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Book review

J.-P. Rodrigue, C. Comtois, B. Slack. (Eds.), The Geography of Transport Systems, 4th edition Routledge, Abingdon (2017). (440pp. £140 (hardback) £46.99 (paperback) £23.50 (ebook) ISBN 978-1138669574)

Jean-Paul Rodrigue and his colleagues are to be congratulated on the publication of this book's fourth edition. Emerging from the online project *Transport Geography on the Web* that was begun in 1997, the book has become one of the real publishing success stories of the sub-discipline. Its easy-to-follow chapter structures and formatting, combined with a wealth of diagrams, maps and tables, as well as supporting material online, make it a valuable teaching (from my own experience) and learning (from that of my students) companion. The book is these days effectively a hybrid co-authored and edited volume, including as it does contributions from six further academics who make contributions in several key areas such as air transport and logistics.

The approach from the outset is to ensure that students become acquainted with key concepts and terms, and the text is frequently broken up with bullet points, and/or significant words are highlighted in bold, to help learners identify the main things they should know as they develop their understanding of transport geography. As you might expect from a book that is put together predominantly by Rodrigue, there is good coverage of freight as well as passenger transport issues. This is important not least because, as he notes in the preface, topics such as supply chain management have often received limited coverage in the past when in reality their relevance to an increasingly globalised and integrated planet is difficult to understate. The contents are wide-ranging and include examples from all over the world (I'm looking at text about the TGV in France, an electric trolley line in Virginia, USA, and the impact on transport systems of an earthquake in Japan; maps of the Silk Road, the Straits of Malacca and the Eurasian land bridge; pictures of Antwerp Central station, the intermodal freight terminal in Hidalgo and the inside of a terminal building at Madrid Barajas airport; and diagrams illustrating various generally applicable concepts).

Still, while the pages bring concepts and ideas from around the world to light, the overall *approach* of the book remains quite North American in relation to the kind of transport geography it invites readers to engage with. Generally speaking the authors seem most comfortable occupying the domain of the 'traditional' sub-discipline: the text is about the transport systems themselves and their spatial characteristics, how these have come about, how they operate and what their impacts are, and it neglects issues of more recent scholarly interest such as the meanings and representations of mobility practices. This is not to say the authors do not make links between transport systems and the socio-economic systems they reflect and shape. It's clear from the start of the book, for example, that transport networks have developed to reflect patterns of demand; that their geography has changed to reflect advances in humanity's capacity to overcome particular physical barriers; and that they operate in the context of different political environments and are subject to the vicissitudes of unfolding geopolitical relations.

My point is that the authors don't really go beyond 'traditional' means of thinking about such things. There are parts of the text that deal with transport and society, but the main section of that name runs only to two pages. And while this contains a subsection entitled *Mobility and society*, the discussion has little to say on such things other than the briefest of introductory statements; mobility gaps as a concept is dealt with in a paragraph under the heading of *Societal transportation challenges*, a section that also includes reference to cost differences, congestion, accidents and health (there is some further discussion of these things elsewhere in the book). A subsequent section in Chapter 9 on Information and Communications Technologies (and others, for example in Chapter 4), makes only scant reference to the sizeable literature that has developed around the ways in which the increasing ubiquity of ICTs influences people's use – and will influence the future development – of future transport services. The authors remain largely silent on people's experiences on the move, or what these mean in terms of the broader transport geography endeavour, even in relation to matters like social exclusion.

This 'traditional' approach is also apparent in the second, methodological, part of the book. Rodrigue writes in the preface that this part addresses "how transportation information is used to assist transport operators to allocate their resources (investments, vehicles) or to influence public policy. This includes a wide array of methods ranging from qualitative to quantitative. Since transport is a field of application, the use of methodologies is particularly relevant, as they relate to real-world issues" (p. xiv). Indeed. But in the methodological part of the book, the authors pass up the opportunity of elaborating on any qualitative means of investigation. Students will learn about graph theory, GIS, accessibility (from the point of view of network connectivity, and geographic and potential accessibility), network data models, technical and economic performance indicators, the gini coefficient, the gravity model and market area analysis. Nowhere will they learn about interviews, ethnography, documentary analysis or visual methods.

Concluding their volume, Rodrigue et al. note that "Transport geography has played a relatively small role in the field of transport studies, a field that has been dominated by engineers and economists" (p. 399). In this sense it is understandable that their focus in the book has been on explaining and understanding the transport systems themselves, rather than the meanings and experiences of those who use them: engineers and economists aren't known for relying especially heavily on ethnographies. At the same time, the authors make the point that "transport studies have become a multidisciplinary field of application" and that transport geography "thus has opportunities to contribute to transport studies, transport planning and transport operations, in part because of the breadth of the approach and training" (p.399). Absolutely it does (and far more widely than transport studies, planning and operations, I'd argue). But it's also the case that transport geography students reading and engaging with Rodrigue et al.'s volume will not be exposed to all that transport geography has to offer in relation to this breadth of approach and training.

I'd very highly recommend this book because what it does, it does

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extremely well. Equally, students might also want to read it alongside (parts of) other volumes – Adey et al.'s (2014) *Handbook of Mobilities*, for example – if they are better to appreciate transport geography's true multidisciplinary span and potential.

References

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