

Epilogue

Colin Divall, Julian Hine, Colin Pooley

Collectively, the essays presented in this volume present a powerful argument for the role of a historical perspective in the development of transport policies. They have covered a wide range of transport modes, issues and time periods and we do not feel that they need further elaboration in a lengthy conclusion. However we do offer some very brief thoughts about possible future research directions and transport-related planning issues where a historical understanding could be of value. With the exception of Chapter 1 all the contributions to this volume have been on the UK. Despite the impressive efforts of north American (Rose et al. 2006) and Dutch scholars in particular, a fuller assessment of how a range of other countries have (or have not) incorporated an historical perspective into their transport policies awaits further research, and would almost certainly require a large multi-disciplinary and international research project. This would certainly be a worthwhile endeavour as it could, for instance, be used to explore the extent to which different paths of transport development have led to either convergent or divergent policies today.

One factor that is implicit in several of the essays in this volume is that of scale. This is something that often seems to be neglected when policies (as in transport) are predominantly determined by central government decisions. The issue of scale can be viewed from a variety of perspectives. At a global scale, and following from the comments above, it is clearly of value to undertake comparative cross-country analyses. Rather than emphasising the aspects of British transport histories that are perceived as distinctive, it may be of more value to identify similarities with other countries and to learn from their experiences. This could be true across all transport modes ranging, for instance, from high-speed rail to the spread of e-bikes. A similar comment applies at the meso-level of transnational groupings such as the European Union, where attempts to develop and apply a common approach to

transport and mobility policies across several nation-states have so far received little attention from historians. (Henrich-Franke 2010) Factors of scale are equally important at the national level. Policies developed in Westminster, and constructed primarily with a London-centred view of the country, may not be equally appropriate in all parts of the United Kingdom. Histories are always both temporally and spatially specific, and what works in one location may not work in another. This argument can be disaggregated and advanced at many levels. For instance, a London (and by association English) perspective on transport policy may not be perceived to be so applicable in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. But, a metropolitan (and by association southern) perspective may also be viewed as equally inappropriate in northern cities such as Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds or Newcastle. Within regions the same arguments apply. Urban and rural transport demands and priorities are clearly very different, as are the needs (and constraints) affecting small and large urban settlements. Even within one urban area there is a need to be aware of the significance of scale. As is emphasised in Chapter 2 local communities develop particular characteristics and may develop their own strategies and practices for enabling daily mobility. The way this works in one community may be very different from another, even within the same urban area. We suggest that the role of differential historical experiences across Britain (and elsewhere) is a topic that would repay further investigation.

At the time of writing (May 2015) it seems that some quite significant political shifts are taking place in the UK, with potential impacts on future transport policies. The extent to which change will actually occur, of course, remains to be seen. Although many aspects of transport policy in Scotland have been devolved since 1998 (Scottish Parliament website), the emergence of a strong Scottish Nationalist Party, not only in Scotland but also at Westminster, means that in the future transport policies within Scotland may become increasingly differentiated from those in England. At the same time calls for greater regional

devolution within England have gathered pace, and if current plans to devolve many powers from Westminster to the large city regions come to fruition then it is likely that we shall see the development of more locally focused transport policies, designed to suit the needs of the city in which they operate. Manchester is the first English city likely to be given such powers, which include control of transport as well as public health, policing, housing and planning. (Wintour 2015) Reorganisation of local government, and the shifting of responsibilities between different layers of administrative authority, is of course not new; but it would seem that the UK is entering a new phase of administrative reorganisation with the potential for substantial devolution of powers from Westminster. We suggest that, in doing so, it is also important to be cognisant of the history of previous reorganisations, especially the impacts of unintended consequences of change. It is striking, for example, that despite Vigar's (2002) pioneering efforts to trace the tangled relationship between central-government and local-authority transport policy since the Second World War we have no systematic history of the Whitehall department that was ostensibly a central player in such endeavours. Perhaps the very lack of an official history of the Department for Transport reflects the widely held perception that ever since its founding in 1919 as the Ministry of Transport the department has played second fiddle to other, more powerful forces within Whitehall and government. Transport is expensive (although arguably not as expensive as it ought to be given the uncoded environmental and social consequences of 'excessive' mobility) and so it is not surprising to find the guiding hand of the Treasury behind many aspects of transport policy in the UK.

In organising the workshops from which most of the essays in this volume originate we have been keen to also explore how transport histories can inform debates around contemporary mobility; yet it is also clear that ideas and notions of mobility practices from the past may also be useful in seeking to understand possible future travel behaviours. As

policies seek to encourage less carbon intensive modes of transport and for that matter more collective public modes of transport it is possible that we can learn from previous generations' documented travel experiences to develop insights into patterns of provision and how these have shaped attitudes towards personal mobility, accessibility to job opportunities and goods and services. In a relatively short period of 60 years personal mobility and lifestyle has been dramatically reshaped by increasing access to the motor car. In 1952 59 per cent of passenger kilometres in the UK were undertaken by public transport (rail and bus/coach) while by 2013 this had declined to 14 per cent, compared to a just over a three-fold increase, to 83 per cent, in passenger kilometres travelled by car over the same period. (Department for Transport 2014) This has impacted on decisions where we choose to live, shop and undertake leisure activities and also on how daily life is undertaken. Because of the car we are no longer wedded to the idea of comprehensive proximity to public networks, despite being increasingly encouraged to use public transport for the journey to work. It is not beyond us to contemplate our own future mobility in light of the growing need to reduce the amount of carbon used in transport systems and also – at least in the long-term – rising fuel prices: but at the same time it also requires us to rethink how we use our own neighbourhoods and facilities given these pressures and the growing impact of ICT.

At their most basic almost all transport policies intend to facilitate the easy movement of people from one location to another. In doing so they must balance the competing demands of cost, speed, comfort, accessibility, safety, environmental impact and customer satisfaction. In this volume we have sought to cover at least some of these issues ranging from those concerned with social and environmental justice to the marketing of different modes to the travelling public. There are many other angles that could be covered, and we hope that these essays will help to stimulate further research and interactions between historians and policy makers.

References

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