

Transport history.

Methodological and bibliographical notes

Stefano Maggi

1 Transport historiography: features and sources

In the first half of the XIXth century, trains and steam boats applied mechanical energy to the means of conveyance, making it possible to win the uncertainty of transports, until then depending on the weather conditions. Therefore the security and regularity of travels were granted, as never realized before the industrial revolution. In the first years of the XXth century the speed was then exalted, thanks to the arrival of the aeroplane and the motor car.

The motor car became the symbol of the freedom of movement in the industrialized countries, but also the most important consumer product, leaving an indelible imprint in the society of the last 50 years.

In spite of its exceptional change in the last two centuries and in spite of its very great influence in the daily life of people, transport remained in the background of the debate and the historiographical researches. While other sectors, as politics or industry, were studied minutely, the events of transport were disregarded in Italy and very few local and regional analysis were produced about the mobility networks.

Transport history has elements of economic history, of social history, of business history, of historical geography, of industrial archaeology and perhaps is deprived of an its own methodology, which depends on the kind of research carried out; but surely all historians who deal with transport, need a consistent knowledge of the technics used in each period to understand the working of transport systems.

For transport historians the sources represent one of the main difficulties. They are loose, rarely well catalogued and the records are normally

dedicated to the development of only one carrier or infrastructure, so that sources almost never show the whole circulation of persons and commodities, not even in a limited area. On the contrary, transports need to be studied in their wholeness and in their relations with society, in the widest sense of the term.

The transport world is indeed very rich of events, data, suggestions, phenomena of short and long duration, but its study must be inserted in the history of society, in order to comprehend its evolution. For its nature, transport is linked to all other sectors, because it allows them to move and to have reciprocal connections.

Whereas, explaining and interpreting recent or past facts, we are used to think in a “statical way”, as if the means of conveyance don’t influence other events. For this reason we tend, sometimes unconsciously, to neglect the fact that transport was always fundamental in the progress of society, one of the most important tools of economic and social modernization.

Among the sources, must be quoted the records of the Ministry of Public Works and the Treasury, and the records preserved in the State Archives in each province, which often contain the correspondences exchanged between local and central authorities for the building of infrastructures, also showing the political pressures in the background of the many realizations. Moreover, the historical archives of Communes and Provinces are usually full of projects on this subject, giving idea of the complex studies necessary for transports. The records of enterprises are of great utility, too, when they are catalogued adequately; the records of banks present crucial information about the flows of financing; even the judiciary records have an importance, regarding the disasters due to transports and the bankruptcy of transport firms. Also the numerous pamphlets printed by technicians, politicians and local committees, today kept in most libraries, are very interesting as sources for transport history. Moreover technical reviews, which reported news of projects and buildings, and local newspapers, often very attentive to the achievements in the transport field, because it was a very warm theme for people. Finally all the travel and tourism literature, where can be found basic elements to understand the function of transport in society.

2 What kind of transport history do we need?

In the studies about transport, historiography of the single means of conveyance always remained prevalent, with a predominant position of the railways followed by the maritime navigation. The historians often forgot that the infrastructures of transport must be analyzed in an overall sight in order to understand their economic and social effects. The concentration in some sectors of transport instead of others led to a narrow vision of the movement in each territory, made it ignored the concept of “network”, and therefore caused a scarce knowledge of the traffic on the roads, of the coasting trade, of the inland navigation, of the air navigation, of the pipe transport.

At present, the need is that of history of the movement of people and goods in the space, among different places, while less interest presents the history of railways, ships, roads, motor-vehicles, aeroplanes, which give a limited view of the economic and social change. Such histories are too limited also for the recent research of environmental history, tightly linked to transports, which are very important both for the production of pollution and for the consumption of energy, and even for the modelling of the landscape.

We need, at the different geographical levels, history of transport network and mobility contained in the general history. While transport history would have to be taken into account by general historians, as it was demonstrated, with masterly skill, in the work by F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, one of the few in which transport is perfectly embodied in the narrative and interpretation of events.

In order to obtain that historians consider transport also in researches about other sectors, we need to develop transport historiography, proving that transport is very important in each historical fact, in peace and war. But we need also to provide more information and data regarding the system of mobility in each period and in each area.

About transport, the present historiography needs more detailed studies of the markets of passengers and freight, to answer some questions: why passengers and consignors of commodities chose one form of transport rather than another? What degree of competition there was? Why one prevailed or why more than one went on existing side by side? Least but

not last, which was the degree of mobility in a territory, in a period, in a society?

About the specific field of passengers, we need to learn much more about “tourism”, productive of great economic and social changes in contemporary age. In a few words, “we need history of the movement of people and things between places” (M. Robbins, *The progress of transport history*, in “The Journal of Transport History”, March 1991, p. 85).

3 The origins and developments of transport history in Europe and America

Transport history, as separate subject of study, has British origins and dates back to the second decade of the XXth century, with the two books of E.A. Pratt, *A history of inland transport and communication in England*, 1912; and W.T. Jackman, *The development of transportation in modern England*, Cambridge, 1916. Edwin Pratt was an English journalist, author of numerous other popular books about specific aspects of the means of conveyance, while William Jackman was a researcher and became professor of *Transportation* at the University of Toronto in 1931. He transferred the study of history and economy of transport in America, beginning a school on this matter.

His book of 1916 (reprinted in 1962) was devoid of predecessors and particularly detailed. For the writing out, Jackman needed almost a decade of analysis of records. In the Preface he wrote:

“It is impossible to study at first hand and from the original sources such a comprehensive subject as this without being impressed by its vital connexion with the other phases of the national evolution; and it has required much self-restraint to keep from branching out farther into a discussion of the relation of transportation to the progress of agriculture, the growth of markets, the advance of industry, the increase of wealth, and many other economic factors which have affected the welfare of different classes of the people and of the nation as a whole” (Preface, p. XXXI).

In the following years historiography about railways began to spread and transport history achieved a slow performance in Great Britain, Canada and United States, until the foundation in 1953 of “The Journal of Transport History”, editor Jack Simmons, professor at the University of Leicester, and joint editor a friend of him, Michael Robbins, official of the London Transport. With growing fortune the “Journal” succeeded in putting together the ample publishing activity of the transport history lovers – very numerous in each nation and second in quantity only to the local historians – with the research of an academic school devoted to the study of the history of transport technology, examined in its political, economic and social features.

Except for a brief interruption between 1967 and 1970 the review is still alive, become a world reference for transport history, not only in contemporary age but also in previous periods. Its presence promoted in the Anglo-American historiography other works: C.I. Savage, *An economic history of transport*, London, Hutchinson, 1959 (revised 1974); H.J. Dyos – D.H. Aldcroft, *British transport. An economic survey from the seventeenth century to the twentieth*, London, 1969 (revised 1974); P.S. Bagwell, *The transport revolution from 1770*, New York-London, 1974 (revised 1988); S.P. Ville, *Transport and the development of European economy 1750-1918*, Houndmills-Basingstoke-Hampshire, Macmillan, 1990.

The maritime history shew a tendency to stand out from the history of inland transport: in 1989 (after a first publication since 1970) “The International Journal of Maritime History” began to issue.

Another review has just issued in Spain: “Transportes Servicios y Telecomunicaciones”, regarding all the vast world of communications. To be marked out also two historiographical reviews devoted to railways: the American “Railroad History”, issued in the United States since 1921, as organ of the Railway & Locomotive Historical Society, and the French “Revue d’Histoire des Chemins de Fer”, published since 1989 as organ of the Association pour l’Histoire des Chemins de fer en France.

Some articles concerning the progress of transport history in the different countries have been published in “The Journal of Transport History”: about Great Britain, J. Butt, *Achievement and prospect. Transport history in the 1970s and 1980s*, in “The Journal of Transport History”, March 1981, pp. 1-24; M. Robbins, *The progress of transport history*, in “The

Journal of Transport History”, March 1991, pp. 74-87; about France, where transport history always received a great attention after the second world war, with a predominance of historiography about railways, followed by roads and water transport since the 1970s, M. Merger, *Transport history in France: a bibliographical review*, in “The Journal of Transport History”, September 1987, pp. 179-201; about Germany and Austria, where transport history didn't assume – until very recent times – an academic authority, remaining confined among the transport lovers, M. Robbins, *Some recent railway history in German. A review article*, in “The Journal of Transport History”, March 1988, pp. 109-117; about the Dutch case, which presents a particular relation between canals and railways, H.J. de Jong, *Dutch inland transport in the nineteenth century: a bibliographical review*, in “The Journal of Transport History”, March 1992, pp. 1-22.

Some essays about the international historiography concerning the different means of conveyance were published in the issue of the “Journal” of September 1993, 40th anniversary from the foundation. Such essays reported the results obtained and the necessity of investigations in the fields less known: T. Gourvish, *What kind of railway history did we get? Forty years of research*, pp. 111-125; D.M. Williams, *The progress of maritime history 1953-93*, pp. 126-141; T.C. Barker, *Slow progress: forty years of motoring research*, pp. 142-165; P.J. Lyth, *The history of commercial air transport: a progress report 1953-93*, pp. 166-180.

Many conferences were accomplished in the last decade about transport history, most of them regarding railway history. In England an Institute of Railway Studies was jointly created in 1995 by the National Railway Museum and the University of York, in order to realize historic research in the field of transports and particularly of railways. The Institute issues a Master of Art (MA) degree in *Railway Studies*. Information about the Institute of Railway Studies can be found at <http://www.york.ac.uk/inst-irs/>, which contains also numerous links to other institutions involved in transport history.

Finally, we can remember the work carried out for the production of international historical maps about the transport networks, A. Carreras – A. Giuntini – M. Goerke, *Towards a computerized historical Atlas of European transports and communications, 19th-20th centuries*, in *Cohordinates for historical maps*, edited by M. Goerke, Goettingen, Max Planck Institut

für Geschichte, 1994, pp. 121-132.

4 Transport History in Italy

In Italy, perhaps more than in other European countries, most contributions to transport history came from the transport lovers, such as the railway enthusiasts, and not from the academic historians. The contributions concentrated on the history of railways, urban transports, motor cars, ships and aeroplanes. These books often represent very detailed technical analysis of vehicles, sometimes they regard the local history of single infrastructures, other times they are mainly photographic books with scant historical descriptions. However, in several essays the events and the anecdotes reported are of great interest also for the historians of economy and society.

Therefore, it would be unjust to refuse to admit the value of such works, which, among other things, often remember stories whose memory would be otherwise lost. Moreover the transport lovers frequently produced fascinating and useful historical synthesis about the different means of conveyance, although deprived of the methodological characteristics and the deep reflections of a historiographical research.

Instead, the Italian historiography never dedicated a good number of studies to the transport revolution, tightly linked to the industrial revolution, which was marked by innovations and changes in the field of production, but also by improvements in the locomotion, so to allow the diffusion of the same innovations. Therefore transport history still presents many unexplored subjects in the economic and social fields and in the policy of sector.

In Italy the scanty attention was due to the lack of a national school of study in social history of technology in the contemporary age. Therefore the social history of transports and also communications never received enough emphasis. There is a scarcity of historiographical synthesis about the different means of conveyance, and a lack of studies about the transport networks at a local level, too. There are very few researches about transport enterprises, about transport workers, about the progress of public works of transport, about the relation between transport and administration, about the competition among the means of conveyance, about the effects of

transport in some important social phenomena of the XXth century, such as commuterism and tourism.

Italian transport history suffers from a lack of studies of basis and the situation is made worse by the reduced availability of transport records, due to various reasons: from the loss or destruction of papers by firms not very attentive to their own historical memory, to the dispersion of records among seats even difficult to locate, to the scarce reordering of papers kept by the public archives, often not catalogued because rarely asked by scholars.

Some short notes concerning the Italian historiography of transports were written by A. Giuntini, *Italian transport history: recent developments*, in *XIX and XX centuries transport history. Current trends and new problems*, European University Institute, Working paper HEC No. 95/2, pp. 39-41.

Only about railways a historiography enough ample is present in Italy, as reported in A. Giuntini, *Le ferrovie nella storiografia italiana*, in "Italia Contemporanea", n. 179, giugno 1990, pp. 325-332; A. Giuntini, *Per una storia delle ferrovie italiane. Spunti di ricerca e note bibliografiche*, in *La rivoluzione dei trasporti in Italia nel XIX secolo. Temi e materiali sullo sviluppo delle ferrovie tra questione nazionale e storia regionale*, a cura di G. Sabatini, L'Aquila, Amministrazione Provinciale, 1996, pp. 49-74.

Instead, the historiographical studies about the whole transport networks are very few, with the exception of some brief essays of general interpretation, as listed below. The Italian historiography about transport was started by F. Borlandi, *Il problema delle comunicazioni nel secolo XVIII nei suoi rapporti col Risorgimento Italiano*, Pavia, 1932, which considered the themes of the means of conveyance inside an important trend of the national historiography, the progress of Risorgimento. Borlandi's work remained without followers for a lot of years, until the more recent M. Di Gianfrancesco, *La rivoluzione dei trasporti in Italia nell'Età Risorgimentale. L'unificazione del mercato e la crisi del Mezzogiorno*, L'Aquila, Japadre, 1979. Some good essays, written by G. Are, B. Cori, L. Frangioni, A. Giuntini, L. Perini, G. Aliberti, were then collected in Piano generale dei trasporti. Segreteria tecnica. Progetto politica dei trasporti. Contributo alla memoria storica, *Popolazione, tecnologia, commercio, politica e sistema dei trasporti nell'Italia contemporanea*, Roma, Italtemi, 1984, a book not well known. Also a general work of economic history, in several volumes,

dedicates an ample space to the themes of transport: *Annali dell'economia italiana* founded by E. Corbino. Each of these volumes – divided for decades – has a specific chapter about transport, rich of information and suggestions, edited by the same Corbino until volum V, then by G. Benedetti, L. Cicognani, C. Mochi; the chapters about transport are completed with a bibliography collected by N. Lamarca. In the same series F. Ogliari, *Trasporti e comunicazioni*, in *Annali dell'Economia Italiana. Documentario I*, Milano, Ipsoa, 1985, pp. 431-490.

Other brief essays about transport are included in general works, sometimes regarding the Italian history, otherwise extended to Europe and America: G. Pala – M. Pala, *Lo sviluppo dei trasporti*, in *Lo sviluppo economico in Italia. Storia dell'economia italiana negli ultimi cento anni*, edited by G. Fuà, vol. III, Milano, Angeli, 1978, pp. 345-387; L. Bortolotti, *Viabilità e sistemi infrastrutturali*, in *Storia d'Italia. Annali*, vol. VIII, *Insedimenti e territorio*, edited by C. De Seta, Torino, Einaudi, 1985, pp. 289-366; M. Del Viscovo, *La rivoluzione dei trasporti*, in *La storia. I grandi problemi dal Medioevo all'età contemporanea*, edited by N. Tranfaglia e M. Firpo, vol. VI, *L'Età contemporanea, I. I quadri generali*, Torino, Utet, 1988, pp. 71-94. Such essays became more frequent in the last years, showing an increasing interest for transport: C. Pavese, *I trasporti e le comunicazioni*, in *Lo sviluppo economico moderno dalla rivoluzione industriale alla crisi energetica (1750-1973)*, edited by P.A. Toninelli, Venezia, Marsilio, 1997, pp. 301-345; G. Fumi, *Vie di comunicazione e trasporti*, in *Guida all'Italia contemporanea 1861-1997*, vol. I, *Risorse e strutture economiche*, Milano, Garzanti, 1998, pp. 89-118, useful in particular for tables, maps and graphs at the pp. 119-163; A. Giuntini, *Nascita, sviluppo e tracollo della rete infrastrutturale*, in *Storia d'Italia. Annali*, vol. XV, *L'industria*, edited by F. Amatori, D. Bigazzi, R. Giannetti e L. Segreto, Torino, Einaudi, 1999, pp. 551-616; in *Storia economica del mondo*, edited by V. Castronovo, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1998-1999, we can find three essays about transport history in the last two centuries: in the volume 3, *L'età della rivoluzione industriale*, M. Merger, *Una nuova rete di comunicazioni*, pp. 473-495; in the volume 4, *Tra espansione e recessione: dalla seconda metà dell'Ottocento agli anni Trenta*, A. Giuntini, *Il boom delle ferrovie*, pp. 21-43 and C. Pavese, *Dalla vela al vapore, dall'automobile all'aeroplano*, pp. 45-63.

Finally the recent book by S. Maggi *Politica ed economia dei trasporti*

(*secoli XIX-XX*). *Una storia della modernizzazione italiana*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2001, which faces the Italian transport history with the opportune international comparisons, offering a panoramic view of the importance of transport for the modernization of contemporary society.

Some histories of transports not historiographical have been published, too. They are sometimes rich of interesting suggestions. First of all the monumental work by F. Ogliari, *Storia dei trasporti italiani*, divided in 35 volumes, which contain copious data and images. Some interesting data also in F. Ogliari – P. Muscolino, *Centocinquant'anni di trasporti in Italia*, Milano, Socini, 1989, and the next book by the same authors, *Trasporti. Due secoli. XIX-XX*, Milano, Coop. Libreria Iulm, 1995. Moreover we can remember M. Fabre, *Storia dei trasporti terrestri*, Milano, Mursia, 1965; F. Medri, *Storia delle comunicazioni, trasporti terrestri, navigazione, aeronautica, telecomunicazioni internazionali*, Genova, 1968; *I trasporti in Italia: storia e futuro*, edited by F. Dani, Pomezia, Sarin, 1987; Ministero dei Trasporti e della Navigazione. Direzione generale programmazione organizzazione e coordinamento, *30 anni di trasporti in Italia*, Roma, Istituto poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, 1996.

About the themes of travel and means of conveyance, P. Prato – G. Trivero, *Viaggio e modernità. L'immaginario del mezzo di trasporto tra '800 e '900*, Napoli, Shakespeare & Company, 1989; and the numerous texts by A. Brilli, among which for example: *Arte del viaggiare. Il viaggio materiale dal XVI al XIX secolo*, Milano, Silvana, 1992; *Quando viaggiare era un'arte. Il romanzo del Grand Tour*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1995.

Also two regional studies are worthy of attention: G. Guderzo, *Vie e mezzi di comunicazione in Piemonte dal 1831 al 1861. I servizi di posta*, Torino, Museo nazionale del Risorgimento, 1961; E. Corda, *Ruote e rotabili 1830-1980. 150 anni di trasporti interni della Sardegna dalle diligenze alla pubblicizzazione delle autolinee*, Sassari, Chiarella, 1981.