

1. Events

Event Details

A familiar source of air pollution: steam trains and the smoke abatement movement in Britain (1910s-1960s)

Start date : 21 November 2024 17:30

Date de fin : 21 November 2024 19:00

Where : London

Hosted by : Institute of Historical Research

Information sources :

<https://www.history.ac.uk/events/a-familiar-source-air-pollution-steam-trains-and-smoke-abatement-movement-britain-1910s>

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Part of a positive and powerful imaginary of Western technological progress, the aesthetic plumes and swirls of smoke belched out by locomotive engines have long been a familiar sight in industrial countries such as Britain, to the point of becoming almost a natural feature of the engine and of the urban-industrial landscape. Beyond its apparent normality however, locomotive smoke appears as the result of an unequal balance of power, as it was the source of many conflicts opposing railway interests, residents, and local authorities, from the early days of steam traction until its gradual demise from ordinary service. This observation raises the question of the role played by public opinion in the technological development of railways regarding fuel and traction policies, as much as the role played by these policies in the gradual perception of railways from a local source of nuisance to a major contributor to air pollution.

Based on ongoing PhD research, the communication will focus on the perception of railway smoke in Britain in the 20th century, from the first scientific investigations on urban air pollution to the implementation of the Clean Air Act. It will show the influence of local and national smoke abatement players and the importance of public opinion in railway modernisation plans, leading to the invention and promotion of a “clean”, environmentally friendly means of transport.

Arthur Émile is a doctoral student at the Laboratory for the History of Science and Technology, EPFL, Switzerland, preparing a PhD in history of technology and the environment on “The ‘smoke locomotive’. A comparative history of air pollution by steam trains in Britain and France (1820s-1960s)”, under the co-supervision of François Jarrige (Université de Bourgogne) and Jérôme Baudry (EPFL). He is currently associated to the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Leeds Beckett University, as part of a 6-month mobility grant to carry out his research.

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.

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