

IDEAS IN MOTION

Notions of Mobility in Argentina *A Discussion of the Circulation of Ideas and Their Local Uses and Meanings*

Dhan Zunino Singh and Maximiliano Velázquez,
University of Quilmes and University of Buenos Aires

Abstract

The following critical review of notions of mobility in Argentina is motivated by the rapid spread of this globalized term and how it is being appropriated by transport scholars, policymakers, and technicians. Our concern as sociologists – now involved in cultural history and urban planning – and as members of the Argentinean University Transport Network, is the lack of a profound discussion that allows us to talk about a mobility turn.

We argue that the movement from transport to mobility tends to be a semantic change mostly because social sciences and humanities do not lead it, as experienced in other countries. Moreover, we believe that the particular way in which the notions of mobility spread in Argentina must be understood in the context of circulation and reception of ideas, experts, capital and goods, and re-visiting center–periphery debates.

Keywords

Argentina, circulation of ideas, local uses, mobility turn, peripheries

In the last five years we have seen how the word “mobility”¹ has spread – not without resistance – within Argentinean academic, political, and technical (planning and design) discourses with the aim of re-signifying traditional ideas, mostly engineering-based, about transport.² We often come across mobility in academic publications and in those of the transport agencies, in surveys, public policy documents, and political discourses. It is associated with terms such as “right” (to), “accessibility,” “sustainability,” or “poverty,” which in turn specify particular aspects of transport at urban, regional, and national levels. Yet we believe that the concept is still somewhat vague and limited. While its use has probably meant a critique of traditional ideas about transport, this still has not produced either a field of critical thinking about mobili-



ties or more creative and provocative approaches (including aspects such as gender and sexualities, passenger experiences, in-mobility or motility, power relations, and culture, amongst other things). We argue that, apart from the work of a few scholars in cultural and urban history,³ the spread of the word “mobility” has been more a semantic change than a genuine turn.

It is probable that this has also happened in other countries where the mobility turn has emerged, but we are assuming that notions of mobility in Argentina correspond to the particular way in which international circulation of ideas are “consumed” by peripheral countries. Their uses and meanings are determined by the center-periphery relation as much as by the local cultural and material conditions. In this sense we make two claims. On the one hand, we argue that while the existence of international networks (of scholars, politicians, companies, agencies, technicians) allows the spread of the term mobility, the influence of the term has been somewhat diffuse. On the other hand, we hold that the current transport crisis in Argentina has sparked an interest in mobility studies but that this interest is principally concerned with responding to the demands of the transport sector.

It can be seen that since colonial times Argentina, like other Latin-American countries, has been shaped materially and symbolically by foreign ideas and interests. This resulted in the rise of dependent economies and cultures. The example which best illustrates this process is the construction of the infrastructure for exporting commodities and importing manufactured goods, such as ports, railways, and roads. This was carried out by British, German, Belgian, French, and American expertise and capital. Even during the period of the nationalization of the railways, the inclusion of external capital, expertise, and technologies was a precondition or something necessary for local development. In this sense, Argentina has had a subaltern position within the international division of labor. This asymmetric relation was evident, for example, when North-American interests displaced British control of Argentinean transport and turned it into a motorized country despite the early development of an extensive rail system (railways, tramways, and metro). International market forces and local public policies determined those changes but were accompanied by knowledges (*savoirs*), which have incited or justified those changes.

For example, the current high rate of motorization in Argentina is one of the main factors which has led to a critique of traditional transport studies and opened the door to new ideas. Among transport scholars, there is a high degree of consensus that the extensive motorization of the region and the low investment in rail transport systems have contributed to urban sprawl and, therefore, to low-density cities favorable to the private automobile, something which reinforces social and spatial inequality and generates recurrent transport crises. But, to what extent has this critique been influenced by new foreign (and fashionable) ideas or by local debates?

We recognize both an old, persistent, local dispute between advocates of the railway and advocates of the car (nostalgia vs. modernization) and, at the same time, global debates such as the question of sustainability (low carbon emissions), accessibility, and the right to mobility. We note that the increasing environmental awareness associated with the search for alternative energy can also be seen among policymakers. Also important is the emergence, albeit limited, of slow-motion policies that generate spaces for pedestrians and bicycles. Influenced by landscape gardening, such spaces and practices of mobility are based on projects for the humanization of space in central urban areas, something that focuses on public space reorganization, transport corridors, and neighborhood commercial nodes.

The recent launch of Manuel Herce Vallejo' *The Space of Mobility* is an expression of the tendency that we are describing.⁴ Written by a well-known Catalan planner and engineer, the book stirred up hopes for new mobility debates although really it is more a claim for a human-scale city where pedestrianism would be privileged by reducing the influence of cars and buses.⁵ Herce Vallejo criticizes the fact that although Latin-American countries are investing a lot of money in new transport infrastructure, trying to meet the demand of majorities, they are copying models of mass, rapid transport from Asian cities. He observes, for example, how the new Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) infrastructure in Rio de Janeiro is tearing apart the urban fabric because it has been designed as freeways instead of a segregated lane in the street. However, while local planners and policymakers have been sympathetic to his humanizing view of traffic and transport infrastructure, it remains Eurocentric because it does not consider local peculiarities. It says nothing about, for example, the need to permit the movement of masses which were historically segregated but which today are entering into the labor market, or the question of differences of scale. (Barcelona is much smaller than Rio de Janeiro, not to mention that the "Europeanized" Buenos Aires is ten times bigger than the Catalan city and more unequal socio-economically.) We do not deny that the terms associated with mobility mean a real advance with respect to traditional transport studies, but want to ask to what extent the debate about the role of the automobile really has provoked a "mobility turn." The lack of systematic studies about the culture of the automobile is a good example given that the "mobility turn" has been largely influenced by automobile studies. Piglia's history of automobile associations and the Uruguayan Giucci's cultural history of the car in Latin America are the exceptions that confirm the rule.⁶

We suggest that one reason why a more critical, creative, and provocative mobility studies has not yet emerged is that the new notions about mobility in Argentina are still confined to transport scholars (geographers, economists, architects, political scientists, and some engineers) who are interested in and have experience in transport and urban planning rather than social sciences

and humanities. As a result, the main concern of transport studies in Argentina is to produce new knowledge – knowledge which goes beyond traditional engineering concepts – that can be applied to public policies. This concern is strongly influenced by scientific and technological policies which encourage responses to transport crises. Undoubtedly this has triggered a great interest in mobility issues that we celebrate. At the same time, what concerns us is that this context might hold back those studies that seem to have no practical purpose, that is to say those studies that are not explicitly designed to respond to transport policies.

A good example illustrating this tension is transport geography studies. This is a field in which mobility has indeed gained ground. Andrea Gutiérrez has reviewed mobility turn literature enabling the discussion of new approaches,⁷ but looking at the articles published by the *Review of Transport and Territory*, University of Buenos Aires, the majority still focuses on transport policies and the role of State as the “big planner.” The latter is also predominant in those works that have applied cultural and historical perspectives to mobility studies and this prominence is perhaps a peculiarity of our social sciences.

The rapid spread of the term mobility to surveys (focusing on commuting) and transport policies (including environmental issues, energy efficiency, alternative mobilities like the bike, etc.) attracts our attention because in both cases the semantic nature of the change becomes more evident. The titles of the largest studies of public transport in the metropolitan region of Buenos Aires illustrate this. In 2007 the National Secretary of Transport carried out a survey of “supply and demand” of public transport called INTRUPUBA but the new survey in 2009 was given the strange title of Survey of Home Mobility (ENMODO) – and was in fact a home survey about mobility. This semantic confusion demonstrates the lack of precision in the way the term is being used.

Let us see what ENMODO says about mobility. It claims that the survey is based on the “concept of mobility” because it “supersedes the classic conception of transport” (which focused on “the assessment and analysis of transport, services, and infrastructure supply”) by “focusing on people’s needs for moving within the territory.” Mobility, it points out, “refers to the sum of daily movements (going to work, study, social events, etc.) made by a population within a defined territory.”⁸ Despite theoretical advances, however, this study reduces mobility to a study of commuting or demand. Mobility is still transport, in other words.

We should pay attention to the “kitchen” where all these surveys are “cooked” because this kitchen is intersected by an international network of technicians and funds which largely model theories and methodologies that are then applied in different local contexts. PTUMA (Urban Transport Project for Metropolitan Areas), for example, is a project financed by Inter-American Development Bank to carry out surveys in intermediate-sized Argentinean

cities such as Mendoza, Tucumán, Córdoba, and Rosario, using the same structure and method as was utilized for the metropolitan region of Buenos Aires. The asymmetric relation at international-national level is replicated between the metropolis and the interior producing a homogenized knowledge – useful primarily for aggregated analysis and global comparisons.

If surveys are still an “origin and destination” study, the notion of mobility used by state agencies – usually with responses from non-state organizations – seems to be a semantic turn that expresses nothing more than political correctness. The most illustrative case is the Government of Buenos Aires City, which has called its public transport and traffic policy Plan for Sustainable Mobility, promoting the BRT system, eco-buses, cycling, and walking, among other policies. Modeled by a conservative but modernizing ideology, the Plan responds efficiently to urgent but isolated situations, becoming fragmented rather than global, aesthetic rather than functional. By contrast, the Transport Agency of Rosario, which changed its name two years ago to Mobility Agency, has aroused expectations since it seems to be moving beyond a semantic change. Based on a mobility policy rather than a plan, this institution, shaped by a socialist government, is carrying out promising surveys about passenger behavior, including a gender perspective.

We believe that the notions of mobility currently circulating within the academic, technical, and political fields in different ways must be subject to further analysis. We can say that these notions circulate at different rhythms or velocities in different fields and have different influences and consequences. An early critical view in the field of geography can be identified, but we believe that what really pushed the semantic change and the spread of the term mobility was the presence of policymakers influenced by international organizations, agencies, and lobbies. International funding organizations as well as global and regional transport agencies are relevant actors since they provide credit, technical support or knowhow, materials, and so on.

For example, it is interesting to see how the issue of sustainability, both economic and social, as well as energy efficiency, emerged with the challenges of the millennium as disseminated by the documents of international organizations and NGOs (GTZ, ITDP), through events such as conferences and seminars, which strongly influence state agencies. Naturally, the external influence is also important in the academic field. On the one hand, international experts are frequently invited for lectures and conferences. On the other, national scholars study abroad, bringing back new ideas.

In this sense, the movement from transport to mobility in the Argentinian academic, technical, and political fields must be understood within an uneven process of the circulation of ideas, experts, and even capital – a circulation that seems to be more evident in a globalized world although it is a long-term process. Historically, like other countries of Latin America and the

Global South, Argentina has occupied a peripheral and subaltern position in the international networks, and has become a receptor or consumer of ideas generated in different centers. Sometimes such consumption was forced but also wished for – as the case of the Argentinean elite which aspired to shape the country following European models.

There is no doubt that we keep looking at certain centers as models to follow or to learn new ideas from in order to transform our local circumstances. Even our own argument (and claim) that we need to move beyond a semantic turn to a more critical viewpoint is based on the experiences of European and American academic fields. Our opinion that the cultural history of mobility is an emerging field of studies or about the scarcity of such studies in South America is supported by several reviews in the *T2M Yearbook* (2009, 2011, 2013), and is a good example of how we perceive ourselves by comparing ourselves with the centers.

One of the main questions about the concept of “periphery” is how we understand “copying.” Does copying result in a degraded version of the original? Does it express an attitude of dependency or inferiority, or a lack of originality? To what extent can we build our destiny without external references or models? The question here is whether those influences are mutual or asymmetric. In general, the notion of periphery entails the existence of a center (as an original model to emulate) as well as a certain distance from it. Periphery can be understood as mere dependency but the distance from the center might also mean opportunity. Being on the margins could be seen as subversive. But, even in a subaltern position, the process of reception, even of copying, is at the same time a process of production because the adaptation of external ideas to the local context inevitably generates something new, peculiar, or different from the original.

The way in which we are currently consuming ideas of mobility enables us to see the influence of external forces as well as the constrictions (or obstinacy?) of local realities. Our reality is that while a new, global theoretical and methodological toolbox is available to understand critically the production of mobilities, immediacy or the pressing need for responses to our current situation conditions the production of knowledge in general, and a critical view in particular.

We might think that the constricting effect of immediacy is more typical of the political and technical fields. However, it is also a characteristic of the academic field. In policy-making the new notions of mobility tend to be rapidly naturalized. The plans for a sustainable mobility, for example, rest not only on political correctness but also on an agreement about problems and solutions. In consequence, the main impediment to a sustainable mobility policy seems to be the lack of funding or the political will to carry it out. This argument is usually supported by planners who tend to see planning as a rational, clear,

and linear discourse. By contrast, we claim that a critical view tends to highlight the tensions or contradictions of the uneven process of mobility.

Universities are also part of a dramatic change in Argentina, where large-scale public investment in scientific and technological research demands a return in the applicability of that knowledge. While this policy fosters an auspicious and expectant relation between society and academy, some of those pressing problems may actually be reducing the level of theoretical and methodological reflection.

We do not believe that critical thought about mobilities implies isolation or shutting ourselves away in the academy so as to distance ourselves from politics. On the contrary, we argue that the mobility turn contains evident political aims – the demands for mobility reduction, environmental justice, a “usable past,” and so on, are good examples. Yet, in “translating” deep, critical thought about mobility from the academic to the political field it is necessary to avoid permitting academic research from becoming a simple “supply” for planning – which will happen in so far as that knowledge loses its critical grounding in the process of translation. In the particular context that we are looking at, a critical view should create debates or agendas based on new approaches to mobility from the social sciences and humanities. It is true that notions of sustainability, accessibility, or the right to mobility are creating a new agenda; however, those well-intentioned notions also need to be evaluated critically since they appear in policy-making and planning discourses as non-conflictive terms.

Discourses about sustainable mobility, for example, concentrate their attack on car use while forgetting that Argentina seems to have fulfilled the Millennium Goals – by reducing 10 million head of cattle (16.5 per cent) between 2007 and 2010. Electric modes of transport (railway and tramways) are shown to be an alternative, yet there exists no profound debate about the energy matrix – 88 per cent of electrical power is produced in Argentina by oil and gas combustion. Finally, accessibility tends to appear as a self-evident concept without discussion, on the one hand, of mobility as a universal right and, on the other, of the spatial consequences of creating large-scale infrastructure for the masses. While the former requires at least a deconstruction of the Liberal origin and the positive connotation of that discourse, the latter needs a profound debate about social and environmental justice, the rise of more journeys and movements, decentralization, and so on.

“Something happens with ideas when they cross the Atlantic. They get wet!” our Professor of Latin-American History used to say. This is why when discussing notions of mobility in Argentina we tried to bring up the process of production, circulation, and reception of ideas. How these are adapted to the objective conditions of Latin America not only contributes to locating “constellations of mobilities” geographically and historically, but also forces us to revisit the question of the “periphery” in a globalized world.

Dr Dhan Zunino Singh is a researcher in cultural history of urban mobilities at the Centre of Intellectual History, University of Quilmes (Argentina), with a Postdoctoral fellowship (CONICET). He has a degree in Sociology from the University of Buenos Aires (UBA), a postgraduate degree as Specialist in History and Criticism of Architecture and Urbanism (UBA), an M.A. in Sociology of Culture from San Martin National University, and a Ph.D. in History (School of Advanced Study, the University of London). E-mail: dhasebastian@gmail.com

Maximiliano Augusto Velázquez is a sociologist of the University of Buenos Aires (UBA), specialized in Urban and Regional Planning, and a Research Fellow at the Metropolitan Area Centre of Transport Studies, UBA. He is also a lecturer of Graphic Design, School of Architecture, Design and Urbanism, UBA, and of Technology Rail Transport Management, School of Management and Economics, University of Mercantile Marine. He currently coordinates the Argentinean University Network of Transport. E-mail: maxovelazquez@gmail.com

Notes

1. It should be noted that mobility is always named in the singular.
2. Tourism and migration studies are not included in this review.
3. Valeria Gruschetsky, "Argentina in Motion: Connections between Mobility, Politics, and Culture in Recent Historiography," *T2M Yearbook* 4 (2013): 138–141.
4. Manuel Herce Vallejo and Francesc Magrinyà, *El Espacio Público de la Movilidad* (Buenos Aires: Café de las Ciudades, 2013).
5. The author calls for a change in planning methods so as to incorporate the idea of mobility instead of transport. Transport, he says, "implies a waste of energy" and "infrastructure to reduce the travel cost" (and infrastructure business), while the mobility gives more attention to "autonomous forms of motion," supplies alternative infrastructures, and manages the energy cost. Herce Vallejo and Magrinyà, *El Espacio Público de la Movilidad*, 20–21.
6. Melina Piglia, "Entre la Acción Civil y la Ayuda Mutua: el Caso de los Clubes de Automovilistas en la Argentina de Entreguerras," *Revista Turismo y Territorio* 5 (2011): 6–28, <http://www.rtt.filo.uba.ar/RTT00502006.pdf> (accessed 10 November 2013); Guillermo Giucci, *La Vida Cultural del Automóvil. Rutas de la Modernidad Cinética* (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 2007).
7. Andrea Gutiérrez, "Movilidad, Transporte y Acceso: una Renovación Aplicada al Ordenamiento Territorial," *Scripta Nova* 14 no. 331 (2010), <http://www.ub.edu/geocrit/sn/sn-331/sn-331-86.htm> (accessed 10 November 2013).
8. Proyecto de Transporte Urbano para Áreas Metropolitanas (PTUMA), "Encuesta de Movilidad Domiciliaria 2009–2010: Movilidad en el Área Metropolitana de Buenos Aires," PTUMA (2010: 3, <http://www.ptuma.gov.ar/publicaciones/index.html> (accessed 10 November 2013).