

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Jacob Shell, *Transportation and Revolt: Pigeons, Mules, Canals, and the Vanishing Geographies of Subversive Mobility*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015. ISBN: 9780262029339 (cloth); ISBN: 9780262330398 (ebook)

Fear has shaped transportation systems in many ways. In the 1950s fear of atomic attack and mass evacuation of cities helped justify the Interstate Highway System in the US. Fear of racial integration prompted “white flight” evacuation by those same highways, which were also used to fence and blockade “blighted” inner city neighborhoods. When they insisted on equal access, fear built low-slung overpasses on Long Island’s parkways, keeping busloads of blacks and Puerto Ricans from Jones Beach. Haussmann’s Parisian boulevards grew out of fear of proletarian rebellion, and today similar fears obsess cocooned SUV drivers plying the electronic toll roads of sprawling Orange County and Dallas. When we consider the contemporary era of shoe bombers, drones, and GPS tracking by the NSA, fear’s dominance of mobility is exhaustive and exhausting. And yet so little has been explicitly written about the role of fear in shaping the geographies of mobility.

In *Transportation and Revolt*, geographer Jacob Shell tackles this gap in our understanding of the mobility-fear nexus through a radical social history that shows not what fear built, but what fear destroyed or hindered. His premise is that there have been an array of transportation technologies and visions—such as canal or subway networks—that were proposed but unrealized because they might have enabled subversion and political revolt. Other carrying technologies, like pigeons, elephants or camels, could facilitate clandestine trafficking and so needed to be suppressed or eliminated. For example, pack mules weren’t simply replaced by

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motorized jeeps; their utilization by guerrilla armies meant that the breeding of mules needed to be abolished. More to the point for Shell, it was not transportation technologies per se that were feared, but the people that operated and sustained them. In vivid case studies and narrative, Shell shows how class resentment and suspicion permeates the transportation palimpsests we see, and don't see, today.

Shell's radical social history of transport begins by examining carrying animals, which defy the need for extensive physical infrastructure to move things. Carrier pigeons eluded surveillance and were once agents of war communications and smugglers. Mules were "off road rebels" celebrated by Che Guevara for carrying heavy equipment and ammunition up steep slopes and far from motorized enemies. What Shell describes as "insurgent mobilities" also included elephants, camels, sled dogs, and some watercraft, and their common thread is that they can go where roads and motorized transport cannot, and they are difficult to map. Desert sand covers camel tracks; mule prints are lost in rough terrain; and snow covers the path taken by sled dogs. Elephants are evasive, semi-aquatic carrying animals good for river crossings, and muddy South Asian monsoons cover the evidence.

These animal-based transport systems generated fear of rebellion and piracy and turned the ire of the elite toward not just the animals, but also the breeders, traders, and animal drivers who enable clandestine activity or revolt. The transport infrastructure enabling this activity—not concrete and steel, but rather of networks of people—needed to be destroyed. With this theme, Shell not only expands our understanding of transportation and the built environment but also takes a fresh approach to class struggle.

The second half of *Transportation and Revolt* goes a step further by explicitly linking entire unrealized transportation systems—canals and subways—to late 19th century fears of anti-

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colonial revolt and early 20th century red scares. Shells first asks why the UK and Canada rejected canal systems despite the economic boom in canal building in Continental Europe and the US between 1870 and the 1920s. Here we get a historiography of the economic geography of railroads versus canals, as Shell revisits Robert Fogel's thesis that canals were economically and technologically fit for the times. Yet ambitious plans for shipping canals penetrating interior Canada or the "Cross" canal scheme in England were abandoned.

Offering a gentle critique of the historical literature, Shell does not brush aside or dismiss conventional technological and economic explanations for why canals were unrealized, but rather carefully suggests that fear and resentment round-out a fuller explanation. In one colorful episode Shell narrates the plotting of the "Fenians", Irish-American rebel fighters who used barges and canals to initiate a failed overthrow of British Canada. While the plot failed, the impact of the anti-imperial, seditious guerrilla activity stoked lasting fear of canals and canal workers among British and Canadian elites.

The chapter on New York City's proposed freight subway was by far the most interesting and impactful narrative in the book. In this case study, as manufacturing boomed in New York from 1900 to 1920, port officials proposed an extensive underground freight subway on Manhattan, with tunnels to mainland New Jersey. Shell asks the reader to imagine a different trajectory of urban industrial development had this subway system been built. However, Wall Street's elite feared political revolt and objected to the freight subway because they saw it as cementing the proletariat permanently in Manhattan.

As with the historiographic review of canals, Shell teases out where fear should fit into the theories of urban deindustrialization. Enhancing rather than dismissing the traditional narratives of technological change in shipping and waterfront real estate revanchism, Shell adds

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a colorful and critical element to the urban industrial/blue collar decline narrative. However, the claim that because of its iconic pace-setting stature, New York's unrealized freight subway also influenced urban deindustrialization more generally, might be a little flimsy. Perhaps the argument could have been strengthened with acknowledgement that this was not unique to New York. For example, San Francisco's equally tumultuous waterfront politics, which, sans the freight subway proposal, did have a long history of unbuilt infrastructures running up against elite fear of socialist dockworkers like Harry Bridges and the International Longshoreman's Union.

Overall Shell is polite and thoughtful in his delivery of the fear thesis. He uses history in an inspiring way to prompt us to reject totalizing narratives of technological determinism or economic inevitability. This opens us to different possibilities and alternative futures of how cities and transportation systems could have been and it allows us to reimagine contemporary possibilities, to reimagine things that we are today told are inevitable. Technology or economics might make things seem self-prophesizing, but the politics of fear Shell describes also shows that nothing is inevitable.

There is one minor quibble with Shell's historical method, and that is his suggestion that he had to focus on the period between 1850 and 1950 because material is more easily digitally accessible. The claim that copyrighted post-1950s documents limits the scope of research seems odd, given that libraries exist, in part, to circumvent that very problem. Perhaps there is more to that explanation. That said, the temporally constrained inventory of insurgent mobility does get the point across.

Shell's emphasis on fear shaping transportation especially invites the reader to consider other episodes of "transport destruction" beyond his specific case studies (and historical period).

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For example, invoking Shell's insurgent mobilities framework, where does fear add to, or contradict, the conventional technological and economic narrative of the near-total collapse of bicycling in the early 20th century? That narrative says that automotive and streetcar technology were superior and preferred, but where does the bicycle's emancipatory character fit in with the fear of the suffragette movement or early 20th century labor mobility?

Fast-forward to wartime Italy and Holland, German Nazis ordered the confiscation and destruction of bicycles when violent resistance ramped up in 1943 and 1944. In Rome, where bicycles and pipe bombs killed, the Nazis ordered anyone on a bicycle shot. Meanwhile Shell's insurgency thesis can be extended to asking how bicycles have been both tool and symbol of political revolts against the system of automobility and capitalism, from the 1960's Amsterdam Situationists to the insurgent "Critical Mass" bike rides occurring in cities worldwide. Shell does not mention the bicycle, but these examples show how scholarly exploration of insurgent mobilities and fear of them is a ripe field of inquiry that Shell just may have cracked wide open.

Emphasizing fear and class resentment, Shell's *Transportation and Revolt* is groundbreaking in that it adds a novel and provocative twist to conventional histories of transportation. It gives a more complete social and political context about why certain things didn't happen, and this work will no doubt stimulate other scholars to investigate the role of fear in shaping how we move.

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