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Book review

Transportation and Revolt: Pigeons, Mules, Canals, and the Vanishing Geographies of Subversive Mobility by Shell, J., 2015, Cambridge: MIT Press. $32.00 or £22.95 (Hardback) ISBN: 9780262029339, €22.00 (ebook) ISBN: 9780262330398

How come there are so few canals in England or Canada? Why did the United States Army disinvest in mules for transport in the mid-1950s? According to Jacob Shell's new book, Transport and Revolt: Pigeons, Mules, Canals and Vanishing Geographies of Subversive Mobility, these and other transport modes become associated with subversive groups and threatened the state. The state responded by shutting down, avoiding, eliminating these particular mobile arrangements. Shell's book is organized into three sections focusing on animal mobility, canals, and, freight and deindustrialization in New York City.

The first substantive section of Shell's book broadly examines various forms of subversive mobility that transverse difficult geographies and the efforts to control them. Shell defines subversive motilities as those mobile modes that threaten the state. The cases included in this section are mostly animal carrying systems that move and smuggle secrets, rebels, supplies, and other contraband: pigeons, mules, elephants, camels, and sled dogs (Shell also includes watercraft as another form of subversive mobility). As he does throughout the book, Shell demonstrates an impressive geographic scope of analysis.

These animal based transport modes are particularly adept at crossing difficult terrains, what Shell calls "intermediary states," such as ice, mud, desert, and mountainous terrain, where roads cannot easily go. Carrier pigeons bear secrets and other lightweight items long distances. Mules excel at transporting cargo, for guerrilla fighters or smugglers, through mountainous terrain. Camels can move goods across the barren deserts where roads are quickly swept under the shifting sands. Elephants are able to carry large loads across flooded or muddy terrains while avoiding the open roads. Sled dogs shuttle cargo across frozen Siberian landscapes.

In the next section, on canals, Shell turns his attention to the mystery of Britain's "missing canal ship era." During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, when many peer countries built extensive inland canal networks, Britain built surprisingly few. Shell argues that the reason for the missing canals has to do with the perception of the canals, boats, workers and their kin as suspect and immoral. This chapter powerfully demonstrates the melding of groups of people and modes of transport. In this case, canals and "boatpeople" came to be joined in the public imagination as a single mysterious entity that could circumvent surveillance and smuggled all manner of contraband.

Embedded in the story of the canals is a useful comparison of railroads and canals. Shell cites mid-nineteenth century documents and earlier historical work suggesting that railroads carried with them an aura of modern technological efficiency compared with the plodding nature of canal movements. The "railway men" were seen by many as young technologically savvy businessmen. The "psychological biases" against canals were not limited to the physical transportation but bled into and out of the perceptions and the biases against the "boatpeople" who were older and viewed as outsiders. Less extreme biases and conflation of modes and operators can be seen in contemporary discussions of local transit modes (e.g. bus vs rail, informal vs formal transit services, and taxis vs new ICT-based ride-sharing services).

The third section argues that the threats posed by subversive watercraft in New York City contributed to deindustrialization in the first half of the twentieth century. Compared with the preceding chapters, Shell's argument is less straightforward. He establishes the clear role that watercraft and harbor workers played in smuggling and the spate of anarchist bombings during the 1910s and how these associations led to police and others to view the harbor workers as a suspect group embedded in both the revolutionary politics and smuggling. Less clear, however, is how these perceptions influenced business leaders, foundations and planners' disinvestment in freight and manufacturing in favor of redeveloping Manhattan's West Side into office space.

Those interested in historical mobility, subversive or insurgent mobility, and animal mobility will find a lot to like in Transportation and Revolt. The book offers a powerful argument that the reasons why certain transportation modes become dominant while others fade away are not always economic or technical but can also be rooted in politics, fear and efforts to control suspect people.

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