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TGRG page

Forthcoming special issue on state intervention in contemporary transport

For the 25 years following the oil price shocks of the mid 1970s, the political economy of the developed world was dominated by the progress of the neo-liberal movement, inspired by authors such as Friedman, Tiebout, Niskanen and Hayek. Like any other area of public policy, transport was profoundly affected by these winds of change, as the desire to reduce state involvement in the planning and delivery of public services was put into practice. State provision of transport services was reduced in favour of the market, competition restrictions were reduced or removed altogether, and the procurement and financing of infrastructure became more dependent on the private sector as governments sought to reduce their spending and debt liabilities.

But if the 1980s and 90s were dominated by the twin processes of deregulation and privatisation, then the first decade of the 21st century already seems likely to have a different leitmotiv. In many countries, a sustained retreat from neo-liberalism and the 'pure' market economics of laissez faire has occurred, as the state has steadily sought to become increasingly re-engaged in many areas of public policy. Transport is no exception to this, with governments around the world adopting more interventionist stances towards the full range of infrastructure and service provision activities.

This phenomenon has emerged for a number of reasons, many of which will be examined in depth in a forthcoming special issue of the *Journal of Transport Geography*. A collection of papers focusing on the re-engagement of the state in transport policy has been assembled to provide a counterpoint to an earlier special issue of the *Journal* published in 1998, in which Clive Charlton and Richard Gibb captured the mood of the moment with their analysis of 'transport, deregulation and privatisation'. Then, the authors observed that the processes of "deregulation and privatisation have become a central dynamic within transport systems over the past two decades", and that the "profound organisation changes involved in [these processes] are now being applied over a widening range of both national and international settings, and across a wide range of transport modes."

Central to the concerns of the earlier special issue was the geographical impacts of the apparent neo-liberal hegemony, which economic geographers and others conceptualised in terms of the 'hollowing out' of the state's powers, both from below through increasing marketisation and consumer choice at the individual level, and from above as the decline of welfarism generated new systems of international economic regulation appropriate to the era of the globalised economy.

Gibb and Charlton also noted, however, that despite the "undeniable prominence of liberalised transport systems, there is an apparent contradiction between the broad policy support for deregulation and privatisation and the continued, and even enhanced, regulatory environment affecting many transport systems." In other words, signs of 'filling in'—replacing one form of state control with another according to shifting regulatory contexts—were already in evidence. In large part, this is because progress towards neoliberal goals was always likely to be tempered by a degree of realpolitik, since all such radical policy shifts have to negotiate the pitfalls of both incrementalist structures of policy making and the vagaries of electoral democracy.

It is these processes of 'filling in', therefore, and what such moves towards new forms of state intervention in transport are likely to mean for the geography of transportation and mobility in future, that form the rationale for the forthcoming special issue. In so doing, evidence from around the world will be deployed to illustrate the diversity of roles played by the state in the contemporary context, and how these varying experiences inform our understanding of the changing geographies of transport currently being played out. It is hoped that the analysis of state re-engagement presented in the special issue will not only advance the debates ably facilitated by the work of Charlton and Gibb five years ago, but will also complement the TGRGs ongoing work into the impacts of devolution and other emerging expressions of multi-level governance of transport.

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