Future London: Sustaining the Unsustainable? A Book Review

February 2015

Vivre à l'ère de la transition mobilitaire

In November 2014 I visited the launch of the book "Sustainable London? The Future of a Global City" co-edited by Loretta Lees (University of Leicester) and Rob Imrie (Goldsmiths, University of London). One thought was repeated by most speakers: "sustainable development" discourse in London on closer examination turns out to be about "sustaining the unsustainable".

By Anna Nikolaeva

Sustainable London

In November 2014 I visited the launch of the book "Sustainable London? The Future of a Global City" co-edited by Loretta Lees (University of Leicester) and Rob Imrie (Goldsmiths, University of London). One thought was repeated by most speakers: "sustainable development" discourse in London on closer examination turns out to be about "sustaining the unsustainable". Interested in what questions about mobility transitions in London and more generally such a perspective can provoke, I purchased the book and in this short review I will summarize some of the key arguments of the collection and relate them to research on mobility transitions.

In the *Preface* Imrie and Lees notice that the collection does not provide a comprehensive review of sustainable development discourse and policies in London, but rather seeks to highlight some tensions and contradictions of current policies and projects promoted as part of the sustainable development agenda. This promise is fulfilled as the chapters critically examine the implications of sustainable development discourse in various policy fields from housing and transport to healthcare and education.

The two chapters written by the editors – the opening chapter *London's Future and Sustainable City Building* and the closing *Postscript* – present a critical examination of the politics of sustainable development in London. Lees and Imrie argue against understanding of sustainable development as post-political and consensual. They maintain that "the allocative and distributional logic of the market as the basis for securing London's socio-economic and ecological future" is anything but "post-political" (p.14), and that the presentation of sustainable development policies as naturally "good for all" is deeply problematic. Instead, a sustainable future London should be seen as an object of contestation. The chapter *Sustainable Governance and Planning in London* by Emma Street provides further discussion of the framing of sustainable development policies as post-political and brings to our attention an example of such contestation in the case of London's South Bank area.

Concerned with the social dimension of sustainability, Lees and Imrie argue that developments that are presented by policy-makers and private organizations as "sustainable" may lead to the "creation of new social inequalities and extending and deepening existing ones" (p. xv). The chapter by Lees *The Death of Sustainable Communities in London* examines exactly that problem through a study of a mixed communities policy and regeneration in London. The interview with Anna Minton featured in the book also raises a number of related critical points and the chapter by James Fournière offers an interesting take on social sustainability and the future of public space in London.

Examining the impact of the financial crisis on sustainable development policies in London, Imrie and Lees highlight two tendencies. One is the priority of the "growth agenda" above others and the related focus on welcoming international investment. The second one is the delegation of responsibility to individuals when it comes to environmental sustainability: the future of London is presented as dependent on citizens' choices and behavioural change. The latter trend towards individualising policy programmes is again anything but post-political, Imrie and Lees argue, as the negative impact on the environment resulting from state policies or corporate activities is obscured.

Sustainable development policies in London, Imrie and Lees further maintain, are based not on envisioning a fundamental change in the way the society works but on seeing problems as resolvable through the use of technology and management. This point is further elaborated in the chapter by Mike Raco *Privatisation, Managerialism and the Changing Politics of Sustainability Planning in London* . Raco demonstrates how this "output-centred approach" leads to privatization of public infrastructure, delegating responsibility to private actors in a variety of policy areas and as result prioritizing short-term deliverables over a long-term vision.

For mobility and transport researchers the chapter *Rhetoric in Transitioning to Sustainable Travel* by Robin Hickman would be of particular interest. Hickman introduces the current policy targets in respect to cutting CO_2 emissions in London and discusses why these are difficult to achieve given the current approaches to the problem. His major point of criticism is that there is too much reliance on technological solutions, such as e.g. the use of low emission vehicles and alternative fuels while a more integrated approach is needed. Such an approach would require a set of concerted measures, including more investment into public transport, providing better conditions for walking and cycling, using urban planning for mobility solutions, studying travel behaviours, promoting forms of sustainable mobility by drawing on strong evidence etc.

Barclays Cycle Hire docking station, London, 2014. Photo by the author.

The case study Hickman chooses to discuss is cycling in London. While the policy documents promise a "cycling revolution", Hickman is not very convinced that this revolution is indeed happening, pointing to the to the low quality of existing cycling infrastructure, insufficient investment into its development and a controversial approach of Transport for London (TfL) to the issue. Despite the supportive rhetoric around cycling, TfL appears to be committed to increasing or at least maintaining traffic capacity which, according to Hickman, will limit the space available for cycling, walking and public transportation.

Towards the end of the chapter Hickman offers some interesting reflections on the role of the "interventionist" state and the perceptions thereof in a transition to low carbon travel. He argues that "interventionist" approach is presented in the debate as doomed to failure and unacceptable when it comes to developing provisions for public transport, walking and cycling "while new highway investment is seen as 'critical for business and freight', 'investment for the city' and 'helping the majority or important interests' " (p. 258).

This discussion is related to the question raised in other chapters: who envisions sustainable future and how the responsibility, the costs and benefits are proposed to distributed? When applied to examining narratives on mobility transitions, this question inspires a more scrupulous examination of proposed policies that promise to benefit everyone yet might obscure some potentially contested issues. Transition to low carbon mobilities may happen in a variety of ways, yet some of them are prioritized above others, and particular deliverables may feature prominently in the debate while questions about an integrated approach towards low carbon mobility may remain unanswered. Relating the argumentation of "Sustainable London?" to research on mobility transitions, we might also find necessary a closer investigation of the role of private actors, the state and individuals in imagining future mobilities, the distribution of responsibilities, and the relationships between short-term objectives and long-term visions.

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.
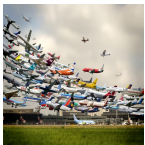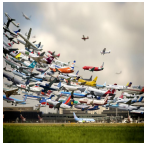
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Associated Thematics :

Policies

- [Reducing inequalities](#)
- [Ecological transition](#)
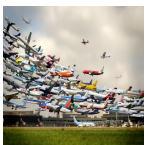- [Public transport](#)

Theories

- [Concepts](#)

Other publications

[Did Covid cause public transport to grind to a halt?](#)

Annelise Avril, David Henny

1 http://livinginthemobilitytransition.forumviesmobiles.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2015/02/IMG_1680.jpg