



Viewpoint

Transport geography should follow the freight

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In recent decades transport geography has been transformed by a topical emphasis towards passengers, which I perceive somewhat as a bias. The modes and terminals that support passengers have consequently received the bulk of the attention and parsing the topics presented at conferences such as the AAG confirms this view. Freight transportation has a reputation of being “uninteresting”, probably because it concerns inanimate objects. For a contrarian, it is always a good idea not to follow the crowds and identify opportunities that are looked over. In such a context, freight appears as the underdog of transport geography in contradiction to its fundamental importance. Large volumes of containers are handled by maritime and rail transport systems, billions of barrels of oil flow through pipelines and supertankers, millions of parcels are handled on a daily basis, a staggering array of parts and finished products ranging from shoes to plasma televisions are shipped through distribution centers, all of this barely noticed. It is as if ports, rail yards and distribution centers were invisible. Trucks are only noticed when linked with congestion problems, as if they have no other role than move around and impair commuters in their journeys. In spite of this under-representation, it can be argued that freight transportation is a field of investigation that may have a richer geography than passengers.

The mobility of passengers and freight has very different spatial dynamics. While the intensity of passenger transportation, in terms of the share of total passengers–km, is dominantly focused on a rather short distance range, freight transportation includes a wide range of geographical perspectives. The majority of passenger movements are related to commuting, shopping and recreation. These movements are bound by the time constraints of individuals who are unwilling to spend more than one hour per day moving. It is only when passenger movements are less bound to time constraints, such as for business or tourism, that their geographical range can be extended. Unlike passengers, freight has a lesser time constraint, although the emergence of logis-

tics has placed time more at the forefront in freight distribution. This implies that the intensity of freight movements has a much more significant variety of geographical conditions. While waste disposal and local distribution (supplying stores with goods, mainly groceries and mass retailing) have a limited range, it is at the level of commodity chains (agriculture, manufacturing) that the highest intensity and complexity is observed in freight distribution. The substantial amount for goods being traded at the international level, including energy and raw materials, also matters. In a global economy, the majority of passenger movements are still bound by a distance/time ratio, but freight movements are more a function of comparative advantages in production. Thus, freight appears to be more flexible than passengers in terms of modes, origins, destinations and intermediate locations, a trend underlined by logistics.

From a socio-political perspective transport geography has somewhat become a socialist endeavor where mobility is professed as a right to be guaranteed by the welfare state. Differences in accessibility, whatever the scale they concern, are perceived as an injustice to which have been added problematic age, gender and ethnic issues. People with less mobility have been portrayed as victims. Workers of the world should unite against the oppression of the lack of accessibility and massive subsidies should be provided. Decades of introspection has made us believe that public transit is preferable to the private car, while millions of people have made the exact opposite choice and many more would if they could afford it. Many transport geographers have implicitly conveyed a preference for public transit; almost every investigation in urban transportation and suburbanization does. I have no contention that large tracts of suburbia are unsustainable and that public transit should play a greater role in urban transportation, but suburbia and the automobile are an expression of the triumph of private property. I doubt it will go further on than the current stage of America’s “McMansions”.¹ However, people should

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¹ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/McMansion>.

simply assume the costs linked with their locational decisions.

The concept of sustainability has further placed mobility beyond much rationale, well within the realm of politics and ideology. In my opinion, socializing mobility undermines the sustainability of our economy. While I cannot clearly tell what sustainability is, I can venture to assess what it is not. An unsustainable system eventually goes bankrupt. So, who's likely to go bankrupt first? While every public transit system in the world is running deep in the red (with very few exceptions) in their plight against spatial inequity through socialized mobility, profitable transport sectors, all of them related to freight, go fairly unnoticed. Nonetheless, it has commonly been argued that the transport market is distorted by the – free – provision of road transport infrastructures, which tend to benefit the automobile since motorists do not pay for the full costs of driving. This distortion is also prevalent, and possibly more acute, in public transit systems since the users are also not assuming the full costs of their mobility. Unnoticed by many, the distortion applies more extensively for freight transportation. For instance, while rail companies in North America must provide for all their capital costs, from their fleet to their rail lines, trucking companies do not directly account for the provision and maintenance of road infrastructures. Higher energy prices, congestion and an ongoing privatization of road transport infrastructures are likely to mitigate this distortion. A comparison of the stock market performance of passengers and freight transport companies is quite revealing. While a portfolio composed of major passenger transportation companies, mainly car manufacturers,² would have suffered a loss of 55.2% between 2000 and 2006, a portfolio composed of major freight transport companies³ achieved a resounding 246.8% valuation during the same time period.

There is also a serious reconsideration of the role of governments and public policy under way. While all eyes are on terrorism as a security threat, a fairly predictable natural climatic phenomenon (e.g. Hurricane Katrina) triggered one of the most incompetent emergency responses in American history. Actually, government agencies behaved exactly how they were supposed to, not knowing what the other hand was doing and impairing one another (Rockwell, 2005). Worse, many private initiatives which would have actually done something timely and relevant were sidetracked because the state (FEMA) did not want its perceived jurisdiction as “caretaker” of the masses stepped over. Well before landfall, corporations such as Wal-Mart and Home Depot, were relocating critical supplies such as water, generators, lumber and batteries to the region. However, in some cases deliveries were impaired, shipments were turned back or directed to the wrong destination, not because of the forces of nature,

but because of a confused FEMA unable to react coherently (Westley, 2005). Nevertheless, corporations turned out to be far more effective than government agencies, namely because of their command of logistics. While private enterprises with excellent managerial and freight distribution capabilities were able to respond and provide freight distribution in distressed areas, bureaucratic agencies stumbled under their own mass and red tape. The welfare state and central planners have clearly showed us the consequences of removing the flexibility of our society and communities to adapt to changes and disruptions. Mobility should thus be seen as a business. It is jointly a product and a service offered at great effort, much too important to be left in the hands of governments.

Central planning does not work effectively as a means to allocate scarce resources and often makes matters worse. It disconnects those involved from the clear signals a market often sends. Central planning is actually a strong force supporting unsustainable practices by allowing them to endure much longer than possible. Such a lesson should be looked upon carefully by transport geographers. The transport systems we are investigating are too complex to have their behavior accurately predicted, even less controlled, particularly in a global economy. The belief that we can effectively plan and anticipate outcomes is a pitfall. Governments have a long history of resources misallocation and assume little accountability for their mistakes through theatrical blaming games. If as a community we replicate this behavior and train transport professionals to become central planners (professional misallocators), we are doing ourselves a significant disservice. With this in mind, the solid conceptual and methodological background of transport geographers would be able to provide good guesses about how a situation may unfold. As unusual as it may sound, we should move away from a plan and forecast perspective towards a listen and predict approach. Price signals should be treated as facts and policy statements mostly as confusing noise. Although policies can significantly impact on transportation investments and operations, the various levels of governance create a situation which is confusing at best and commonly counterproductive. Most policy outcomes are the product of unintended consequences. Paradoxically, and not surprisingly, the most successful transport policies are actually those removing and restraining the role of governments in the transport sector (e.g. Airline Deregulation Act, the Staggers Act, the Motor Carrier Act and the Ocean Shipping Act in the North American setting). While it appears that a change in economic philosophy has been under way for many decades, exemplified by deregulation, this trend is in contradiction with the ever growing size of governments.

This said, the resurgence of freight related topics in transport geography requires a new focus. A whole generation of transport geographers has been trained to see freight as a marginal component. Even if containers do not vote, they certainly show where the real wealth is and the inherent redistribution of production taking place in

² General Motor, Delta Airlines, Toyota Motor Corp and Ford Motor.

³ BNSF, Federal Express, J.B. Hunt and Maersk.

the global economy. For instance, Pacific Asian container ports handled close to 70% of the global container traffic, while American airports handled about 60% of the global passenger traffic. There is a clear disconnect between the geography of passengers and freight transportation. As it stands today, the freight subfield has endured in geography mainly through maritime and air transport. While the field of air transport has developed a solid background in the United States particularly because passenger issues could be investigated as well, maritime transportation, the most important transport mode in the global economy, has been marginalized. Even rail freight, which is likely to be one of the most important land transport modes in the coming energy crunch, has virtually disappeared from our radar screen.

In addition to the topical inadequacies I just discussed, there are also inadequacies of scale. Globalization has somewhat caught transport geographers off guard to deal with an entirely new class of transport problems to which the commuting-focused, transit-obsessed and passenger-biased crowd is ill-prepared to address. Even at the urban level the tremendous potential of urban logistics has been largely ignored by transport geographers. This is well

underlined by the fact that the current research in urban logistics is almost entirely the object of European and East Asian (Japanese) scholars. Economic geographers are well ahead of us in this matter mainly with their deep understanding of the geography of production, but with the field of logistics and supply chains, transport geographers are starting to catch up. The current setting is thus rife with opportunities to consider freight transportation as a fascinating and rewarding research venue. It is my expectation that transport geography will evolve to address the wide variety of freight transport issues. Should freight be brought back as a focus because of unintended consequences where transport geographers react to a new reality, or should we listen to the rather clear signals that serious challenges are ahead of us and that freight matters?

References

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