a variant of that practice.

But it is not only political motives that determine the unequal division of mobility. Mobility costs money, and furthermore it is an investment the proceeds of which are uncertain or nonexistent. Mobility thus presupposes sufficient prosperity to take that risk. And so it is not only ‘mobility rights’ but also ‘mobility opportunities’ which are unequally divided. Even today. That inequality,
the limitations it imposes and the ambition of overcoming these limitations have created curious cultural products: the museums of natural and cultural history are more than just display windows for things brought back from faraway places. At the same time they enabled those who were forced to remain at home to gawk at the exotic, at the charms and the dangers of mobility. But perhaps even more than museums, it is their ‘living’ counterparts, the arboretas, botanical gardens and zoos that have brought about the democratisation of the exotic, thereby providing a degree of compensation for the limited mobility of some segments of society. But coincidentally it was in fact these very institutions that began having difficulties when, beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, nearly everyone could afford long-distance mobility. In Flanders in the 1950s and 1960s, the slides shown by pastors in parish halls and secular speakers in working class community centres had that same function: sharing the experience of mobility with those who could not (yet) afford it. And all pillarised societal organisations, all the trade unions and all the co-operative health insurance organisations have invested in popular tourism: out of a sense of duty and didactic zeal, undoubtedly, but also in order to foster good customer relations, based on that irresistible hunger for mobility.

The democratisation of mobility has a long history, and it has its negative sides as well, as we shall soon see. This democratisation was given a powerful boost by public transportation, principally the train. In the summer of 2003 there was an exhibition in Ostend which consisted of material, mainly posters, used to advertise tourism on the Belgian coast around the turn of the nineteenth century: *Poster Art by the Sea*. Among all the posters - the alluring brochures and websites of the day - one letter stood out. It had been sent by the Belgian National Railways to the coastal towns in 1910, on the occasion of the World Fair in Brussels. According to the letter, ‘*with cleverly conceived publicity*’, those coastal towns could profit from the exhibition in Brussels by using it to lure people to the seaside. Naturally the train was the mode of transport *par excellence* for this purpose. A good example of nascent coastal tourism, its growing democratisation and the crucial role of the train in that process.
course, the train is (or was) a tremendously important technology for the economy, and the massive investments from governments and private parties in its early days were based on those expectations and on that reality. But at the same time the advance of the train can only be explained if we also understand its socio-cultural underpinnings: its role in the gradual democratisation of the need for mobility, which is so deeply rooted in our culture.

This is even more true for the next wave of democratisation, which was based on - literally - yet another mode of transport: the car. The story of the German Volkswagen and the massive government investment in the autobahn or motorway system during the Third Reich is well known. But in actuality what took place in Germany with a great deal of ideological fanfare was going on elsewhere too. After the train, the car proved to be an even better instrument for stimulating the national economy and tapping into the deep-seated desire for mobility. World War I, the Depression and World War II significantly delayed the breakthrough of the car, both technologically and economically. But with the spectacular economic growth of the late fifties and sixties, that break-through was ultimately unstoppable. And once again simple economic principles and mechanisms formed the basis. Take, for example, the price of a car, which in relative terms - the number of days someone has to work in order to buy one - dropped to a quarter of what it had been within a few decades and then continued to fall even further. Anyone could own a car. And that immense demand elicited an unprecedented industrial supply. The car was here to stay. At most a few small makes of car disappeared in order to clear the way for mass production, and although we can now muse wistfully on the subject, this transition to mass production was necessary for the low prices we enjoy today. But make no mistake about it: as economically driven as the automotive industry was, the mechanisms by which the manufacturer exploited the various desires of the ‘motorist’ were and are culturally subtle and understated; with differences in model, colour, styling, comfort, speed, safety, etc., the automotive industry skilfully capitalised on the diverse wants and needs of the consumer, so that everyone can still cherish the illusion of being an individual, even in that sea of almost identical cars. If mobility has been democratised, if no one can appropriate the foreign any more, then we have to distinguish ourselves by the vehicles with which we indulge our urge for mobility and in which we travel around an area that has become familiar to us all. The car as status symbol has often been described. But more than that, isn’t the car that highly personal and comfortable means by which we participate in that great human project of economic and technological progress, regardless of where it may lead?

‘They are chasing nothing at all’: mobility, economics and anti-pollution taxes

If the democratisation of mobility in Western Europe dates mainly from the period following World War II, it was in the 1980s that its omnipresence became a problem. When a product goes from scarcity to abundance in a short period of time, problems are often the result. In the 1960s the car became, at least in Western Europe, a household item. Gradually the physical, economic and legislative infrastructure became equipped to handle this new state of affairs: roads and highways, petrol stations and traffic lights, insurance and driver’s licences.
Seen from a distance, the energy crisis of the 1970s was responsible for a nasty dip in all sorts of growth curves, but it did create a remarkable symbol: the car-free Sunday. Those who were behind this initiative saw it in the historical context of ‘shortage’, ‘wartime scarcity’ and ‘rationing.’ But many who took part in it saw it, conversely, as a protest against abundance and superfluity. And little by little the situation neared a critical point: starting in the 1970s the expansion of the highway system was met with more and more protests, sometimes against the planned routes the highways would take (through the Flemish Ardennes, through Limburg, through Amelisweerd), sometimes against the principle itself. Nevertheless in those years, despite the protests, beautiful landscapes were destroyed, Flemish markets and town squares were ripped open with little respect for history (Oudenaarde) and Dutch city centres (Utrecht) were sliced apart by urban freeways. Protest was futile: society was irrepressible in its enthusiasm for organising automobility. And over time its economic importance has become greater and greater, and the transport sector has become a fundamental factor in the economy.

But at the same time the ecological impact of (auto)mobility has also been on the rise. The amount of space occupied is immense. With 62 metres of roadway per square kilometre, Flanders has a road-density that far exceeds the European average. Of course, this is connected with a population density which is also well above average. But the damage to public spaces, the fragmentation of the landscape are no better for it. And indeed, what one person sees as damage is another’s economic opportunity: in a recent brochure intended to attract businesses, the province of East Flanders cites that high road-density (at 65 metres per square kilometre even higher than the Flemish average) as a trump card for economic development. And not without reason.

Nevertheless, the negative effects of universal mobility are starting to get out of hand. In the first place the negative effects of mobility on mobility itself. In the 1990s the highway system in the Low Countries hardly expanded at all, but by the end of the same decade over 40% more cars were using that system. In Flanders, for example, over three-quarters of all mobility (12,000 km per year per person in total) is now automobility. The figures for the Netherlands are similar. Without cynicism you could argue that a large part of that is actually immobility, i.e. traffic jams. Automobility is getting bogged down in itself, butting up against its limits, and one of the major causes of this is the sharp increase in freight traffic on the roads. But transport by motor vehicle now seems
to be approaching its limits from an economic perspective as well: narrow profit margins are swallowed up when transport takes longer than anticipated. But the little prince could observe all manner of absurdity here as well: trucks that take pigs from the Netherlands or Flanders to Italy, only to return some time later with meat which is re-imported bearing the label Parma ham. ‘Are they coming back already?’ Yes, in many cases. Transport seems to be less an added value and more an end in itself: ‘They are chasing nothing at all’. Moving in order to survive, mobility as occupation.

And then within those narrow profit margins there are all sorts of costs, mainly environmental costs, which are not even passed on to the consumer. In the nineties car traffic cost 25% more in fuel. Because of more fuel-efficient engines, this is less than the rise in the number of kilometres driven. However this is only possible because fuel prices are so low, relatively lower than during the time of the so-called energy crisis of 1973-74. But raising the price of fuel, which has been cautiously attempted by a few European governments, is politically not feasible at present; with a few trucks across the road, the transport sector can cut society’s supply lines. Automobility, good for the economy as has been said, but by no means a strong sector, has the economy in its grip. And while transport economists have determined that an increase in fuel prices could relieve some of the pressure on the roads and improve mobility, no politician can afford to make such a proposal.

Building more roads is equally unfeasible, and moreover it is no solution. Every new road immediately becomes congested; every by-pass clogs up; every more widely drawn ring road around a city only postpones the problem. Hence the attempt to enlarge the share of the train and other forms of public transport (in Flanders now just 700 of those 12,000 annual kilometres). But this is not simple from an economic-technological and cultural point of view, in the first place because public transport, especially given the disinvestments in that sector over virtually the entire post-war period, is not designed to accommodate that capacity and cannot handle that level of intricacy and flexibility. Our train system is unwieldy - not surprising, considering that it has never been
restyled since its original design. Moreover, its links with our urban transport are poor. But this is more than a
question of technology, money and management. There is also a cultural problem: public transport bears the stigma
of the past, the stigma that it is only good for ‘compulsory’ mobility: to and from work, and only for people who don’t
have a car. The form of transportation which with ‘cleverly conceived publicity’ kick-started the democratisation of
mobility a hundred years ago seems to have become a dinosaur. Thus far only the TGV has succeeded in giving the
train a new image, a new appeal and a new lease of life. Of course this is because of its speed and comfort and the
novelty of the technology. But probably also because passengers are given the idea of being part of a great human
project. It is a pity that discussions of automobility and public transport often have such a limited starting point:
technology, money and management, while so little attention is paid to the cultural-historical side of the issue, with
respect to both the past and future.

In his conversation with the pointsman, the little prince was mainly interested in the absurdity and not the
environment. But in addition to getting bogged down in itself, automobility is also becoming mired in environmental
issues. Exhaustion of fossil fuels does not interest people: fuel is cheap and the effects of its depletion are not
noticeable, and thus the influence on public opinion is minimal. Even so there has been growing social unrest about its
effects on public health. Both Dutch and Flemish environmental reports point out that noise pollution - that constant,
continuously audible product of roads and highways (and of airplanes, as the discussion around Brussels Airport,
which has been dragging on for years, demonstrates) - is a growing problem. And this is not just a matter of an
increase in complaints: the exposure is greater, the noise is louder and longer-lasting and the overall impact is greater.
Noise barriers, perhaps still useful in specific situations, no longer help: the noise is coming from all around us. And at
the same time there has been mounting concern about CO₂ and NOₓ emissions, volatile organic matter and all kinds of
dust, more particularly about the - largely unknown - effects of this type of pollution on public health. On the basis of
clean air standards, practically all downtown areas should be declared uninhabitable, while a car tunnel is a downright
dangerous ‘working environment’. The dieselisation of cars is a particular source of worry, and with over 40% of its
cars running on diesel fuel Belgium once again finds itself well above the European average of 20%.

It is the same with air pollution as with noise pollution: from the 1970s we have dealt with all sorts of problems and
problem areas, a noise problem here, an odour problem there. But now we are being confronted with ‘background
pollution’. This is proving to be not only much higher than previously thought, primarily due to car traffic, but also
much more harmful. Just as ‘normal’ noise pollution apparently causes more stress than we had previously suspected,
it seems that ‘normal’ air pollution which goes on for year after year has far greater health effects than we thought.

Mobility is deeply rooted in our culture, in our society and in our economy. The urge for mobility and the realisation
of that desire has produced outstanding human achievements and wonderful cultural products. This yearbook includes
many examples of this. But mobility costs us a great deal as well: space, environment, health, human lives. We cannot
get much more mobile than we are now. But the desire is so deep-seated, and mobility is such a great good that we
are apparently prepared to pay that price.

Translated by S.J. Leinbach