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A Political Turn: Highways and Mass Transit in American Mobility History

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HISTOIRE DES TRANSPORTS, DU TOURISME ET DU VOYAGE

GIJS MOM, GORDON PIRIE, LAURENT TISSOT (eds.)

MOBILITY IN HISTORY

THE STATE OF THE ART IN THE HISTORY OF TRANSPORT, TRAFFIC AND MOBILITY

T²M

EDITIONS ALPHIL
PRESSES UNIVERSITAIRES SUISSES

© Éditions Alphil – Presses universitaires suisses, 2009

Case postale 5

2002 Neuchâtel 2

Suisse

www.alphil.ch

www.presssesuniversitairessuisses.ch

ISBN 978-2-940235-52-0

Publié avec l'appui du Fonds national suisse de la recherche scientifique.

Photo de couverture: Cover Zig-Zag Magazine (Santiago, Chile), Vol. 4, number 150, 5th January 1908. Source: Biblioteca Nacional de Chile.

Responsable d'édition: Alain Cortat

Conception graphique et mise en page: www.nusbaumer.ch

A POLITICAL TURN: HIGHWAYS AND MASS TRANSIT IN AMERICAN MOBILITY HISTORY

Michael Fein
Johnson & Wales University

Mark Rose's *Interstate: Express Highway Politics* (1979) and Bruce Seely's *Building the American Highway System: Engineers as Policy Makers* (1987) signaled the opening of U.S. highway politics as a field for sustained scholarly investigation. In *Interstate*, Rose examined the political competition among interest groups, such as truck operators, that produced the landmark 1956 highway legislation. Seely's focus was the road engineers themselves, led by Thomas MacDonald, whose uncanny ability to present themselves as 'apolitical' experts paradoxically allowed them to dominate the highly politicized drafting of the main contours of American highway policy. Together these two texts opened a range of questions in U.S. transportation policy, and in the grinding politics through which citizens, interest groups, experts and politicians directed the development of America's transportation infrastructure.[1] Rose's and Seely's mode of analysis appeared particularly well suited to capturing the complex

[1] Mark H. Rose, *Interstate: Express Highway Politics, 1939-1989* (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1990, rev. ed. [orig. 1979]); Bruce E. Seely, *Building the American Highway System: Engineers as Policy Makers* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1987). Seely's book was part of the series, 'Technology and Urban Growth', whose editors included Mark Rose and Joel A. Tarr. On the unexplored state of the field at that time, see Bruce Seely, 'An Overview Essay: Roads in Comparative Perspective', in Gijs Mom and Laurent Tissot (eds.), *Road History: Planning, Building and Use* (Neuchâtel, Switzerland, Editions Alphil, 2007), 13-4; see also email correspondence, Mark Rose to author, 14 August 2008.

ways in which transportation systems and societies shape each other, and, since then, a wave of new highways and transit scholars has built on their insights. This development constitutes a political turn in mobility history, with recent scholarship placing politics, political actors, and political ideology front and center. In 2006, the publication of the deliberately policy-oriented and admirably wonkish text, *The Best Transportation System in the World: Railroads, Trucks, Airlines and American Public Policy in the Twentieth Century*, co-authored by Rose, Seely and Paul Barrett, indicated the durability of a political approach to American mobility history.

This trend is most visible among urban historians and historians of technology, who have sought to untangle the complex political machinations behind highways' transformation of the nation's cityscapes. In a series of special issues in the *Journal of Urban History* (1979, 1987, 1999, and 2004), Rose and Joel Tarr (whose early work was in urban-political history)[2] sewed together the fields of urban history and the history of technology with the thematic thread of politics. By 1999, Rose and Tarr noted that historians of urban mobility had found 'politics and political choice' to be the forces that defined the relationship between technology and the city.[3] According to one vital contribution to the 1979 issue, Clay McShane's 'Transforming the Use of Urban Space: A Look at the Revolution in Street Pavements, 1880-1924', technology alone cannot explain changes in paving practices: changing cultural uses of public space and municipal administration were important too.[4] McShane returned to these themes in his masterful *Down the Asphalt Path*, published in 1994. By this time, scholars of mass transit, automobiles, and city planning—most notably Barrett and Mark Foster, writing in the early 1980s—had decisively shifted historical analysis away from the technological determinism of earlier studies, revealing the multifaceted ways in which politics and urban culture mediated the adoption or rejection of competing transport technologies.[5]

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[2] Joel A. Tarr, *A Study of Boss Politics: William Lorimer of Chicago* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1971).

[3] Rose and Tarr, 'Technology, Politics and the Structuring of the City', *Journal of Urban History*, 30 (July 2004), 643-47. See also the preceding special issues in the *Journal of Urban History*, 5 (May 1979); 14 (November 1987); 25 (March 1999).

[4] Clay McShane, 'Transforming the Use of Urban Space: A Look at the Revolution in Street Pavements, 1880-1924', *Journal of Urban History*, 5 (May 1979), 279-307.

[5] Clay McShane, *Down the Asphalt Path: The Automobile and the American City* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1994); Mark S. Foster, *From Streetcar to Superhighway: American City Planners and Urban Transportation, 1900-1940* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1981); Barrett, *The Automobile and Urban Transit: The Formation of Public Policy in Chicago, 1900-1930* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1983). Foster's and Barrett's books, along with Seely's, were part of the 'Technology and Urban Growth' series. See also Charles Cheape, *Moving the Masses: Urban Public Transit in New York, Boston and Philadelphia, 1880-1912* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1980); Glenn Yago, *The Decline of Transit: Urban Transportation in German and U.S. Cities* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984); David St. Clair, *The Motorization of American Cities* (Westport, Greenwood Press, 1986); Scott L. Bottles, *Los Angeles and the Automobile: The Making of the Modern City* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987).

Over the past decade, policy analysts, urban and cultural historians, and historians of technology have situated these conflicts—and the growing reliance on cars and trucks as a form of mass transportation—in even more expansive, though still politically inflected, frameworks. David Jones combines comparative historical investigation and economic and environmental policy studies to account for the divergent histories of mass motorization and mass transit in the twentieth century, and to assess their prospects in the early twenty-first.[6] David Blanke studies America's oft-cited 'love affair' with the automobile, examining it alongside the deadly consequences of automobile accidents. His *Hell on Wheels* is both cultural and regulatory history, and it illuminates the unresolved tension between the collective risk of automobility and the promise of individual freedom.[7] Peter Norton asks what it meant to 'control' the streets in the early twentieth-century city, exploring these efforts through the competing paradigms of justice, efficiency and freedom.[8] Like Rose and Barrett's important 1999 article on the politics of transportation statistics, Norton's *Fighting Traffic* proceeds from the assumption that much is at stake in how roads and the practice of road building are defined. Early twentieth-century public officials tended to define transportation planning as a technocratic exercise best handled by engineers, establishing a powerful—and often unresponsive—road-building regime by the mid-twentieth century.[9] This regime met tremendous public resistance by the 1950s and 60s. These clashes have been documented by many scholars, most thoroughly by Raymond Mohl. Mohl's analysis of the 'freeway revolts' moves beyond the hackneyed dichotomies that pitted citizen activists against unfeeling technocrats, illuminating multiple vectors of change—in grassroots activism, race politics, urban dynamism, political discourse and leadership.[10]

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[6] David W. Jones, *Mass Motorization + Mass Transit: An American History and Policy Analysis* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2008). See also Tom McCarthy, *Auto Mania: Cars, Consumers and the Environment* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2007).

[7] David Blanke, *Hell on Wheels: The Promise and Peril of America's Car Culture* (Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 2007).

[8] Peter D. Norton, *Fighting Traffic: The Dawn of the Motor Age in the American City* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2008). On the construction and regulation of the early motorist, see also Robert Buerglener, 'Creating the American Automobile Driver, 1898-1918', Ph.D. thesis, (University of Chicago, 2006); Virginia Scharff, *Taking the Wheel: Women and the Coming of the Motor Age* (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1992); Margaret Walsh, *Making Connections: The Long-Distance Bus Industry in the USA* (Aldershot and Burlington, Ashgate, 2000).

[9] Mark Rose and Paul Barrett, 'Street Smarts: The Politics of Transportation Statistics in the American City, 1900-1990', *Journal of Urban History*, 25 (March 1999), 405-33. See also Jeffrey Brown, 'From Traffic Regulation to Limited Ways: The Effort to Build a Science of Transportation Planning', *Journal of Planning History*, 5 (2006), 3-34.

[10] The 2004 special issue of the *Journal of Urban History* (vol. 30) edited by Rose and Tarr collected several important works on freeways and freeway revolts. See especially Matthew W. Roth, 'Whittier Boulevard, Sixth Street Bridge and the Origins of Transportation Exploitation in East Los Angeles', 729-48; Zachary Schrag, 'The Freeway Fight in Washington, D.C.: The Three Sisters Bridge in Three Administrations', 648-73; Raymond Mohl, 'Stop the Road: Freeway Revolts in American Cities', 674-706. See also, Mohl, 'Ike and the Interstates: Creeping Toward Comprehensive Planning', *Journal of Planning History*, 2 (2003), 237-62; Mohl, 'The Interstates and the Cities: The U.S. Department of Transportation and the Freeway Revolt, 1966–1973', *Journal of Policy*

Recent state-centered case-studies examine not just how politics structured transportation choices, but how transportation policy influenced broader patterns of American governance. Paul Sabin's *Crude Politics* reveals how the political construction of the California oil market produced a user-financed highway system that ultimately stymied advocates of alternative energy and mass transportation programs for decades.[11] Michael Fein's *Paving the Way* reveals how small-scale policy debates, over such issues as who would pay the costs of securing rights-of-way for new highways, led New Yorkers to embrace a roads program that overwhelmed longstanding local checks on road-building authority. And as engineer-administrators consolidated their control over road-building bureaucracy, even the most adept political figures of the twentieth century stumbled in their efforts to secure a transportation system that reflected an increasingly hard-to-define public interest.[12] That such a 'balanced' system has proved elusive is demonstrated by the travails of the nation's most ambitious recent road-building initiative: Boston's Central Artery/Tunnel project, commonly known as the 'Big Dig.' Scholars of contemporary transportation politics have probed the contradictory impulses that continue to drive urban highway policy. They have found pressures to develop 'open-system' design processes and a more participatory 'bottom-up federalism', but also a tendency of project managers to limit citizen control by privatizing construction processes, obfuscating the escalating (real and opportunity) costs of multi-billion dollar projects, and making risky trade-offs between project costs and public safety.[13]

While many investigations into American mobility history turn on the political mediation of new technologies, the politicization of social groups or the institutionalization of policy regimes, other scholars have ascribed greater importance to the power of an ascendant political ideology to shape transportation initiatives. John Lauritz Larson's *Internal Improvement* elegantly argues for the significance of the republican ideal of activist national planning in setting the terms of transportation development during the decades after

History, 20 (2008), 193-226; 'Interstating Miami: Urban Expressways and the Changing American City', *Tequesta: The Journal of the Historical Association of Southern Florida*, 68 (2008). Mohl is currently at work on a book length treatment of these themes titled *The Interstate and the Cities*.

[11] Paul Sabin, *Crude Politics: The California Oil Market, 1900-1940* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005).

[12] Michael R. Fein, *Paving the Way: New York Road Building and the American State, 1880-1956* (Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 2008).

[13] Alan A. Altshuler and David Luberoff, *Mega-Projects: The Changing Politics of Urban Public Investment* (Washington, D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2003); Mark H. Rose, 'Reframing American Highway Politics, 1956-1995', *Journal of Planning History*, 2 (2003), 212-36; Rose and Bruce E. Seely, 'Getting the Interstate System Built: Road Engineers and the Implementation of Public Policy, 1955-1985', *Journal of Policy History*, 2 (1990), 23-56; Thomas Hughes, *Rescuing Prometheus* (New York, Pantheon, 1998), esp. ch. 5, 'Coping with Complexity: Central Artery/Tunnel'; Robert Jay Dilger, *American Transportation Policy* (Westport, Praeger, 2003); Michael R. Fein, 'Tunnel Vision: The 'Big Dig', Invisible Highways and the Politics of Planning', conference paper presented at the 4th International Conference on the History of Traffic, Transport and Mobility, Paris, 2006.

the nation's founding.[14] But until recently, such visionary ideals seemed out of place in twentieth-century analyses of builders and bureaucrats. In an age when power brokers and hard-headed engineers called the shots, it seemed that historians needed to be conversant in the raw exercise of power, not ideological discourse.[15] Two important texts suggest that both matter. Jason Scott Smith's *Building New Deal Liberalism* demonstrates that massive New Deal expenditures on public works (and on road building in particular) can be seen as the physical manifestation of New Dealers' larger effort to recast the liberal state around a commitment to economic growth through broad-based public investment.[16] Zachary Schrag, in *Great Society Subway*, sees evidence in the history of Washington, D.C.'s mass transit system that 'even in matters of pragmatic planning, idealism has its place.' Power politics mattered, but so did political philosophy. Lyndon Johnson's Great Society liberalism shaped the Metro's development; otherwise, asks Schrag, how do we account for Washington's embrace of a large-scale public rail system at the very height of the nation's commitment to building auto-centric freeways?[17]

Schrag demonstrates that transportation historians need not just an urban perspective, but a broader, metropolitan one. Contributors to Colin Divall and Winston Bond's collection, *Suburbanizing the Masses*, demonstrate the varied ways in which transportation technologies acted as a powerful force in shaping urban and suburban development, and as a ''junction' between politics, technology and culture.' Louise Nelson Dyble, in her superb article, 'Revolt Against Sprawl: Transportation and the Origins of the Marin County Growth-Control Regime', braids together the San Francisco freeway revolt and the emergence of Marin County as an archetypal suburb, defined primarily by racial exclusivity, lack of affordable housing, and general inaccessibility. For Dyble, the rejection of urban expressways went hand-in-hand with the politicization of a wide array of social groups (environmentalists, real estate developers, property owners, business leaders) that together, for various and often conflicting reasons, helped usher in a new transportation policy regime aimed at stemming rather

[14] John Lauritz Larson, *Internal Improvement: National Public Works and the Promise of Popular Government in the Early United States* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2001). For a more muddy boots perspective on 19th century transportation, see McShane and Tarr, *The Horse in the City: Living Machines in the 19th Century* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

[15] Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York, Knopf, 1974). For reconsiderations of the Moses legacy, see Jeffrey Brown, 'A Tale of Two Visions: Harland Bartholomew, Robert Moses, and the Development of the American Freeway', *Journal of Planning History*, 4 (2005), 3-32; Hillary Ballon and Kenneth Jackson, (eds.), *Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York* (New York, Norton, 2007); Steven Hart, *The Last Three Miles: Politics, Murder and the Construction of America's First Superhighway* (New York, New Press, 2007).

[16] Jason Scott Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[17] Zachary Schrag, *The Great Society Subway: A History of the Washington Metro* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 282-83.

than promoting suburban growth.[18] Dyble shows that transportation policy choices influenced larger political processes, social geography, and urban and suburban landscapes. Most historians studying the interplay of mobility and governance agree that these developments have hastened the fragmentation of metropolitan regions.[19]

Historians of mobility have also studied the politics of preserving, transforming and creating 'natural' environments by regulating road construction. For example, Paul Sutter's *Driven Wild* explores how Americans came to redefine 'nature' as 'scenic', and 'wilderness' as 'roadlessness.' To Sutter, just as automobile use has always been politically mediated, so too has the world we see through the windshield. Contributors to Christof Mauch and Thomas Zeller's important collection, *The World Beyond the Windshield*, explore not just the relationship between technology and the environment, but also the social and political construction of roadscapes in the United States and Europe.[20] These comparative studies continue to draw on the brand of pioneering political analysis first adopted by Rose and Seely, an analysis that has emerged as a primary means of interpreting American mobility history.

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[18] Colin Divall and Winston Bond, eds., *Suburbanizing the Masses: Public Transport and Urban Development in Historical Perspective* (Aldershot and Burlington, Ashgate, 2003), 18; Louise Nelson Dyble, 'Revolt Against Sprawl: Transportation and the Origins of the Marin County Growth-Control Regime', *Journal of Urban History*, 34 (November 2007), 38-66; Dyble, *Paying the Toll: A Political History of the Golden Gate Bridge and Highway District, 1923-1971* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

[19] Peter Siskind, 'Suburban Growth and Its Discontents: The Logic and Limits of Reform on the Postwar Northeast Corridor', in Kevin M. Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue, (eds.), *The New Suburban History* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2006), 161-82; Margaret Pugh O'Mara, 'Uncovering the City in the Suburb: Cold War Politics, Scientific Elites and High-Tech Spaces', in Kruse and Sugrue, eds., *New Suburban History*, 57-79; O'Mara, *Cities of Knowledge: Cold War Science and the Search for the Next Silicon Valley* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004); Owen Guttfruend, *Twentieth-Century Sprawl: Highways and the Reshaping of the American Landscape* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2004); Richardson Dilworth, *The Urban Origins of Suburban Autonomy* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2005).

[20] Paul Sutter, *Driven Wild: How the Fight Against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2002); Christof Mauch and Thomas Zeller, eds., *The World Beyond the Windshield: Roads and Landscapes in the United States and Europe* (Athens, Ohio University Press and Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2008). On the creation of the American roadscape, see the work of John Jakle and Keith Sculle, esp. *Motoring: The Highway Experience in America* (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2008).

Contents

Preface 7
Gijs Mom, Gordon Pirie and Laurent Tissot

I The State of the Art

Towards a paradigm shift ? A decade of transport and mobility history 13
Gijs Mom, Colin Divall and Peter Lyth

Mobility: trajectory of a concept in the social sciences 41
Vincent Kaufmann

A natural intersection: a survey of historical work on mobility and the environment 61
Tom McCarthy

The history and future of automotive fetishism 83
David Gartman

II Continents and Countries

Urban mobility without wheels: a historiographical review of pedestrianism 111
Peter Norton

A political turn: highways and mass transit in american mobility history 117
Michael Fein

Mobility in Australia: unsettling the settled 123
Georgine Clarsen

African mobility history: recent texts on past passages 129
Gordon Pirie

Knitting a nation together: three themes in canadian mobility history 137
Liz Millward

Transport in china before the industrial age: comparative research issues 141
Nanny Kim

From the Scythians to the Soviets: an evaluation of russian mobility history 149
Tracy Nichols Busch

New developments in a neglected field: transport and mobility in latin american recent historiography 159
Rodrigo Booth and Melina Piglia

Niche development or wider renaissance? Italian mobility history growth in the last decade.....167
Massimo Moraglio

National and transnational transport history: trends in recent dutch research 173
Hans Buiter

All is politics: fifty years of mobility history in Belgium.....179
Donald Weber

Swiss traffic history: a research report 187
Hans-Ulrich Schiedt

Still focussing on the railway: transport and mobility history in Austria.....193
Bernd Kreuzer

An indistinct constellation: mobility history in Greece.....201
Aristotle Tympas and Irene Anastasiadou

Bulgarian state of the art: more transport than mobility history 213
Emiliya Karaboeva

III Topics

European mobility policy: a topic to be discovered 221
Christian Henrich-Franke

Mobilizing race, racializing mobility: writing race into mobility studies 229
Cotten Seiler

Gender and mobility: historicizing the terms 235
Georgine Clarsen

Public transport: at the crossroads of urban history and the history of mobility 243
Arnaud Passalacqua

Production versus mobility? new perspectives for an old dilemma 247
Valentina Fava

Notes on contributors 253

For decades scholars in diverse fields have examined problems in the history of mobility. Their diversity was their strength but also their limitation, as disciplinary boundaries impeded the exchange of ideas that lets scholarship flourish. Since 2003 the International Association for the History of Traffic, Transport and Mobility (T^2M) has served as a free-trade zone, fostering a new interdisciplinary vitality in a now-flourishing field.

Now, with the publication of its first yearbook, T^2M has surveyed these gains in the form of a comprehensive state-of-the-art review of research in the field. Here, twenty-seven scholars in the history of mobility, from sixteen countries and five continents, present synopses of recent research.

Besides reviews of research in thirteen countries, contributions also include thematic reviews relating mobility to the environment, automobile fetishism, race, gender, and other transnational themes. All in all, more than sixty scholars within and beyond T^2M cooperated in this project, making it a truly collective work.

Gijs Mom is Programme Director for Mobility History at Eindhoven University of Technology. In November 2003 he co-founded the International Association for the History of Transport, Traffic and Mobility (T^2M), of which he was nominated President (until September 2008). His most recent publications include (with Laurent Tissot) *Road History: Planning, Building and Use* (Neuchâtel, Alphil, 2007).

Gordon Pirie teaches and researches transport and travel. He has published widely on aspects of past and present railway and air transport in southern Africa. He has begun researching the history of municipal airports in South Africa. His research into roads and automobility in colonial Africa is ongoing.

Laurent Tissot is professor of contemporary history at the University of Neuchâtel. He is currently dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Human Sciences. His main fields of research are: business history, tourism and transport history. His last publications: 'Le tourisme.' Special issue of *Entreprises et histoire* (Paris, 2007).

ISBN : 978-2-940235-52-0

9 782940 235520

49 CHF – 33 € – 54 $