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Moving Towards Transition: Commoning Mobility for a Low-Carbon

Future. Peter Adey, Tim Cresswell, Jane Yeonjae Lee, Anna Nikolaeva, André Nóvoa, and Cristina Temenos, eds. Just Sustainabilities Series. London: Zed Books, 2022. 193 pp., bibliography, index. £85.00 cloth (ISBN 9781786998965), £28.99 paper (ISBN 9781786998972); £76.50 eBook (ISBN 9781786998996).

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This book on transitions towards low-carbon mobility is a landmark publication within urban and transportation geography because it presents a novel and comprehensive social science perspective on the policy issues at stake, where scholarship on transportation policies remains dominated by applied engineering- and economics-inspired analyses. The central concept of ‘mobility transitions’ is defined as a transition towards a world in which mobility entails eliminated fossil fuel use, greenhouse gas emissions and reduced dependency on the automobile. The six collaborating authors are associated with the ‘new mobilities paradigm’ at the intersection of geography and sociology: with this book, they seek to stake out their position regarding how we should think about mobility transitions, *contra* the popular multi-level perspective (MLP) on socio-technical transitions (Geels, 2012). Chapters 2 and 3 are devoted to setting the theoretical scene. The MLP and current policymaking is characterized as excessively focused on technological solutions in thinking about low-carbon transport, ignoring questions of power and social justice – well-worn, but valid, critiques. Peter Adey and colleagues argue that mobility theory provides a better perspective “decentering... technologies of transport in thinking about transition in favor of a fuller social notion of mobility as a combination of movement, meaning and practice in the context of power” (p.10). The focus of the remainder of the book is on justifying this theoretical claim regarding the strength of a mobility theory perspective with reference to empirical material – and boy, is that material extensive.

Moving Towards Transition is based on a research project that considered policies related to mobility transitions in 14 countries across the Global North, East and South,ⁱ including surveys of national government policy, over 42 local case studies and 150 interviews with

policy stakeholders.ⁱⁱ This empirical and geographical breadth is an obvious strength of the book: the many examples will be especially useful for students. Case descriptions of specific policies like public transport regulation in Portugal, road pricing in Singapore, and bike lanes in São Paulo are seamlessly woven into different chapters to illustrate the concepts being discussed. This is a very rich book.

Synthesizing these empirics in 153 pages is a deeply impressive feat – as is the perseverance of the co-authors based in multiple countries who appear to have finished the manuscript many years after the original grant (at least long enough to have had five babies born within the team!). Reading this book, I was left with a wonderful sense of joyful academic collaboration and remaining hope for ‘slow science’. The introductory and concluding chapters contain the most insightful thinking that I have read on the variable impacts of COVID-19 on the mobility of different population groups, and what we can take away from the pandemic for thinking about mobility futures – this discussion constitutes a second key strength of the book. Scholars will want to take note of the funder of the original project: *Forum Vies Mobiles*, a mobilities research platform supported by the French railway company SNCF that champions interdisciplinary work across geography, sociology, and the humanities – an important alternative to the technical focus of many transport research funders. In many ways, *Moving Towards Transition* thus serves as a model of excellent research in its project ideation, empirical ambition, and commitment to reflexive critique.

Nevertheless, despite this praise, the book does not meet its central aim: it fails to convincingly justify the assertion that mobility theory provides a stronger basis for understanding just transitions towards low-carbon mobility, relative to the MLP. The scaffolding of mobility theory is presented in chapter 3: at the core is the definition of mobility as not just involving movement from A to B, but also including cultural elements of social meaning and embodied practice (following Cresswell 2006). This conceptual ‘triad’ of movement, meaning and practice is inconsistently applied in subsequent empirical chapters. For example, the argumentation in chapter 6, regarding the pervasiveness of neoliberal governmentalities associated with individualization of responsibility for low-carbon lifestyles and importance placed on measurability of monetary and emission benefits from behavior change policies, is missing clear links to the concepts of meanings and practices: cultural analysis that typically constitutes a central value added of the mobilities perspective. Chapter 4 and 5 do not engage with mobility theory *per se*, and in chapter 7, the ‘movement, meaning,

practice' framework resurfaces only briefly (pp.132-134). The other two concepts defined as constitutive of mobility theory – power and justice – are introduced (chapter 3) primarily with reference to a critique of the MLP and work by two mobilities scholars, yet again, the specific theoretical perspective advanced by the authors is unclear. Throughout, the book is clearly *sensitive* to questions of power and justice when discussing real-life policies, yet it presents no new *theoretical* tools for thinking about these questions. Sheller's (2018) theory of mobility justice is cited as foundational inspiration but not substantively deployed or added to, for instance with reference to different dimensions of justice (distributive vs. procedural).

While the book's target scholarly audience likely extends to a range of disciplines, here I discuss its relevance to geographers, for whom the book needs a stronger theoretical basis in dissecting policymaking. This need is most evident in chapter 4 on governance, which discusses the project's international review of low-carbon mobility policies with reference to different scales and actors. While empirically interesting, the chapter simply describes how agency with respect to low-carbon transitions unfolds simultaneously on multiple 'entangled' scales, including 'soft' agenda-setting pursued by intergovernmental institutions, state actors pursuing 'top-down approaches', and non-state actors pursuing 'bottom-up' action. For geographers, these are hardly new conclusions. The descriptive approach reflects the lack of a theoretically grounded articulation of scalar relations or governance modes, which the authors could have developed through cross-fertilization of mobility theory with urban theory and environmental governance literature.

Moving Towards Transition thus fails to offer an authoritative account of the (ever changing) role of the state with respect to mobility transitions. It is a very complex role that admittedly requires lengthy discussion to unpack systematically. Yet, in this book, somewhat muddled arguments regarding state action betray theoretical 'loose ends': on the one hand, the authors call on government to enact large-scale, rapid change to engender low-carbon transitions – having shown 'what is possible' during the COVID-19 pandemic – and on the other hand, they call for decentralized participatory governance and (re)localized common ownership as contestations of austerity and central state control. It is not that these forms of agency *inevitably* exclude each other and cannot exist in parallel, yet the considerable hope placed on national governments (chapter 8) seems at odds with the rest of the book, which shows how the state is in fact complicit in carbon pollution entangled with neoliberalism, austerity politics, and militarization. The need for a more nuanced perspective is especially pertinent as

this book discusses low-carbon transitions in Global East and South countries where state power and provision differ considerably from the Global North – the policy prescriptions feel very much written with a Northern context in mind.

Having concluded that *Moving Towards Transition* does not convincingly showcase mobility theory as an incisive perspective for geographers wanting to analyze low-carbon transitions, I feel the need to ask: was it necessary for the authors to argue for the superiority of mobility theory vis-à-vis other perspectives like the MLP, in the first place? I pose this question as a scholar whose own research has drawn on both mobility theories and the MLP. The MLP is a theoretical framework that is useful for analyzing ‘the puzzle of stability and change’ with respect to low-carbon mobility transitions – why it is that we see so little system-level change in a world of so many niche-innovations – yet it is not complete nor comprehensive in addressing all dimensions of a transition. Neither is the mobility theory perspective advanced by this book, which arguably is less readily operationalizable by a range of scholars across different disciplines (i.e., those outside the mobilities paradigm) compared to the MLP. In any case, advancing research on just transitions to low-carbon mobility requires a multiplicity of frameworks for different analytical purposes.

For what purpose, then, can mobility theory provide unique and complementary value? In the book’s conclusion, the authors re-iterate the argument that beyond thinking about transport technologies, policymakers need to understand the role of socio-cultural meanings and everyday practices if we hope to achieve transitions to low-carbon mobility (pp.150-151). This point is easy to agree with if we consider the role of behavior change, for example, and has already been made by social practice theorists (e.g., Shove 2010). Yet the authors have focused on critique of the MLP and current policies, and returning to my earlier point, not actually demonstrated *how* a mobilities perspective is deployed in analyzing meanings and practices in relation to different forms of mobility discussed in the book (e.g., cycling, flying). In my view, the added value of mobilities scholarship lies in its sensitivity to mobility *cultures* and how these vary across space (e.g. Aldred and Jungnickel 2014), which remains a key research gap in current thinking on transitions. For example, my research on street space experimentation in New York City has shown that while the expansion of single interventions to city-wide programs did transform mobility infrastructures and governance arrangements over time (Smeds 2021), there are few conceptual tools available to understand how and whether the cumulative impacts of repurposing streets for ‘people rather than cars’ ultimately

succeed in disrupting car culture, i.e., contributing to cultural shifts among communities and policymakers that undermine automobility. This relation between change in mobility cultures and mobility transitions is one that mobility theory would be in a prime position to develop. Should the authors want to fulfil their ambition of setting the theoretical agenda for future research, I am thus, essentially, advocating for a different book.

The conceptually strongest parts of the book are those that do *not* rely on mobility theory (as defined in chapter 3), and here, the book does indeed offer cutting-edge tools. Chapter 5 discusses low-carbon mobility transitions from the perspective of ‘policy assemblages’, drawing on urban theory and policy mobilities literature (see Temenos and McCann 2013). This is highly valuable, as application of assemblage thinking is rare in existing literature on transport policy, and the discussion will serve as an accessible introduction for transport- and transitions-focused scholars. The chapter also makes thought-provoking arguments regarding the non-linearity of transitions: by drawing attention to the *ad hoc* nature of ‘patchwork transitions’ where low-carbon mobility policy is driven by multiple agendas (environmental, economic, etc.) and *assembled* through the practical work of different globe-trotting mobile ‘experts’ who produce and translate ‘best practices’ from different places, the authors complicate “the idea of transitions as following a linear path that starts out with a clear intention [and deliberate plan] to reduce GHG emissions” (p.149). Indeed, when we examine past real-life trajectories of policy development, it is evident that they are outcomes of temporally and geographically contingent people and processes, rather than a master plan. This is an extremely important point: policymakers and scholars need to seriously consider what the reality of ‘patchwork’ governance means for our imagined ability and current attempts to roadmap ‘transition pathways’ to achieve carbon-neutral mobility in 10-30 years’ time. Chapter 7 introduces a concept that will be generative for future research: ‘commoning’ as an emancipatory new form of democratic mobility politics that can support just transitions (Nikolaeva et al. 2018), drawing on theories from across the environmental social sciences. Most importantly, this chapter successfully pinpoints two things that simultaneously lurk in the undercurrents of contemporary debates regarding mobility politics yet lie at their very heart: scarcity and austerity, and their discursive nature (as opposed to ‘real’ in a non-constructed sense). The concepts introduced in chapter 5 and 7 – patchwork transitions, discourses of scarcity, and austerity politics – deserve to feature centrally in future social science research on transport policy, considering the uncertain future of climate politics in the post-pandemic context.

Overall, *Moving Towards Transition* marks a milestone in transport-related research for many reasons. It is the first book-length treatment of low-carbon transport policy that weaves together concepts of transitions, mobilities and social justice. For the broad target audience indicated by the choice of Zed Books as an imprint, it serves as a rich invitation to think differently about mobility futures, beyond the obsession surrounding ‘smart’ technological solutions and technocratic governance that permeates current policy-making and popular imagination. For scholars, the book performs an important function of ‘legitimizing’ alternative ways of thinking about mobility transitions, acting as a reference point for those seeking theoretical alternatives to the MLP. Indeed, it is a book that I wish had existed at the start of my own PhD research on mobility transitions. *Moving Towards Transition* should be assigned as required reading for undergraduate and postgraduate students across a range of courses and will hopefully radicalize a new generation of citizens who will be able to creatively imagine democratic and just solutions to the climate crisis.

Notes

ⁱ Brazil, Canada, China, Kazakhstan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and the UK.

ⁱⁱ Case reports are available open access at: <https://forumviesmobiles.org/en/recherches/2470/decarbonized-mobilities-poorly-initiated-transition>.

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