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COST NEW Changing Cultures of Mobility in Europe

A. Background

A major challenge facing Europe is to produce balanced and sustainable solutions to the task of simultaneously making Europe more mobile and less congested whilst reducing the burden of travel on individuals and the environment. To this end, the European Commission's proposed Common Transport Policy to 2010 'places users' needs at the heart of its strategy'. But, as the Commission acknowledges, much more research is needed on transport policy and practice within the European Research Area (ERA), as well as a much more effective exchange of existing knowledge and expertise, both between nations and between researchers and other stakeholders. (Transport Research 2004: 1) This Action contributes to these aims by enhancing the European Community's capacity to understand the benefits to public-transport users of a fuller comprehension of the part played by so-called 'soft' – social and psychological – factors in influencing consumers' choices about mobility.

The importance of soft factors is increasingly recognised by policy-makers and researchers across the ERA and in many other countries. Although aspirations about when, where, how frequently and by what mode to travel, and decisions whether or not to do so are ultimately those of individuals, the attitudes and values which inform them are rooted in wider social collectivities, institutions and processes, such as families or work-places. Another way of putting this is to say that patterns of mobility are partly informed by culture, where the term 'culture' refers not specifically to works of high art but more generally to the ways in which each of us makes sense of the everyday world of other people, social institutions and material things and processes, thereby enabling us to live in it. These everyday cultures are not monolithic but divided and fractured according to familiar sociological categories, such as age, gender, ethnicity, class. (E.g. Chaney 2002) Policy-makers and researchers are thus increasingly comfortable with the idea of differentiated 'cultures of mobility': that the propensity to be mobile – as well as the ability to act upon this desire – differs between social groups. (Urry 2000) Knowledge of these differentiated cultures and propensities can help to shape policies and practices aimed at changing peoples' attitudes and choices, for instance in the direction of more socially equitable or ecologically sustainable patterns of mobility. (E.g. Doherty and Shaw 2003; Hine and Preston 2003; Mayinger 2001; Nijkamp et al 1998; Raje 2004; Vigar 2002).

Although there is a growing volume of research along these lines across the ERA, they primarily focus on individual countries and, generally speaking, only then on a small number of regional or local cases. There has been no systematic attempt to draw together the scattered knowledge and data, either to enhance the quality of further work carried out at the national level or to open up the possibility of analysing how cultures of mobility operate at the pan-European level. This Action provides the forum to facilitate both these tasks.

However, the major defect of existing research lies not so much in its geographical constraints (important though these are) as in its circumscribed temporality. Although some scholars acknowledge the importance for contemporary policy and practice of understanding long-term shifts in everyday cultural attitudes towards mobility (e.g. Vigar 2002), very few are equipped to deliver the kind of systematic longitudinal studies that are needed. By contrast, many historians, cultural geographers and other social scientists concerned with the past demonstrate that factors which shaped the ways

in which mobilities were produced and consumed historically — the social organizations, modes of governance, infrastructures, vehicles and other artefacts which constitute transport systems — can persist and continue to shape present-day aspirations, expectations and practices. It is therefore important for policy-makers to understand how and why these continuities develop, and what can cause them to break down. (Divall and Revill 2005) For instance, it is becoming increasingly clear that an understanding of inter-generational continuities and shifts within families regarding attitudes towards mobility would help to identify those aspects that might be amenable to change in the short-term and those which are more deeply embedded and thus subject to change only in the longer term. This Action provides a network through which transport researchers and policy-makers can meet with social scientists to develop the intellectual framework for a social science of mobility that is useful for policy because it is sensitive to historico-cultural factors.

This task is made manageable by the Action's focus on public transport for passengers by land. More specifically, COST NEW assists the providers of inter- and intra-urban public transport (buses and coaches, trams and trains) in developing their services in ways that not only better meet the aspirations and desires of existing users but also address those of consumers who either do not travel as much as they might or who prefer to use private means. It does this, for example, by analysing the ways in which historically governments and public-transport operators' policies have been shaped by particular cultures of mobility. It also assesses the strengths and weaknesses of attempts to incorporate cultural factors into planning, such as by including passengers (and would-be passengers) into decision-making. Where appropriate, however, to the pursuit of its principal aims in the realm of public transport by land, the Action also address how cultures of mobility influence users' aspirations and choices with regard to other modes of passenger transport.

At this stage of the development of a policy-relevant historical social science of mobility, the emphasis has to be on reviewing the existing level of understanding within the ERA and cognate countries, and creating the conditions for an intellectual synthesis that can push analysis to a pan-European level – from regional to European cultures of mobility. The COST framework is the most appropriate vehicle for this task. This Action's emphasis on soft factors means that it complements the more behavioural focus of COST 355 (Changing Behaviour Towards a More Sustainable Transport System).

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B. Objectives and benefits

The main objective of the Action is to enhance the attractiveness of land-based public passenger transport in Europe by increasing knowledge of how over the long-term everyday cultural factors influence users' choice of public provision.

The secondary objectives of the Action are:

- ❑ To develop an intellectual framework appropriate to the task of comprehending how cultural factors over the long-term shape patterns of mobility from the regional to the European level.
- ❑ To provide public authorities and public-transport providers with a better understanding of the potential for influencing modal choice through the use of cultural mechanisms such as advertising and peer-pressure.
- ❑ To assess the long-term success or failure of the social institutions, processes and techniques intended to integrate users into the planning, delivery and usage of public-transport services by land within Europe.
- ❑ To improve understanding of inter-generational shifts in attitudes towards public transport.

The benefits of the Action are:

- ❑ To policy-makers, gaining an understanding of how long-term cultural change affects the effectiveness of policies for making public transport more attractive.
- ❑ To public-transport providers, the potential to develop methods and techniques for incorporating cultural factors into the planning and delivery of services.
- ❑ To researchers, the opportunity to develop a new intellectual framework for a historical social science of mobility.