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PAPER TITLE: ELAPSED MOBILITIES

TECHNOLOGY SALVATION, DEBRIS AND BENJAMIN'S ANGELUS NOVUS

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However, the authors will be pleased, if asked, to allow quotes, uses and citations from the text.

PAPER ABSTRACT

The progressive tale of mobilities is embedded in technological innovations, great inventions and ingenuity. The current misery of real, every day, mobility and its huge impact on environmental and social lives is released by new technological improvements. The last in the pipeline in the electric motors, pass off as novelty, as a sort of *Deus ex machina* which will lead us out of the mud of energy wars, deadly polluted urban areas and immobility. The less worried about the trendy environmental issue focus their attention to the driver-less vehicles, so that also travelling is a freed time, as if going by train or tram would not giving the same experience.

But, all together, passing through hundreds of studies, researches and investigations, the mobility is worldwide conceived at the 99,99% as wheeled mobility. Sometimes even the bicycle, although wheeled, is left out of this account, which leaves mobility concept developed as pure motorized transport. Blanketed under the neutrality of statistic, the most diffuse and worldwide experience form of mobility, namely walking, is silenced and it simply disappears.

However, all together, despite the claimed shift in mobility trends, “calling for innovation is, paradoxically, a common way of avoiding change when change is not wanted.” (Edgerton 2006, 210). In this respect, the promises of better, no-polluting, less expensive transport systems are, at the end of the days, trying to guarantee mobility as experienced today. If the reader let me to fantasize a little bit, it seems to me that Benjamin Angelus Novus concept can be applied also on technological obsession in the transport field.

Can we say that technological obsession works as progress in the Angelus Novus, which leaves behind it only debris and new frustrating hopes? Can we say that technological fix approach is acting as the Angelus Novus, looking to the (transport) failures of the past, and promising a new, better way of move around. But, what is again left at the foot of the technological totem are more debris, more failures and more pain; and, of course, a new wave of novel technology will promise to fix this again, unless it will further leave additional debris etc. etc. So, it is not better to move to a not-linear approach, in which progressive tales of progress and technologies leaves room for a more complex, less crystalline definition of transport trends?

The proponent, who is a historian, will take advantage of his involvement as coordinator of a European project (www.race2050.org) devoted to the future of the transport industry in mature and emerging economies up to 2050, combing future studies with an investigation of the past.

PAPER FULL TEXT

Considering the conference targets, and the preliminary and explorative aims of this paper, this text tries to radicalize concepts and narrative, in order to give more elements for an open discussion.

The current debate in the mobilities studies is still largely focus on trends, great narratives and motorized transportations. The progressive tale of mobilities is embedded in technological innovations, great inventions and ingenuity (Edgerton 2010). The current misery of real, every day, mobility and its huge impact on environmental and social lives is released by new technological improvements. The last in the pipeline in the electric motors, pass off as novelty, as a sort of *Deus ex machina* which will lead us out of the mud of energy wars, deadly polluted urban areas and immobility. The less worried about the trendy environmental issue focus their attention to the driver-less vehicles, so that also travelling is a freed time, as if going by train or tram would not giving the same experience (KPMG 2012).

But, all together, passing through hundreds of studies, researches and investigations, the mobility is worldwide conceived at the 99,99% as wheeled mobility. Sometimes even the bicycle, although wheeled, is left out of this account, which leaves mobility concept developed as pure motorized transport. Blanketed under the neutrality of statistic, the most diffuse and worldwide experience form of mobility, namely walking, is silenced and it simply disappears (European commission 2013). Well beyond conspiracy or lobbying, the silence on walking is itself a question which needs to be investigated: why we know – with little efforts - how many aircrafts landed at London-Heathrow airport on June 12th, 1994 (just to throw a date), but we have simply no clue on the relevance of walking and biking in advanced economies? Why the statistics ignore such a relevant contribution to our everyday experience, to the importance of walking for the economic system, to the social necessity and personal pleasure of walking? Is there a plot to hide “poor” and “alternative” forms of mobility which leaves meagre space for profit? Or is a consequence of obtuse bureaucrats who feel uncomfortable with such a slippery issue as guessing the kilometre/persons made by the EU citizens? Or silenced mobilities are the effect of cunning policy-makers who know rather well how walkers and bikers are lacking of lobbies, so that they are the soft belly of the transport realm?

So, in a schizophrenic way, mainstream policies aimed to “innovative” trends in order to reduce CO2 emission, pollution and energy dependency. But in 2013 the mapping of the everyday mobility is done according to 1920s paradigms!

Progressive and backward? Reshaping hidden, elapsed and forgotten mobilities

To some extent the so-called “backwardness” of some countries is a pushing factor to hide “old”, “poor” and “forgotten” mobilities, exactly in order to spread the gospel of the “modern” wheeled mobility. Nowadays, Scandinavian countries are acting in favour of pre-modern (or post-modern?) transport models, including bicycling, walking, post-ownership transport, and (try, or pretend to) put elapsed mobilities more in the frame. On the other way around, peripheral countries in Europe and outside of Europe are strongly focusing on “modern” devices, in which innovation, technologies and so-called cutting-edge new devices.

However, all together, despite the claimed shift in mobility trends, “calling for innovation is, paradoxically, a common way of avoiding change when change is not wanted.” (Edgerton 2006, 210). All the schemes so far proposed in the transport field are actually aiming to keep the transport attitudes as experience in the past decades, in the heydays of wheeled transport. Which is, in other words, to combine high-mobility patterns (as witnessed in the past) with lower externalities, without questioning the dominant framework.

In this respect, the promises of better, no-polluting, less expensive transport systems are, at the end of the days, replicating past outcomes.

If the reader let me to fantasize a little bit, it seems to me that Benjamin Angelus Novus concept can be applied also on technological obsession in the transport field. Benjamin, interpreting progress, wrote that:

A Klee painting named Angelus Novus shows an angel looking as though he [sic] is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

Can we say that technological obsession works in the same way? Can we say that technological fix approach, so widespread among stakeholders, academics and laypeople (in other words among everyone) is acting as the Angelus Novus, looking to the (transport) failures of the past, and promising a new, better way of move around. But, what is again left at the foot of the technological totem are more debris, more failures and more pain; and, of course, a new wave of novel technology will promise to fix this again, unless it will further leave additional debris etc. etc.

So, it is not better to move to a not-linear approach, in which progressive tales of progress and technologies leaves room for a more complex, less crystalline definition of transport trends? If we frame transport not as a path from the primitive to the sophisticated, in which technologies is one not-linear actor among other, the relevance of “peripheral” mobilities becomes indispensable. And it is indispensable not just to debunk its history, but even more to develop policies which minimize the production of debris...

Re-bouncing back to the centre of the modernity?

In order to be provocative, even the revival of old mobilities at the centre of the *modernity*, so to speak, is actually already framed in a progressive tale: the old (e.g. sharing, biking) is labelled as new, promising (again) a new wonderful age in which low-carbon emission, lower energy consumption and happier cities are cemented in a new social compromise. The so-called generation Y, the post-ownership generation, (Deloitte 2012), fancy car-sharing models, and trendy new habits are the pace-setter of new exclusions, in which the suburbs

are left marginal and in which the income lower-end strata of the population will be experienced lower mobility. This because the previous - mainly but not exclusive - model of car ownership is collapsing in its own economical and inner contradictions, while new business model (as car-sharing), so far, do prefer to feed the top-end clientele.

Here, peripheral and elapsed mobilities should be unveiled, in order to offer a wider array of solution, too often not detected or discharged because not they do not fit the mainstream and the progressive tale. Here geography matters less than above, being elapsed mobilities ignored, underestimate or simply refuse both at the centre and at the peripheries.

Working on the debris

So, my proposal is to move the focus on the debris, and not on the storm blowing from Paradise. This should be the first step to reduce its force and avoid the power of self-full filling prophecy. And moving the focus on the debris produced in the transport discourse can allow us to better understand their composition, their fabric, their origin, and eventually their stamina. Elapsed mobilities are elapsed, but not necessarily dead ones. Elapsed mobilities are voiceless, but everyday experience of millions of people. Elapsed mobilities are surely gender related. Elapsed mobilities are often very vibrant, efficient and effective in feed people needs and desire, but what we know about them? What we know about car-sharing grass rotted experiences in 1930s Italy (Gadda 1939)? What we do know about peer-to-peer pre-facebook car-pooling in European cities and villages? Why we forgot the 1930s impressive bike devoted road network around many European cities? Which power and gender relations and unbalances were embedded in those elapsed tales? Which sort of elapsed mobilities are today experienced in Europe? How to unveil elapsed mobilities and make them tools for alternative narrative and practises in the transport realm?

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