

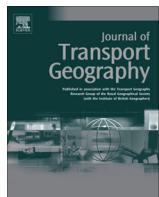


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Book review

Institutional barriers to sustainable transport, C. Curtis, N. Low. Ashgate, Farnham, Surrey (2012). £55.00, ISBN: 978-0-7546-7692-8

After approximately one-hundred years focusing on private cars, we finally started to witness important changes in transportation planning approaches in several parts of the world in the first decade of the 21st century. The challenge now seems to be how to move from the traditional transportation planning to mobility planning while focusing on sustainable patterns of development. This is not just a matter of technical competence, but it also requires building a new path within and across institutions, organizations and the society as a whole, as shown by Carey Curtis and Nicholas Low in the book *Institutional barriers to sustainable transport*.

Based on the cases of three important cities in Australia (Melbourne, Sydney and Perth), the authors investigate how institutional barriers can prevent the development of a new vision compatible with the term 'sustainable'. The core of the analysis is the concept of 'discourse network', used to explain the interconnectedness of ideas, decision-makers and their mental models of reality. The authors believe that discourse networks play a key role in the paradigm change required by sustainable development, therefore they have built the central hypothesis of the study around the concept.

Curtis and Low organized the research reported in the book in four parts. First, they analyzed the policy discourse of State and federal documents produced during approximately fifty years in the second half of the twentieth century. In this part of the study, which was conducted for road infrastructure and public transport in each of the Australian cities selected, they used content analysis. The second part focused on three case studies of infrastructure projects, one in each city. The authors carefully examined the arguments and the logical coherence of the environmental impact statements and other planning reports of these major road building projects. In the third part of the investigation, the focus was on institutions, including their rules and procedures. They finished the study by conducting interviews with a few individuals, including some who exerted a key influence over decisions on road infrastructure and public transport.

Regarding the structure of the book, immediately after the introduction the authors provide a brief review of sustainable transport challenges. Chapter 3 contains a practical explanation of the meaning of the 'path dependence' theory for transport planning. The concept of institutional path dependence, which is the empirical focus of the book, is also introduced in the same chapter. According to the authors, this concept is based on two elements: the organizational power of the agencies that make transport policies and the discourse that defines the transport problem for policy makers. In chapter 4 the text describes how Australia is placed in the international context in terms of urban geography and political constitution. The trajectory of development of the Australian

transport planning is also discussed, with particular emphasis on the role of the federal government and how federal funding and policies have shaped infrastructure at the State level.

Chapters 5 and 6 examine the impact of the historical development of transport planning organizations on transport and infrastructure policies. In chapter 5 the development of the road planning agencies is analyzed, whereas chapter 6 focuses on the history of public transport organizations. Differently from the previous chapters, chapter 7 examines the impact the different organizational sectors have had on policies and plans, for both transport and land use.

From chapters 8 through 11 the authors adopt a different level of empirical research, looking at the discursive aspect of path dependence. At first, they map transport policy storylines in the three cities and examine the way they support decision making for major road infrastructure projects. In chapter 9, they investigate the discourse of public transport based on documents produced by the public transport agencies. Once again, the research strategy adopted was the examination of the discourse through storyline analysis. The same analytical tool was used in chapter 10 to examine the way in which different stakeholder groups have engaged in the transport policy discourse. The comparison between pro-roads groups and pro-public transport/anti-roads groups in each city shows the strength of the pro-roads groups.

Regarding the final part of the analysis described in chapter 11, in which interviews with individuals who had worked or still work on transport policy documents and/or in transport policy-making positions are discussed, the outcomes are very interesting. It must have been very difficult to select a group of individuals with the qualifications required for the investigation, which totally justifies the fact highlighted by the authors that the group of respondents was not a statistically significant representative sample. Even though, Curtis and Low apparently managed to get a reasonable representation from those who had influence over roads policy and public transport policy.

In summary, all steps of the investigation produced interesting results. However, the approaches used can be seen, in certain aspects, as even more important than the results themselves. This can be explained by the small number of cities investigated and the fact that they are all in the same country, therefore subject to similar institutional structures, arrangements or constraints. Two interpretations can be derived from this fact. On the one hand, it can be seen as a limitation of the study. On the other hand, it may work as a motivator to expand the investigation into different cities of different countries. This is an essential step to widen the knowledge basis required to better understand the barriers, motivations and actions needed to reach sustainable mobility in practice.

A point highlighted in the concluding remarks of the book is the fact that planners must be open to the use of new analytical tools and approaches to replace the traditional 'predict and provide' strategies. Visioning and backcasting are among the suggested

alternatives, which can play an important role in bringing communities into the planning process. Although the book does not elaborate on that, it provides elements to support the process in practice. More importantly, it clearly shows that changes will not occur at once, therefore planners must be aware that some actions will not produce immediate or even anticipated results. Even worse, eventually it may seem that they are producing undesirable changes or movements in the wrong direction. This is all part of a long-term process. Finally, I do believe that the book is a welcome contribution to the field and shall be an important reference for planners, policy formulators and decision-makers (including politicians!), and also students.

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