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Book review

Colin Divall, Julian Hine, Colin Pooley. (Eds.), Review of Transport Policy: Learning Lessons from History, Routledge. Hardback (2016). (ISBN: 9781472460059$160. Ebook ISBN:9781315545745 $57.95)

Learning lessons from history should be a fundamental plank of all policy development if only to avoid making the same mistakes again. Although on an individual level – as the editors identify – 'many everyday actions we take and behaviours that we exhibit are shaped by previous experiences' – this does not regularly translate into taking account of previous policy outcomes in the delivery of new policy. Indeed there are many examples of unintended consequences of policy. For example in the Netherlands a Key Performance Indicator (KPI) on train punctuality was the percentage of trains leaving the station on time and this led to trains leaving the station even if the signal outside the station was red: the trains left, waiting a few hundred meters from the station instead of waiting at the station where late passengers could board. A similar KPI in Sydney, Australia has led to the train timetable being slowed down to build in slack so that the service is now slower than it was 20 years ago. It is a personal belief that learning lessons from history can improve policy development and delivery leading to less unintended consequences or repetitions of errors. This book, containing ten chapters of examples of how history might inform policy is a welcome contribution to so influence the area of policy development.

After a clear introduction by the editors, the first chapter by Bert Toussaint provides the background to the unique experience provided by the Dutch ministry of water and infrastructure (the Rijkswaterstaat). As one of the largest central public agencies of the Netherlands, it has had an enduring interest in history by creating an environment where history matters – setting up an internal history unit in the 1980s, using history as a learning environment by developing learning histories (a written narrative of a critical event or process by all who are involved) and providing significant resources to share experience of history internationally to inform policy development by holding workshops – one of which on regulation which I personally attended. This chapter is indeed a remarkable example of how lessons from history can be used to do better now for the future and has been somewhat translated into evaluation processes through a more recent emphasis on process evaluation.

The remaining chapters are divided into two main categories – mobility and social justice on the one hand and marketing im/mobility on the other. These appear to be somewhat artificial distinctions. Some of the chapters relate to understanding a recent past to develop new policy. Thus in Chapter 2, Hodgson rehearses the issues around walking and how there are interactions between who can and who does walk – highlighting the differences between gender and how this needs to be recognised in transport policy. Similarly in Chapter 4, (Ahern and Hine) a present-day analysis is presented that could be used to inform policy but in the different social justice area of the transport needs of older people in the rural areas of Ireland. These two chapters show the potential that understanding of the recent past can have on policy development. Other chapters reflect more on existing policy and how lessons from history can be learnt from their implementation.

Chapter 5 (Shin) looks at how passenger representation has been organised for the railways, almost from their inception. This shows how representation has changed over time with different approaches and different outcomes. The presentation of this history shows how dynamic transport systems are and an over-reliance on official representative processes can give rise to selectivity in hearing passenger voices which in turn might cause injustice because some passengers do not have a route for voicing their concerns. This chapter shows us how history can help us understand where we are now, as opposed to where we should necessarily go next.

Chapter 3 (Pooley) aims to provide a policy framework to embed processes whereby present-day planning can learn from the past. The chapter focusses on how the car replaced the cheap alternative of the bicycle and effective public transport in the form of the tram. Using data on travel to work but more importantly qualitative data from interviews, Pooley shows how the use of the bicycle and the use of the tram were perceived as normal before the car. He argues that the perception of normal needs to be changed from car travel and towards more sustainable travel if current day urban movements are to meet social and environmental justice outcomes. Of a three staged approach to shift public and policy attitudes to more accessible to all transport patterns, Pooley correctly identifies attitudinal change as important but of course this is one of the more difficult areas to address and one in which history is informative. As an analysis of the past to posit a framework for the future, this chapter is important even though it must be accepted that whilst the affection for the car is clearly higher in the UK than in mainland Europe, the love affair with the car is stronger in the US and in Australia but with different pathways to the current day and presumably, therefore, different solutions.

In Chapter 6, Divall looks at the strategic case for the acceptance of HS2 in the UK, providing a contemporary example of how history provides ammunition to question the current policy stance and to identify what further research might be appropriate to further inform the debate. Divall characterises the HS2 as a mega project and draws on this literature to show how the HS2 strategic case is being made with 'tools' developed for less radical projects. For example, cost benefit analysis is the project evaluation tool but with megaprojects, many of the benefits and costs are not easily quantified in this efficiency framework. He postulates that the HS2 success in becoming accepted as a project has more to do with its 'symbolic importance' with the case in favour being shaped 'by a coalition of powerful actors' giving rise to the risk, identified by Eddington that 'transport policy can become the pursuit of icons'. The chapter is a well argued analysis of the issues surrounding HS2 but the relevance of the lessons from history will be better assessed in the future as we look back on this specific project.

Drink driving controls and the way in which the immediate past plays in developing policy is the context of Chapter 7. Highlighting a number of issues that affect policy, this chapter shows how having a political champion can make all the difference (or lack of one leading to

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inactivity) and the need to provide 'scientific' evidence to convince Parliament to act when popular understanding is misinformed. Interestingly, the final chapter has many synergies with this chapter since here, Lyth also looks at the recent past when looking at short haul trips by air – aided by the charter and low cost airlines - and the way these have been particularly embraced by the British public with adverse impacts on the environment and global climate change. Learning from history the chapter considers the way in which the externalities could be internalised noting that the past has shown state intervention to be necessary, usually in some form or regulation or polluter pay process and that 'sticks' work better when accompanied by 'carrots'.

Historians identify with the need to record views and experiences so as to retain a collective history. Chapter 8 (Forsdike) on marketing and the role of branding in shifting travel patterns, with case studies of Network South East and Metro (West Yorkshire), is more interesting for its insight as to the importance of retaining both corporate and individual memories in developing market approaches to transport delivery. Forsdike – a self-identified 'un-reconstituted marketer' eloquently identifies how planners concentrate "on numbers and not the people behind them" and by so doing misunderstand people's motivation and lose the opportunity to work – through marketing – on achieving change. This chapter is complemented by the next by Higginson which examines the history of the use of marketing to gain modal share in urban markets, concluding that in increasingly tough markets, knowing and targeting the customer is increasingly important.

A short review cannot really do justice to the way this book makes an interesting and diverse contribution to how history can help frame and develop policy. Each of the chapters, despite the relative UK-centric context, provides a slice of history and policy that is thought provoking. The analysis is such that history and historians are shown to have much to give in the development of policy. As it stands, this book is an important and significant contribution of the ways in which policy has or has not been informed by history that should be read by both policy-makers and historians to understand how history can be presented and how history can be used to develop and enhance policy development and practice. But more examples are still needed. And, as the editors conclude in their introduction, greater success in learning from history must be a two-way process. Policy-makers must be more open to learn from history but historians must also present their stories and their analysis in forms that policy makers can engage with.

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