Annals of Tourism Research xxx (xxxx) xxxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Annals of Tourism Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/annals

Research note

# Rail tourism transitions: A sociological framework

Martin Trandberg Jensen[a,*], Jonas Larsen[b]

[a] Department of Culture and Learning, Aalborg University, Copenhagen, A.C. Meyers Vaenge 15, 2450, Denmark
[b] Department of People and Technology, Roskilde University, Roskilde, Universitetsvej 1, 02, 4000, Denmark

ARTICLE INFO

Associate editor: Scott Daniel

*Keywords:*
Rail tourism
Transitions
Mobilities
Multi-level perspective
Practice theory
Ethnography

## Introduction

International air travel is polluting and carbon intensive (Scott et al., 2010; Zhang & Zhang, 2018). Paradoxically, this knowledge does not prevent people from flying – until recently, that is. Flying is increasingly "shamed" (Coffey, 2019) and anti-flying lifestyles and rail tourism is gaining commercial momentum with research and industries talking about a rail 'renaissance' ('Travel industry confirms rail 'renaissance' in Europe', 2019; Zhang, 2017). There is also a political momentum as governments and EU invest in high-speed rail infrastructure (European Court of Auditors, 2018; Zhang, 2017). Nonetheless, this transition is slow-moving. With the exception of high-speed trains in certain parts of Europe and Asia (Albalate et al., 2017; Castillo-Manzano et al., 2018; Masson & Petiot, 2009; Sun & Lin, 2018), long distance train travel continues to be a 'niche' for tourists, and it struggles to compete with the comforts and time efficiency of low-cost aero mobility, efficient booking systems and modern airport infrastructures contemporary travelers take for granted. The predictive models of transport scholars and planners have not been able to predict the recent changes in rail travel demands because mobility is seen as a rational spatial transfer explained by instrumental factors such as travel time, distance and costs (Schiefelbusch, 2010). While such parameters are important for modeling and understanding demand, mobilities scholars expand on this perspective by including social, cultural and political issues as well as affective and embodied experiences of being mobile. They show that movement is made meaningful through routines and embodied performances. This includes exploration of train gazing (Larsen, 2001) and lived experiences of interrailing (Jensen et al., 2015; Jensen et al., 2016). Tourism mobility is not only about spatial transfer; it is also a way of sensing and experiencing movement and places (Larsen, 2001; Roy & Hannam, 2013) and related to political consumerism and lifestyle.

This note develops a sociological framework for studying mobilities transitions in relation to train travel, which is a relatively under researched field. We couple the influential *mobilities paradigm* with two sociological transitions theories, *practice theory* (Shove et al., 2012) and *multi-level perspective* (Geels, 2012). These theories complement each other well and provide knowledge inadequately understood by current mobilities accounts or transport models. Whereas the mobilities paradigm introduces embodied experiences

* Corresponding author.
*E-mail addresses:* trandberg@hum.aau.dk (M.T. Jensen), jonaslar@ruc.dk (J. Larsen).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2020.102992
Received 6 April 2020; Received in revised form 24 June 2020; Accepted 29 June 2020
0160-7383/ © 2020 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Please cite this article as: Martin Trandberg Jensen and Jonas Larsen, Annals of Tourism Research, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2020.102992

and social relations as drivers for travel decisions and demands, MLP inserts wider socio-technical relations and lock-in mechanisms, while practice theories highlight the role of comfort, skills, routines and everyday habits; they all suggest that routines are difficult to break and transitions are long in the making and that users are co-producers in innovation processes. We assume that rail tourism will not become mainstream unless it is redesigned in accordance with consumer needs and demands. While sociologists have explored "after the car" transitions (Dennis & Urry, 2009), this note examines practices and opportunities and constraints of "post-plane" travel demands.

## Understanding drivers of transitions

The mobilities turn inserts the social and the body within transport research. The focus is on socially regulated mobility, how 'mobilities skills' are learned and become habitual (Löfgren, 2008) and travel time is not 'dead time' as presumed in transport models. Travel is an embodied, affective and emotional practice that involves political orientations, social relations, norms and habits. Dennis and Urry argue: '…to slow down, let alone reverse, increasing carbon emissions and temperatures requires nothing more and nothing less than the reorganization of social life' (2009, 8). This paradigm has an applied element and examines how low-carbon transitions take place (Urry, 2016). Finally, it examines the infrastructures and designs that stage mobility and ask 'what if…?' (Jensen & Lanng, 2017) specific mobile situations could be redesigned to cater for new travel demands. This material component illustrates affinities between the mobilities paradigm and MLP that this research framework combines in a novel way.

MLP examines tensions between stability and change and how technological transitions (fail to) take place. They argue that stability, lock-in and path-dependence block much innovation and that transitions often proceed predictably in certain directions and give rise to stable trajectories. MLP conceptualizes transport systems, such as the European rail infrastructure, as a: "configuration of elements that include technology, policy, markets, consumer practices, infrastructure, cultural meaning and scientific knowledge" (Geels, 2012: 471). Moreover, transitions are not driven by single factors; they are co-evolutionary processes taking decades to unfold and involve many different industries, institutions and actors. This differs from approaches that view manufacturers as the main actors and in doing so overlook everyday practices, lifestyles and policies. MLP focuses on how powerful regimes, such as air mobilities, reproduce themselves (Geels, 2012; Verbeek & Mommaas, 2008). What is less discussed, however, is how an existing system, such as the railway, may gain new momentum because of emergent political and cultural landscapes favouring sustainable travel. Moreover, while MLP mentions practices, they do not feature prominently. However, we argue that new social practices are essential for steering rail tourism transitions (Shove et al., 2012), and subsequently our final theoretical inspiration focuses on practices.

Practice theories are concerned with routines, behavioural change and: "how social practices around mobility changed in the past, are changing in the present and might change in the future through transforming wider sets of social practices beyond transportation choices and behaviour" (Sheller & Urry, 2016: 14). They illuminate that behavioural change is difficult to elicit and transitions require a combination of new technologies, meanings, skills and routines. They focus in on what participation involves and how 'practices compete with each other for recruits and carriers' in relational competition (Shove et al., 2012: 87). Burgeoning air travel cannot be separated from the decline of rail travel. It follows that we must explore how people become devoted 'carriers' of rail tourism and what meanings, knowledge, aspirations and bodily transformations that are associated with being a rail tourist.

## Studying rail tourism transitions

On this background, our multiscalar framework studies lived experiences of rail travel 'in situ', the dependencies and lock-ins that block rail travel transitions set within a dominant aero mobility regime as well as innovations and future opportunities that support rail travel. Firstly, informed by mobilities paradigms and practice theory, it examines the 'consumption side' of rail tourism by studying existing and potential train users and how affordances of train tourism compare with plane tourism. This means exploring where, how and why tourists travel by plane while others do not. Through interviews with, and observations of, plane and train tourists respectively, the different practices, and the conditions and constrains that shape their transport decisions can be investigated. Since trains are generally slower than planes, it is important to research how far rail tourists travel and how this specific transport mode influence their destination choice. Rather than assuming a fixed origin-destination matrix, train tourists may travel to closer destinations than those that fly. This leads us to why certain people travel by train while others do not and here explorations on low-carbon lifestyles, new forms of slow- and local tourism experiences and distance valuation will be central alongside the traditional focus on price. This also includes examining the role of habits and how different tourists learn or fail this (new) travel practice. Lastly, the framework is committed to exploring ethnographically the lived, corporeal sensations, pains and comforts of travelling by and occupying trains for many hours. Our hypothesis is that these different perspectives can produce new accounts of demands and experiences of rail tourism.

Secondly, informed by the mobilities paradigm and MLP the framework explores the 'production side' of rail tourism and its potential futures by interviewing key industry actors and analyzing real industry cases. This implies analyzing the political landscapes, governing networks and power relations within and between nation states and the EU that support and challenge rail tourism in the future. The focus must be on how path dependencies can be challenged and new alliances, ideas, concepts or innovations can be imagined and developed relating to the 'train travel of the future'.

This approach adapts *mobilities design thinking* (Jensen & Lanng, 2017) to solve – together with train designers, modellers and operators – some of the present problems that rail tourists experience and innovate new markets and design better rail services and train compartments informed by tourist demands and existing basic functions of the railway. Such questions are central to the

ARTICLE IN PRESS



change-driven, interventionistic and collaborative ethos of rail tourism transition studies and encourages researchers to work together with users, companies, organizations and authorities in designing new sustainable and multifunctional rail services.

## Conclusion

The intended contribution of our framework is two-fold. Firstly, to outline a new approach that stimulates tourism and mobilities scholars dealing with high/low carbon tourism transitions. Linked together the three discussed theories provide an innovative multiscalar framework to study tourism mobility transitions from both a consumption and production side. Secondly, our framework supplements transport models with understandings of how travel habits, embodied experiences, social relations and lifestyles influence the demands and valuations of rail travel, which is currently not well understood. This theoretical coupling inspires further collaborations between transport planners and mobilities researchers to analyze the relations between the basic functions of railways and the new and future demands of tourists.

## References


Albalate, D., Campos, J., & Jiménez, J. L. (2017). Tourism and high speed rail in Spain: Does the AVE increase local visitors? *Annals of Tourism Research, 65*, 71–82.

Castillo-Manzano, J. I., Castro-Nuño, M., López-Valpuesta, L., Pedregal-Tercero, D. J., & Garrido-Michó, J. M. (2018). High Speed Rail: Fast tracking tourism in the EU? *Annals of Tourism Research, 71*, 64–66.

Coffey, H. (2019, 5 June). Flygskam: What is the flight-shaming environmental movement that's sweeping Europe. *Independent*. Retrieved from https://www.independent.co.uk/.

Dennis, K., & Urry, J. (2009). *After the car.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

European Court of Auditors (2018). *Special report n° 19/2018: A European high-speed rail network: Not a reality but an ineffective patchwork. Luxembourg*.

Geels, F. W. (2012). A socio-technical analysis of low-carbon transitions: Introducing the multilevel perspective into transport studies. *Journal of Transport Geography, 24*, 471–482.

Travel industry confirms rail 'renaissance' in Europe. Retrieved from https://www.railwaygazette.com/passenger/travel-industry-confirms-rail-renaissance-in-europe/54828.article.

Jensen, M. T., Gyimothy, S., & Jensen, O. B. (2016). Staging interrail mobilities. *Tourist Studies, 16*(2), 111–132.

Jensen, M. T., Scarles, C., & Cohen, S. A. (2015). A multisensory phenomenology of interrail Mobilities. *Annals of Tourism Research, 53*(July), 61–76.

Jensen, O. B., & Lanng, D. B. (2017). *Mobilities design: Urban designs for mobile situations.* New York: Routledge.

Larsen, J. (2001). Tourism mobilities and the travel glance: Experiences of being on the move. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism, 1*(2), 80–98.

Löfgren, O. (2008). Motion and emotion: Learning to be a railway traveller. *Mobilities, 3*(3), 331–351.

Masson, S., & Petiot, R. (2009). Can the high speed rail reinforce tourism attractiveness? The case of the high speed rail between Perpignan (France) and Barcelona (Spain). *Technovation, 29*(9), 611–617.

Roy, S., & Hannam, K. (2013). Embodying the mobilities of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway. *Mobilities, 8*(4), 580–594.

Schiefelbusch, M. (2010). Rational planning for emotional mobility? The case of public transport development. *Planning Theory, 9*(3), 200–222.

Scott, D., Peeters, P., & Gössling, S. (2010). Can tourism deliver its "aspirational" greenhouse gas emission reduction targets? *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 18*(3), 393–408.

Sheller, M., & Urry, J. (2016). Mobilizing the new mobilities paradigm. *Appl. Mobilities, 1*(1), 10–25.

Shove, E., Pantzar, M., & Watson, M. (2012). *The dynamics of social practice: Everyday life and how it changes.* London: Sage.

Sun, Y. Y., & Lin, Z. W. (2018). Move fast, travel slow: The influence of high-speed rail on tourism in Taiwan. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 26*(3), 433–450.

Urry, J. (2016). *What is the future?* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Verbeek, D., & Mommaas, H. (2008). Transitions to sustainable tourism mobility: The social practices approach. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 16*(6), 629–644.

Zhang, A. (2017). *Effects of high-speed rail speed on airline demand and price: Theoretical analysis and empirical evidence from a quasi-natural experiment.* Vancouver: Sauder School of Business.

Zhang, J., & Zhang, Y. (2018). Carbon tax, tourism $CO_2$ emissions and economic welfare. *Annals of Tourism Research, 69*, 11–30.