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From Constructed Scarcity and Mobility Austerity towards Mobility Commons?

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Vivre à l’ère de la transition mobilitaire
Chapô
We’ve got a lack of space in the city, we’ve got a lack of space on the road and we’ve got a lack of space… it’s a strange metaphor, but – a lack of space in the air…let’s say… CO2. Sustainable mobility consultant, the Netherlands
Présentation longue

By Anna Nikolaeva**[1]**

We’ve got a lack of space in the city, we’ve got a lack of space on the road and we’ve got a lack of space… it’s a strange metaphor, but – a lack of space in the air…let’s say… CO2.

Sustainable mobility consultant, the Netherlands

In the “Living in the Mobility Transition” research project our team travelled around the world to identify the drivers behind mobility transition policies, ideas animating struggles for low carbon futures as well as meanings underpinning the inertia of high-carbon mobility regimes, and to understand links between low carbon mobility policies and other societal transformations.

Scarcity has turned out to be a particularly strong driver for mobility transition policies in many national and local contexts. Scarcity of oil, finance, road space, time, clean air, and land are appealed to in a variety of settings to promote “smarter”, greener and cheaper mobilities and mobility infrastructures or are invoked as

obstacles for a radical change. In any case, rhetoric of scarcity and discourses on saving particular resources (time, money, space, oil) are ubiquitous in thinking about mobility and society in the twenty-first century.

For example, the Netherlands and Singapore both emphasize territorial scarcity as an argument for greater efficiency of urban planning. In Singapore the focus on scarcity of land since the 1960s led to land use and transport planning based on the primacy of public transportation (71% in the total modal share at the moment of fieldwork in 2015) and limiting automobility growth through a vehicle quota system and a road pricing scheme. On the one hand, these scarcity-driven measures are partly responsible for the robust public transport system and the fame of Singapore Land Transport Authority (LTA) among transport and land use planners around the world. On the other hand, these policies also contributed to the desirability of the car as an exclusive commodity.

Scarcity of land and road space has been evoked by many Dutch mobility policy experts in the interviews. Despite the reputation of a cycling country, supported by the high rates of cycling in cities, at the national level congestion is presented as "*the* mobility problem" of the country. The national programme "Optimising Use" ("Beter Benutten") puts forward policies of "mobility management" through which door-to-door travel time - a holy grail of transportation planning – can be "saved". Not massive investment into infrastructure[2] but "smart" management of existing infrastructure is seen as the solution e.g. through encouraging drivers to avoid driving in the rush hour. Instead they are given conditions or stimuli to drive in other parts of the day, work from home once in a while, use e-bikes, carpool and so forth. Here, neither environmental impact nor the rationality of driving as such is questioned: time and space on the road can be "saved" through minor tweaks across the board.

The scarcity of road space or street space in cities (this distinction already evokes questions) is the subject of struggles from São Paulo to London, from Amsterdam to Almaty. In 2015 ordinary drivers and taxi drivers in São Paulo and London protested against introducing segregated cycling lanes, arguing that this is a "theft" of scarce space. Ironically, perhaps the most popular image in the nascent genre of advocating low carbon transitions through infographics is the image that shows how much space on the road the same number of people take if they are driving, using public transportation or cycling.

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sao-paulo

"*Reduction is a theft*" *São Paulo. Photo by Andre Novoa*.

space-image1

Image from the website of Cycling Promotion Fund, Australia. For more images of this type see http://www.planetizen.com/node/68574

These and other examples illustrate that **scarcities are always constructed**, and those constructions always serve somebody's interests and they entail different courses of action. The physical space may be limited, yet whether it is seen as the lack of space for cars, for bikes, for people on bikes, for people, for things to do in the city – these interpretations make a difference for policy. More fundamentally, though, discourses on scarcity continue to shape our thinking on mobility and possibilities to envisage fairer and cleaner mobile futures.

In other words**, in mobility planning all kinds of resources are deemed scarce and have to be saved and managed (space, time, money), yet the role of mobility has not been critically reassessed.** Mobility is rationalised as a proxy for sparingly managing some valuable resources and is the only thing we cannot get enough of. None of the national policy contexts studied by the team has shown signs of serious (or, indeed, any) engagement with the idea of curbing mobility. Mobility, which at the level of national policy is more often than not understood as daily automobility of commuters and mobility of goods, is still linked to economic growth (Givoni and Banister, 2013).

So where do we head with this paradox? Are there alternative discourses, logics, solutions? Certainly. In this post I will briefly consider two strands of thinking that engage with the logics of scarcity. Staying with economic imagery (what is scarcity in thinking about mobility if not a derivative of broader tendency of looking at well-being of countries and people alike in economic terms?), I propose two terms: **mobility austerity** thinking and **mobility commons** thinking. Neither term has ever been used in policy or scholarship. Yet, there are instances of both in discourses around mobility transitions, and identifying them as such opens up new questions, affords new critiques and encourages new solutions.

Let's begin with mobility austerity. Austerity is historically known as the logics of tempered spending based on "the notion that individuals, states and societies benefit

from limiting their consumption" (Schui, 2014, p.1). In economic terms, austerity policy in Europe and the US has come to signify a set of measures aimed at cutting public spending in order to reduce government budget deficits after the financial crisis of 2008 and the Eurozone crisis. Having surveyed discourses of the UN and associated bodies on global low carbon mobility transition together with Andre Novoa, I can suggest the following analogy: there is mobility crisis, there is a mobility debt, and mobility austerity is needed (these terms are of my own making and are not used in documents). *Mobility crisis* refers to the perception that the current high-carbon mobility practices cannot continue if severe consequences are to be avoided. The notion of *mobility debt* captures the fact that too much carbon dioxide has been emitted in a regime of unrestrained automobility (the prerogative of OECD countries for the most part, until recently) and thus creating a situation when "cuts" on future mobility-related carbon emissions are to be made. The analogy of *mobility austerity* with financial austerity is productive for it highlights certain problems and paradoxes that such discourse may entail.

First, financial austerity measures are infamous for distributing the responsibility for bearing the consequences of the "debt" through "saving" on spending in ways that do not reflect adequately who was primarily responsible for creating the debt itself (Blyth, 2015). Considering the mobility debt and using IPCC data, we pointed to the differences between the mobile minorities who have enjoyed the benefits of aero- and automobility and the vast populations who never drove: "around 10% of the global population account for 80% of total motorized passenger-kilometres (p-km) with much of the world's population hardly travelling at all" (IPCC, 2014 p. 606). *Yet mobility austerity, if ever seriously undertaken, might influence everyone, including those countries, social groups and individuals whose contribution to the global amount of GHG has thus far been less significant.* A good illustration of the discursive disjunction between the origins of the crisis and the sites where austerity logics may be applied is the idea of "leapfrogging" referring to the possibility that countries, which have thus far not been locked into car-centric lifestyles, will transition to low-carbon mobility regimes skipping the stage of political carelessness about road transport emissions that characterised some of the OECD countries. In this context the guilt-free unlimited private car usage is framed as the thing of the past, even though this past, globally speaking, has only been enjoyed by a few, and perhaps, indeed, we can still speak of mobility and accessibility scarcity that millions of people still face today across the world.

Second, financial austerity policies are underpinned by “moral and political considerations” (Schui, 2014) rather than by a purely economic rationale and are underpinned by a paradox. According to Bramall (2013), “the age of austerity creates an opportunity to communicate anti-consumerist ideas, but at the same time, increased consumption is presented as the only realistic solution to economic problems” (p.10). This paradox can be explained through identifying the shift from individual consumption as a target of austerity (a very old idea) to collective or, public, consumption in the form of public expenditure on e.g. healthcare or public transport (Schui, 2014). In mobility transition discourses, it appears, often the opposite shift is taking place, supported by a neoliberal logics of responsibilisation of the individual: individuals across the world are encouraged to burn fat and save carbon, while national governments stick to policies that directly or indirectly may promote massive (auto)mobility consumption e.g. through building roads, providing economic incentives for corporate policies that stimulate car use by employees, exporting oil etc.

There are also initiatives that encourage some sort of mobility austerity approach that aims to transcend this paradox, e.g. communities such as Citta Slow or Transition towns whereby individuals unite to collectively evade the imperatives of hyper-mobility, connectivity and growth. Similarly, telework initiatives question the necessity to move in order to be productive members of community and critique the traditional logics of transport planning that views the possibility to reduce mobility as the very last option.

Here, I would like to introduce **the concept of mobility commons [i] - as a way forward in reassessing mobility not only as individual freedom and the oil in economic growth machinery but as a collective good.** Instances of such thinking are already developing across countries and mobility modes. Of course, we can talk here about bike-sharing and car-sharing, but, mobility commons thinking could be both much more than that and be even useful to criticise some forms of sharing as exclusive, drawing on the discussion on *enclosure of the commons.* For example, studies point out both car-sharing and bike-sharing schemes often reach the most affluent populations and contribute to racial, gender and class divides in mobility and accessibility (Clark&Curl, 2016; Gavin et al. 2016). However, new forms of sharing mobility are coming up, such as peer-to-peer bike-share schemes operating via online platforms and/or smart locks. While the inclusivity of these practices is again not guaranteed, they do have a potential to represent entirely

different ways of distributing access to mobility, and accessibility of opportunities in general and enabling people to be co-creating both.[3]

Others elements of **mobility commons thinking** can be found in the concept of shared space[4] or, more broadly, the aspiration to see street space as a shared space of change rather than space of war between different groups (as e.g. expressed by cycling activists interviewed by me in Kazakhstan). Coordinated forms of telework and workshifting, as our case studies in Canada and New Zealand show, could represent another way to approach access to mobility and responsibility for its impact as shared. The famous measure taken by Paris mayor to reduce air pollution through temporarily banning cars with even license plate numbers on the road and making public transportation, bike-sharing and car-sharing free hits close to mobility commons thinking, but is hardly underpinned by such thinking given it's use an emergency measure; it also has a top-down logic and may distribute access unequally (e.g. through different implications for affluent households with more than one car and those with one car only).

Finally, commons thinking implies possibilities (and perhaps even an imperative) to understand the origins of constructed scarcities, identify abundances in mobility planning that have been obscured through the work of “scarcity-generating institutions” (Hoeschele, 2010) and open up new ways of thinking about mobility, responsibility and justice.

To sum up

- We need to critically interrogate “constructed scarcities” in mobilities planning
- We can use mobility austerity concept as a tool to identify problematic distribution of responsibility for negative consequences of high-carbon mobility and existing inequalities in accessibility
- **Mobility commons concept allows us to rethink mobility through looking at collective co-creation and consumption of mobility, potentially breaking away from deeply-rooted notions of scarcity and instrumental understandings of mobility.** I will continue to develop this concept through analysing the data from Living in the Mobilities Transition project with our team as well as through new research on smart cycling and I hope to engage more scholars in this conversation.

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[1] This is a shortened version of a paper presented at the 14th Annual Conference of The International Association for the History of Transport, Traffic and Mobility (T²M), Mexico City, 27-30th October 2016. The author thanks all colleagues in the project “Living in the Mobility” – Tim Cresswell, Peter Adey, Jane Yeonjae Lee, Cristina Temenos and Andre Novoa - for sharing the research materials and feedback. Also thanks to the research group Planning for Urban Mobility and Accessibility at the University of Amsterdam for participating in the workshop on mobility and scarcity organised by the author and to Marco te Brömmelstroet for the comments.

[2] While this particular programme receives much publicity as the national approach to mobility management, the Dutch government is planning to invest 25 billion euro into building new roads till 2028.

[i] [added in 2017] I introduced the concept at the T2M conference on October 28, 2016. At that moment a number of publications interrogating mobilities using commons perspective was not yet available. In the forthcoming publication these discussions will analysed.

[3] Such innovations and their impact on mobility is one of the subjects of recently launched Smart Cycling Cities Project. I am one of the researchers who will be studying the impact of such innovations in the next four years. For more information see http://smartcyclingfutures.nl/english/

[4] This is not to uncritically embrace the concept or its applications (for criticism see e.g Imrie, 2012) but to highlight the potential of such directions of thought to de-stabilise ideas about space and mobility.

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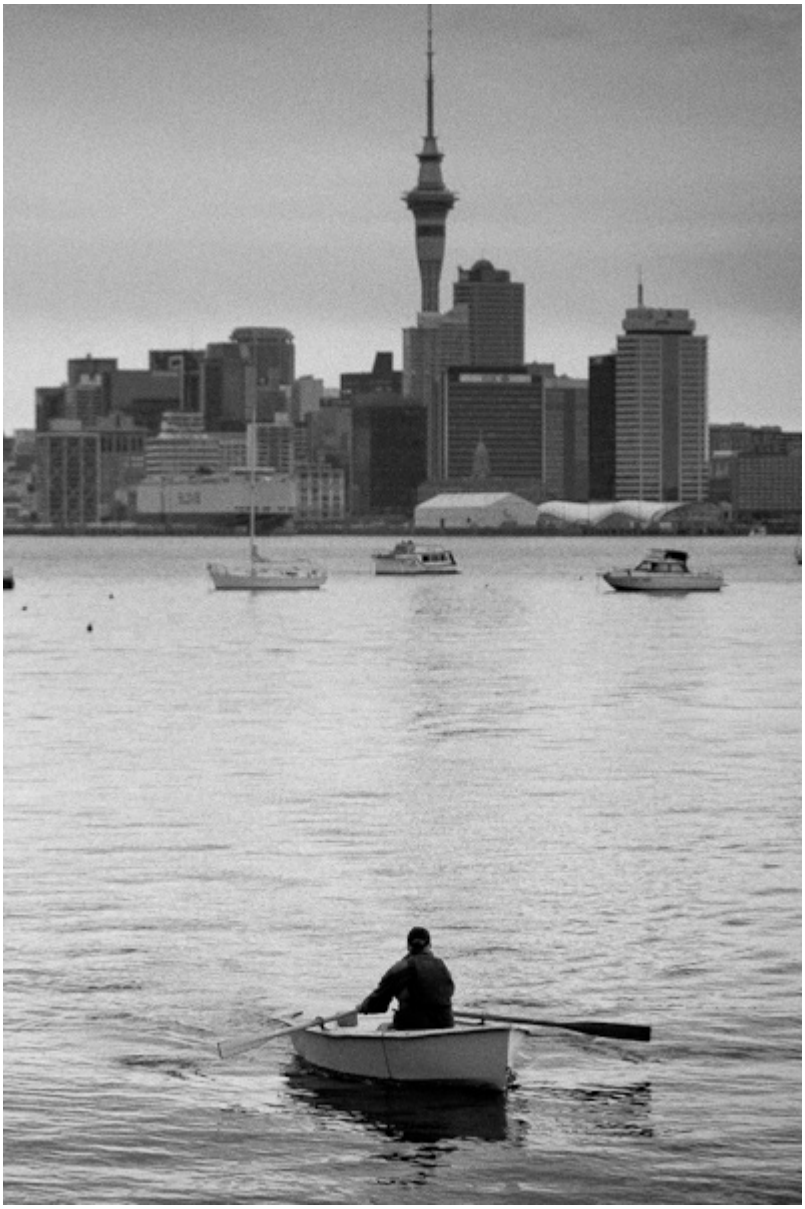

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