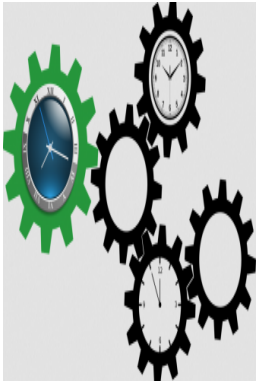


1. New voices



The work of mobility, between parking lots and particles. The space-times of work under pressure

New voices

06 December 2021

Within two mobile occupations - university research and road haulage - tensions emerge between contemporary mobile norms, the way they translate into work control and professional ideals. Meike Brodersen's thesis draws on an ethnographic study of time and space to show how workers resist, attach themselves and adapt to these mobile occupations.

Research participants

- Meike Brodersen

New Voices Awards 2021

Thesis title : Le travail de la mobilité, entre parkings et particules. Les espaces-temps du travail sous tension

Country : Belgium

University : Université Libre de Bruxelles

Date : 2019

Research supervisor : Pierre Lannoy

1. What is your research topic? What thesis are you defending and how does it stand out?

Meike Brodersen – The thesis examines the changes that affect contemporary workspaces and work times, by analyzing the case of road freight transport (TRM) for a third party, where the work involves

the production of mobility, and university research in experimental physics, where for years international mobility has been central to the formation of careers and working groups. These two mobile professions are characterized by identities, representations and professional practices that have a strong spatio-temporal flexibility, a desire for autonomy at work, and vocational commitment. Mobility imperatives and new methods of work assessment and competition are changing the way in which people engage with work: on the one hand, work and travel times are controlled by digital tachograph, just-in-time logistics systems¹ and live fleet monitoring; on the other there is an injunction to international mobility, globalized collaborations and quantified evaluations. The thesis argues that space-time is a relevant entry point to analyze the transformations underway in these two professions and to investigate the daily reality of jobs that are mobile, dispersed and partly digitized.

2. If your thesis includes empirical research, what does it involve?

Meike Brodersen – The research is based on in situ observations, in-depth interviews and textual analysis. A Brussels-based research group in experimental high energy physics was the subject of observation for several years, including during their travels, meetings and social events. This observation was supplemented by semi-structured interviews with members of the group as well as with members of their international professional network. The textual documents produced by the collaboration for its internal workings and outward communication - internal emails, project presentations, reports and website - were also incorporated into the analysis. Simultaneously, workers from several local road transport companies were interviewed and observed; taking part in collective mobilization events and interviewing union representatives provided an entry point for understanding the ongoing evolutions in the sector.

The results of these two sets of fieldwork were systematically compared and contrasted. Various literature were simultaneously drawn upon – in the sociologies of science, work and mobility – allowing us to benefit from bringing together a range of sources.

3. What are the main results?

Meike Brodersen – This research reveals, on the one hand, the tensions that emerge from the contradictions between professional aspirations and the qualities associated with work, and on the other from the modes of control, evaluation, organization and remuneration of work. In road transportation, professional identity and work mobilization continue to be characterized by values that promote autonomy and individual responsibility, despite the fact that European legislation controls working hours, that employers and contractors can monitor workers in real time, and that itineraries are now often imposed. This control, as well as just-in-time logistics, significantly reduces drivers' freedom and autonomy, which used to be considered inherent attributes of (long-distance) truck driving. The freedom and autonomy usually associated with being an independent driver is strongly contrasted with a very real dependence on large logistics companies. For researchers, the injunction to international mobility, coupled with the growth of precarious employment, is not only in conflict with their lifestyles and family trajectories, but also tends to take precedence over professional aspirations and primary motivations for choosing this career. In experimental physics, large research projects rely on an international system that requires information, objects and people to be highly mobile. In addition, the academic world is dominated by a discourse that values excellence, internationality and mobility, as well as increased competition between researchers. Competition and the quantitative criteria used to evaluate researchers (publications, mobility, funding) clash with conceptions of the profession that are based on the values of creative freedom and autonomy at work. As a result, younger researchers may be discouraged to see their chosen career path leading to management duties that are far removed from what they consider to be the core of their work.

These two worlds value mobility and both afford levels of social recognition on the basis of one's ability to showcase it: in road transport, long-haul work and self-employment are held in high esteem because they are reminders of the professions' historic greatness, distinguishing it from the sector's more sedentary professions and delivery jobs. Since "cabotage"² on a European scale facilitates international competition with unfavorable working conditions for drivers who are often subcontracted from Eastern Europe, this symbolic hierarchy is being threatened and some drivers are seeing a drop in professional status, regardless of nationality. In academic research, stakeholders agree that showcasing international and inter-institutional mobility is part of an indispensable cultural capital within the field, and that it is one of the main conditions for remaining in the profession. Neoliberal norms of interindividual competition thus merge with imaginaries rooted in the profession which value autonomy, adventure and international collaboration. Faced with this, researchers and drivers are setting up new ways of producing these mobilities. In this social and situated production, mobilities and immobilities are interdependent: for physicists, for example, their local research group serves as the basis for multiple trips. The on-site members of staff compensate for the externalities of the others' mobility, by welcoming doctoral and post-doctoral students from abroad, for instance, and it is within the group that the skills and dispositions of professional travel are transmitted: travel is organized jointly, experiences are shared in meetings. Shared rituals allow for the joint and continuous construction of the group and local space. Meanwhile, the injunction to international professional and residential mobility contributes to hierarchical and intergenerational relationships within the research group, with more senior researchers, who did not experience these same conditions, integrating this norm into their supervision activities and network strategies. For truck drivers, it is life inside the cabin that has become even more important, given that their ability to choose where they transit and where they rest has become limited by time constraints. Having one's own truck is therefore particularly desirable for employees, as well as for those who are self-employed.

The changing role of mobility gives rise to adaptive strategies and circumventions, but also to resistance. Researchers figure out complex arrangements by living in a multi-local way - including as a family - in order to reconcile their mobile career and family life. This is the case of Stephan, who, in the context of his post-doctorate, makes weekly trips back and forth between Brussels and Geneva to see his wife who stayed there with their children; or again for Sylvie, who took a less qualified post in the local group in order to follow her husband who had taken a lectureship. This of course comes with structural gender inequalities, often masked by the idea that women prioritize family life over their careers. In road transport, workers' bodies need to integrate the rhythms imposed by the machine and find opportunities for autonomy within the gaps of the spatio-temporal constraints - driving, sleeping, carrying out administrative tasks with imposed deadlines, all while trying to organize, in their own way, any free time that is left over from their restrictive schedules.

In both situations, manipulating time becomes crucial when faced with the constant need to do more, and faster. For physicists, project-based funding requires creating a temporal fiction by anticipating future work: a project's budget includes rewarding work that has already been completed, laying the foundations for the next project, supporting the final stretches of a thesis, funding projects that lack backing with emergency financing. By the same token, for truckers, it is a matter of leveraging the margins left over by the tight work schedule, carrying out loading tasks during rest periods, optimizing waiting times to do admin work or rest.

For researchers, mobility constraints are an important factor in giving up academic work. In addition, when they observe other colleagues in stable positions having to devote their time mainly to management tasks and securing financing, they can no longer see what initially attracted them to the profession. Researchers therefore opt for greater socio-spatial control - the possibility of regaining the power to act upon and control their movements and where they conduct their lives. This is not a rejection of mobility, but of the uncertainties and constraints associated with mobile careers that play out in stages. In road freight transport, the disappearance of traditional meeting places (customs, freight offices, roadside restaurants) also contributes to new forms of gatherings and collective actions. During protests against "unfair" international competition and the kilometer charge in Belgium, filtered roadblocks were set up at logistics platforms (rather than at border posts), marches and truck protests were organized online, and much union work was devoted to supporting legal proceedings.

Thus, the times and spaces that constrain workers in both sectors are also the very same resources for them to organize their work and resist its demands. And this goes beyond the ideals associated with the profession - mobility, freedom, autonomy, adventure - promoted both by official and informal discourses.

4. What is your contribution to political and theoretical debates?

Meike Brodersen – The thesis demonstrates three epistemological and methodological positions: First, to understand global phenomena and systems such as international mobility, scientific markets and logistics, the research takes a situated and local starting point. From this starting point, it follows mobility through time, space and networks. This is a way of approaching seemingly global phenomena by the heuristic contribution of local, material and divergent fields. Methodologically, this allows us to carry out an ethnography of mobile and multi-site fields; at the theoretical level, it makes it possible to consider the inherent frictions in seemingly smooth, universal systems such as those of international logistics and scientific research, which promise accelerated, controlled and unhindered movements. This requires following the global connections that are woven into each field's specific environment, and the way in which these are actively constructed, renewed and negotiated. This allows us to show that what is presented as global is never total but made up of borders and limits, costly crossings of spaces and contingent connections.

Secondly, the research creates a dialogue between two fields in professional worlds that, at first sight, seem different in every way, whether in terms of levels of qualification, work content, organization or collective representation. This thematic dialogue goes beyond the mere framework of comparison, allowing us to demonstrate that these cross-sectorial dynamics affect very different sectors of work, in particular with regards to the ever-changing meaning of mobility at work.

Third, the thesis shows the relevance of adopting a spatio-temporal lens to understand these transformations. By leveraging the understanding of temporalities established in the sociology of work and the conceptualization of space in mobility studies, the thesis innovates in both disciplines all the while considering the nature of the transformations underway in the fields of study. In these mobile professions, space and time constitute the arenas where the limits and standards of work are negotiated, and it is through the space-time of work that workers organize their mobilizations and resistance.

5. What new research avenues do your conclusions open up?

Meike Brodersen – The thesis invites us to take a critical look at the mobility norms for each of the fields concerned, regarding the scientific policy and criteria for evaluating scientific projects and careers on the one hand, and regarding the supervision of working conditions and competition in road transport on the other. But it also raises more general questions concerning how autonomy and independence are promoted while salaried work is devalued, and how this is increasingly reflected in employment policies, for instance in the context of the platform economy.

Indeed, autonomy, independence and vocational commitment continue to be powerful engines to impose as many standards and practices as there are stages in precarious careers (such as in the case of post-docs), but also to justify international mobility, freelancing (the auto-entrepreneur status in France), the 'false' independence of truckers, unpaid work in the creative or academic sectors, and even the extreme outsourcing of labor and all its risks in the platform economy. The thesis shows how these autonomies, which are often very relative or even fictitious, lead workers to resist or even abandon their field of work, but then also to perform the delicate reconstruction of their own narratives and professional identities. These conclusions call for an in-depth inquiry into how mobilities control the biographies of mobile workers, by broadening the field of research to include their private lives and

extra-professional biographies, and by extending the analysis to those working on digital platforms, as well as other urban mobile professions. This will open new perspectives on how temporary spatial mobilities, professional mobilities and residential mobilities relate to each other. To study these questions, the contours of the fields and sites of the ethnographic research must be continually renewed, by also relying on digital spaces and on more participatory research methods.

Download the full thesis (in French)



Le travail de la mobilité, entre parkings et particules. Les espaces-temps du travail sous tension.

Thèse présentée par Meike BRODERSEN
en vue de l'obtention du grade académique de docteur en sociologie
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Sous la direction du Professeur Pierre LANNOY,
promoteur

Jury de thèse :

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Pierre LANNOY (Université libre de Bruxelles, Secrétaire)
Esteban MARTINEZ-GARCIA (Université libre de Bruxelles)
David JAMAR (Université de Mons)
Guillaume COURTY (Université de Lille 2)
Giulia MENSITIERI (Université IDHES-Paris Nanterre)

Notes

1 This “just-in-time” model aims to increase production efficiency and reduce the costs involved in storage. Based on the reduction of transport costs, it assumes that production costs are optimized by splitting up production sites and aligning supply chains with standards and contracts signed with suppliers and carriers – who thereby become subject to pressure regarding the content and spatio-temporal criteria of their work.

2 Transport through a given territory by a foreign carrier after international transport starting in that carrier’s country of origin.

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

Mobilization

Mobilization is the action by which individuals are called upon to gather in the public space for a concerted effort, be it to express or defend a common cause or to participate in an event. In this respect, it is a social phenomenon appertaining to mobility. This article has been written by Sylvie Landrière, Dominic Villeneuve, Vincent Kaufmann and Christophe Gay.

En savoir plus x

Residential mobility

Broadly speaking, residential mobility refers to a household's change of residence within a life basin.

En savoir plus x

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1 <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/mobilithese/2020/08/31/second-edition-new-voices-prize-13422>