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# **INTRODUCTION: THE STAKES OF TRANSPORT POLICY IN SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH**

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## **Introduction**

In a mobile world, transport affects nearly everyone. Accordingly, transport policy tends to be a rather contended field in politics at all levels, from small neighbourhoods up to the European Union. The reasons for conflicting opinions include questions of sustainability (air pollution), governance (privatisation, separation of infrastructure and services), as well as development of new infrastructures (urban public transport, motorways, airports) and social inequalities (access). Still, while vast amounts of research on transport issues have been conducted not only by engineers, planners and economists, but also by social scientists such as sociologists and human geographers, transport policy surprisingly enough does not appear so far to have been of fundamental interest to political scientists in the field of policy research.

The situation is in fact quite paradoxical. Authors as varied as Manuel Castells (1996), John Urry (2000) and François Ascher (2000) insist that the nature of mobility in Western societies is increasingly central. Each in his own way shows how this trend is being accompanied by the considerable development of speed potentials made possible by transportation systems that allow users to appropriate space – systems which in the eyes of certain analysts like Zygmunt Bauman (2000) constitute powerful vectors of social change. Despite the importance of this field, public action in the area of transportation – which is the direct source of the development of the

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above-mentioned speed potentials – receives a paltry share of attention from social science researchers in spite of recurrent and heated debates.

## **Overview and guiding question of this volume**

This is the context in which this special edition of German Policy Studies aims at answering a simple question, namely the question of what is the gain of policy research for the specific needs of the field of transport policy. In this volume, we would like to cover a variety of themes on two aspects that are of interest from a policy analysis point of view, i.e. the different levels of public action on the one hand, and the different stages of the policy cycle on the other.

- First, not only the policy problems at stake, but also the politics needed to resolve them differ remarkably at the local, national and supranational levels. Thus, the contributions analyse transport policy issues at three of these levels.
- Second, the policy-making process as well as the policy implementation is relevant in terms of a practice-oriented policy analysis. The same is true for the effects of a certain policy design or a changing institutional setting. We therefore shall avoid limiting ourselves to only one perspective.

This special edition of German Policy Studies brings together five original contributions of transport policy analysts from all over Europe who cover this wide array of analytical interest as follows:

In the first contribution, Liana Giorgi and Michael Schmidt discuss the development of European transport policy in historical perspective and the challenges it faces at present. They conclude that it is rather unlikely that the liberal approach to transport will be given up in future European transport policy, yet the authors propose a paradigm shift towards the redefinition of the role of the state in transport policy.

Dirk Lehmkuhl, then, assesses the national responses to the supranational efforts of the EU, namely to the Common European Transport Policy. He does not find broad harmonization of national policies but a spectrum of transport market reforms from the British

pro-competitive disengagement of the state at the one end to Italy's refusal of reform at the other.

Also the third contribution consists of a comparison of national transport policies, but now from the angle of policy design. Christian Hirschi, Walter Schenkel and Thomas Widmer address the question of how to design a sustainable transport policy that finds acceptance with the affected population. By comparing Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, they identify the main challenge for the acceptance of a sustainable transport policy in the reconciliation of specific short-term measures with a long-term sustainable strategy.

Finally, two articles treat the stakes of transport policy at the local, i.e. urban level. Mario Gualdi and Carlo Sessa present a case study of the institutional change of Rome's transport and land-use planning policies. The authors show how institutional reform leads to significant policy learning, in the present case a new, coordinated planning approach that integrates transport and land-use planning.

Bernard Jouve, finally, asks the same question the other way around: Can there be policy innovation without such concrete, observable change? In his comparison of Geneva, Lyon, Naples, Munich and Stuttgart, he finds a strong case for the theory of path dependency in the fact that decisions once made play a crucial role in defining, or rather: limiting, the range of possible policy options for coming decisions. He concludes that political leadership should play a stronger role promoting policy innovation.

### **Three topics of specific interest**

In order to find an answer to the very broad question of departure, namely the questions of the specific contribution of policy research for the field of transport policy, we want to highlight three topics that especially affect the local, national and supranational aspects of transport policy analysis: coordination, policy design and innovation. Over and above their role in transport policy analysis, we feel that these three topics constitute an original contribution to the body of knowledge in public policy analysis.

## **Coordination**

Transport is a transversal field par excellence that touches on urban planning, economic development, environmental conservation and social equality. As a consequence, it is even more important than in other areas for transport policies to benefit from flawless intersectoral coordination to enable them to reach their objectives, irrespective of the level of analysis. Yet coordination is often lacking, either because the measures of coordination are deficient or nonexistent or because the financing of the projects is based on a segregated sector approach, which does not allow for coordination (Sager et al. 1999). The upshot of this lack of suitable coordination is that numerous transport projects do not attain their initial objectives. This is for example the case with local policies for urban transport that are intended to promote the use of means of transport other than the automobile when they are not backed by policies to control urban spread (Pharoah and Apel 1995).

Interest in this topic is obviously roused by very practical concerns, but there are deeper motivations: in allowing the effects of coordination to be measured in concrete terms (the use of means of transport, for example), the field of transportation allows coordination to be approached not only in terms of decision-making process, but also in terms of results; it then enables the process and the results to be placed in perspective to one another.

## **Policy design**

Policy design is a central part of decision-making in general (Dente 1985); in the area of transport, two elements are of greater importance than in other fields of public action:

- the institutional configuration of the policy-making authorities, which is caused on one the hand by the fact that the financing of infrastructure is almost exclusively the responsibility of the public sector, and on the other by the fact that transport is a transversal field that involves numerous areas of public action;
- the territorialisation of institutions, the importance of which is due to the fact that these are spatial policies.

With respect to the institutional configuration first of all, in the face of the difficulty of translating a political will into concrete projects

and then realising them, the crucial question is to identify the architectural types that constitute the most favourable opportunity structures to implement a transport policy at the local, national and supranational levels (Kriesi et al. 1992). The clarity of the distribution of decision-making competencies and the degree of mutual imperviousness of the political and technological spheres influence the cooperation of the partners involved. The different institutional levels involved and their respective weight in the decision-making process will affect the weighting assigned to the various policy components, and therefore affect the content of these policies. This problem is very closely linked to the legislative aspects that define a framework or the "rules of the game" that structure the opportunities to develop projects and thereby contribute to shaping them.

With respect to the territorialisation of public action, the territorial division of power works to the disadvantage of transport policies which, in order to be effective in a context of spatial rivalry, require that the territories "inhabited" by the actors and the institutional territories be congruent (Offner and Pumain 1996). This question calls for a distinction to be made between bounded and reticular territories. While territories of public action are by definition bounded, the actors – and particularly the financial actors – can use their ability to be mobile to move to the most advantageous locations by playing with these limits (higher or lower tax rates according to the country or the land, for example). The next question for transport policies, then, is that of changing from a bounded division of space to a "variable geometry" approach that would depend on the desired goals.

### **Procedural Innovation**

In the area of transport, especially when developing new infrastructure, the need to coordinate and optimise policy design generally requires new tools: procedural innovations. In contexts that are often very contentious, the decision-making processes must in fact facilitate all the partners coming to the negotiating table to develop the project together on one the hand, and on the other must involve third-party actors through dialogue. In the face of rising opposition to transport projects (infrastructure or traffic control), dialogue is often the right tool to enable the consensus surrounding

projects to be expanded and enriched, thereby optimising their chances of being realised (Jouve 2002).

In more concrete terms, some of the research work in the field of transportation has developed a field of "policy-making engineering" which suggests that, in order to be beneficial, procedural innovations must be introduced much earlier on in the process of realisation, rather than in projects already at a very advanced stage when the partners can no longer have much control. Such a participative approach however implies making choices between contradictory options rather than merely juxtaposing opinions. The quality of the procedure depends in fact to a large extent on the ability of the political authorities to organise the debate and to steer it, and to choose between different strategic options.

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Although the five contributions that comprise the body of this volume deal with these three challenges, they naturally do not cover the entire thought process. We hope that they will rouse the interest of readers in one area – that of the political analysis of transportation, which deserves to become a privileged domain of public policy analysis.

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