

1. Articles

Quotidian rituals in an age of mobility

January 2014

Javier Caletrío

It is often quotidian details that best reveal the vital pulse of the times, the sensuous, emotional and moral textures of everyday lives at a certain historical time. This entry of Café Braudel brings to readers' attention three quotes about the way in which an accelerating rhythm of life associated with the new culture of mobility gained expression in quotidian rituals such as smoking and drinking.

While capital ... must strive to tear down every barrier ... to exchange and conquer the whole earth for its markets, it strives on the other side to annihilate this space with time.

More than a hundred and fifty years since Karl Marx wrote these lines in his *Grundrisse* (1857), social scientists are still debating the social implications of the annihilation of space by time. Many of these debates focus on the recent wave of globalization (1980s – present) and although references are made to the origins of the culture of mobility in the nineteenth century, most analyses in mobilities and transport studies, however, gravitate around social practices and spatial dynamics directly associated with new transport technologies such as the railway. The human geographer Tim Cresswell has paid attention to the ways in which a culture of mobility and a new sense of acceleration permeated and transformed fundamental aspects of more quotidian and seemingly unimportant details of everyday life in the nineteenth century. For example, his book *On the Move* ([see review](#)) includes a chapter on the way domestic bodily movements such as those involved in making a pie at home were considered to be part of cultivating a new modern self.

It is often these small details that best reveal the vital pulse of the times, the sensuous, emotional and moral textures of mobile lives. Today I bring to the attention of the readers of Café Braudel three interesting quotes about the way in which an accelerating rhythm of life associated with the new culture of mobility gained expression in quotidian rituals such as smoking and drinking. The quotes are from *Tastes of Paradise* (1992) by Wolfgang Schivelbusch, author, as many readers already know, of the classic of transport history *The Railway Journey* (1986).

Half a century after the appearance of the cigar, the acceleration process advanced still further with the cigarette. Like the cigar, it came ready for consumption, yet the time required to finish smoking it was even briefer –quite a substantial innovation. The cigarette was light, short, and quick, in the physical as well as the temporal and pharmacological sense of the word. A 'smoke', as this new informal unit of time is called, is as different from the time it takes to smoke a cigar as the velocity of a mail coach is from that of an automobile. The cigarette embodied a concept of time utterly different from that of the cigar. The calm and concentration a cigarette smoker feels in the

twentieth century is quite different from that felt by the cigar or pipe smoker in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, cigar and pipe smoking enjoy special status. They represent a definitive intention not to conform to the prevailing mode of smoking, the cigarette. They deliberately flout convention, go against the prevailing rhythm of life, with an artificial sense that suggests nostalgia, snob appeal, etc. Pipe and cigar smokers are as important, or rather unimportant, to an understanding of our era as are, say, antique car buffs; that is, they are interesting merely as a negative expression. The standards of tranquility and concentration of a period can, in fact, always be deduced from the prevailing mode of smoking. They can even be quantified. The twentieth-century cigarette that takes five to seven minutes to be thoroughly smoked is meant to give all the leisure and concentration smokers in the nineteenth century derived from cigars that took almost a half an hour to smoke. The new sense of time that each innovation in smoking embodies can best be felt when the traditional form of smoking is still in use. Thus at the start of the twentieth century the cigarette was a potent symbol of the new velocity of modern life precisely because the cigar was still ubiquitous. (1992, p. 115)

Smoking, as Schivelbusch shows, therefore reveals more about the subtle ways in which the new mobile practices of modernity become internalized by the subject. This was something that spread to other areas, as Schivelbusch goes on to discuss in relation to drinking.

Liquor dealt a deathblow to traditional drinking, which had been based on wine and beer. These might be termed organic alcoholic beverages, in that their alcoholic content is identical to the sugar content of the plants from which they are prepared. In liquor this relationship to nature was severed. Distillation raised the alcohol content far beyond the natural limits. To be precise, distilled spirits contained ten times the alcohol of traditional beer -which could not help but have far-reaching consequences. Whereas beer and wine are drunk slowly in long sips, and the inebriation process is gradual, liquor is tossed off, and intoxication is more or less instantaneous. Liquor thus represents a process of acceleration of intoxication, intrinsically related to other processes of acceleration in the modern age. The tenfold intensification of alcohol content over that of traditional beer meant that a person could now get drunk with one-tenth the quantity of liquor, or in one-tenth the time it had formerly taken. The maximized effect, the acceleration, and the reduced price made liquor a true child of the Industrial Revolution. It was to drinking what the mechanical weaver's loom was to weaving. The analogy can be further extended. The industrialization of drinking at first had as devastating an effect on the traditional lifestyle as industrialization had on the craft of weaving. In fact, liquor and the mechanical loom worked hand in hand, as it were, in eighteenth-century England, to destroy traditional ways of life and labour. (1992, p. 153)

This change in the substances being drunk was accompanied by concomitant changes in where it was drunk. Now, not only would the time taken to drink be compressed through the beverage itself, but new behaviours, shaping the modern citizen, were fostered through spatial arrangements in public houses.

The fact that the bar first made its way into the big-city drinking houses of England, the so-called gin places, at the start of the nineteenth century marks it as a genuine product of the Industrial Revolution. In this respect it could be compared to distilled spirits, or be termed their architectural equivalent. If

because of its high alcohol content liquor sped up the inebriation process, the bar sped up, i.e., shortened, the length of a drinker's stay in the bar. Liquor not consumed slowly in long sips, but abruptly 'tossed off'. The process is so quick that it can be performed standing up. Because of their bars, the gin places that were springing up like mushrooms in Manchester and other English industrial cities at the start of the nineteenth century resembled factory assembly lines. One such establishment in Manchester served over 400 customers in an hour. In a single week the fourteen largest gin palaces in London served 270,000 guests –almost a metropolis unto itself. This it seems no exaggeration to characterize the bar as a traffic innovation, or as the historians Gorham and Dunnett have written, 'a solution to a traffic problem just as much as Haussmann's Place de l'Etoile or a Woolworth store are practical solutions.' The bar introduced a qualitative innovation to the traffic flow of the gin palace. It sped up drinking, just as the railroad sped up travel and the mechanical loom sped up textile production. (1992, p. 202)

References

- Cresswell, T. (2006) *On the Move* . London, Routledge.
- Marx, K. (1973) *Grundrisse* . New York, Penguin.
- Schivelbusch, W. (1986) *The Railway Journey* . Bergh, London.
- Schivelbusch, W. (1992) *Tastes of Paradise. A Social History of Spices, Stimulants, and Intoxicants* . New York, Vintage Books.

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

[En savoir plus](#) x

Lifestyle

A lifestyle is a composition of daily activities and experiences that give sense and meaning to the life of a person or a group in time and space.

[En savoir plus](#) x

Other publications



Did Covid cause public transport to grind to a halt?

Annelise Avril, David Henny



1 <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/publication/2013/03/11/book-review-517>