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Book review

Street Fight: The Politics of Mobility in San Francisco, J.M. Henderson. University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst (2013). $80.00, Hardback, $24.95, Paperback, ISBN: 978-1-55849-998-0

Transportation planners, politicians and advocates often claim that if politics was just removed from the planning process, we would get "good" policy. In his book Street Fight, Jason Henderson, Associate Professor in the Department of Geography and Environment at San Francisco State University, argues that this is nonsense. Politics are inherently part of transportation planning despite the ongoing claims that technocratic transportation planning processes are ideologically neutral. The author uses a series of case studies of confrontations over transport policies in San Francisco to illuminate the politics of mobility that underlie much of contemporary transportation planning, particularly policies that challenge automobility by making alternatives to driving more attractive while at the same time making it more difficult to own and operate cars.

Henderson focuses his analysis on three political ideologies that he sees as dominant in the politics of mobility in San Francisco: progressives, neoliberals and conservatives. The progressives argue for government interventions that promote environmental sustainability and social equity. In transportation debates, this means limiting automobility while improving other travel options, particularly for disadvantaged populations. Neoliberals, in Henderson's framework, argue that government policies should harness market forces to improve efficiency via high occupancy toll lanes, congestion pricing, and so forth. Conservatives, on the other hand, argue for government interventions that promote automobility through congestion reduction programs and plentiful cheap parking.

Street Fight begins and ends with an argument that San Francisco's transportation planners and activities have established the city as a livability leader in the US. Chapter 1 outlines the three political ideologies that the author analyses. The next six chapters present case studies. Chapter 2 focuses on a single city thoroughfare (Nineteenth Avenue) to tell how past contestations over transportation, namely freeway revolts and protests against transit proposals, produced a stalemate. Chapter 3 is an analysis of a contemporary freeway revolt over the Central Freeway. Chapter 4 describes the role political ideologies play in parking policies. Chapter 5 evaluates conflicts over bicycle infrastructure planning including the role that Level of Service metrics play in supporting automobility. Chapters 6 and 7 describe the politics of transit planning.

Henderson's analysis of residential parking conflicts is illustrative of the politics of mobility. The parking debates pit the three ideologies against each other. Progressives argue for less parking to reduce automobility (and reduce costs and improve livability), neoliberals argue for deregulating parking and letting the market arrive at the "right" price for a parking spot, and conservatives want more parking because they argue that it is necessary for families and small businesses. In practice, planners, developers, activists and neighbors all argue about parking on a project-by-project basis "reflect[ing] the fact that parking is a politically negotiated process as much as a technical one" (p. 104). The chapter provides a nice complement to Donald Shoup's (2005, updated in 2011) evidence that parking policies, often presented as precise, calculating, and rigorous, are in fact technically unsound and have numerous unintended consequences for the built environment.

Henderson includes a pair of chapters analyzing the political ideologies embedded in the debates about transit crises facing San Francisco's Municipal Railway (MUNI). Because the author focuses on conflicts that most large transit agencies face (conflicts over transit planning, financing, and labor) the discussion of the politics of transit are broadly applicable and will be of interest to many readers. Henderson adroitly reveals how the "pseudo-populist good-governance reform movement" (p. 179) appealing to complaints about rude drivers and passengers being passed at bus stops "focused animosity toward the operators' union rather than on the deeper structural problems of how public transit was funded" (p. 178). Behind this strategy was the rise of a distinctly neoliberal transit discourse in San Francisco which also embraces sales taxes for funding, advocates transit projects that benefit the central business district and real estate interests, and focuses on profitability. The dominance of neoliberal transit discourse comes at the expense of progressive programs, such as a "transit-first" policy which would have directly challenged the primacy of automobility by developing bus lanes and signal prioritization at intersections among others.

Despite the strengths of the book, Henderson's progressive, neoliberal and conservative ideologies can seem limiting at times. Although he outlines these categories in detail in the opening chapters and bases the analysis on a significant data collection effort, the three categories can, at points, seem more like straw men than actual espoused beliefs. This may stem from Henderson's choice "not to focus on personalities ... because emphasis on individual agency can divert attention from the attempt to understand the ideological context" (p. 5). As a result, the frequent claims that neoliberals, conservatives or progressives support certain plans or policies occasionally seem disconnected from actual people. While these categories may be limiting in some regards, they provide a useful framework for thinking through contentious transportation issues such as pricing on-street parking, transit strikes and pedestrian improvements.

Street Fight is an excellent contribution to the transportation geography literature. Henderson succeeds in bringing to the fore the role that ideology plays in transportation policy discussions.

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Reference

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