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Book review

Spaces of Congestion and Traffic, by D. Rooney, 2019. London: Taylor and Francis.

In many roads in London, traffic has never moved faster than in the age of horse. *Spaces of Congestion and Traffic* examines the solutions that have been proposed over the years to solve London's congestion problem and the reasons to solve it. The problem is linked to geography. In fact, many solutions tried to rebuild London's "*muddle of streets*" (p.184) or superimpose a grid onto them. But the problem is also related to the technological, economic, political, and sociological context. So do not expect to see the usual congestion maps and time series charts of other congestion studies. This book goes beyond statistics, to conceptualizations, and these can only be understood if we look "*across time, space, disciplines, and professions*" (p.195).

A solution that has emerged from time to time is separation. Sometimes the separation was vertical: roads above other roads and cars above pedestrians (or vice-versa). One example was the construction of Silvertown Way in the 1930s. It was London's first flyover, built to carry goods and workers to London's docks. It also carried the belief that reinforced concrete could "*retrofit a new, efficient network into old urban environments*" (p.61). That would even be aesthetical and symbolic - it would allow road users to see the docks and waterways that represented free trade and London's economic power at the time. The project not only helped to disseminate this belief outside London but also gave a boost to the engineering profession and the concrete industry.

Other times, the separation was horizontal: for example, barriers preventing cars and pedestrians from sharing the same space. One chapter looks at the first large-scale installation of guardrails in London. This measure allowed vehicles to drive closer to the edge of the carriageway, increasing the efficiency of road space. It also represented a new understanding of roads as components in a closed system for movement, rather than a series of places where social activity happens. And it boosted the police over other professional groups, in the power struggle over who controls the roads. The author also argues that the segregation of pedestrians from cars was not unlike racial segregation in the USA at the time, and that it "*racialized, gendered, sexualized, aged, and classed*" pedestrians (p.88) - pedestrians were seen as slowing down the movement of (mostly white and male) car drivers.

And then there were solutions that did not rely on spatial planning. One example was road pricing, implemented in 2003 after a long gestation. The underlying belief was that, rather than directly allocating resources, the state should let road users buy faster speed. This was separation by price: roads would be used by drivers who were willing to pay for them. Another non-planning solution was the installation of road sensors and surveillance cameras in the 1960s. The belief here was that traffic could be treated scientifically, with vehicles reduced to elements in a network that could be modelled and analysed. This shifted power once again, now from police officers to traffic controllers, who could move congestion from one place to another, reshaping roads in a more efficient way than urban planning had ever done. This solution also helped to create a culture of surveillance that paved the way to the "total surveillance" culture of contemporary "smart cities".

The book examines several other solutions, almost always involving some type of separation, from a (failed) experiment of building pedestrian walkways in the financial district (to increase traffic flow) to closing roads to through-traffic in gentrifying Pimlico (to reduce traffic flow). The author argues that these and other solutions were linked to the interests of property developers. In the end, solutions for congestion involve many actors, but capital "*acts as an ineluctable gravitational pull on all decisions about traffic*" (p.196). In the last sentence of the book, the author even suggests that after so many conceptualizations, congestion is presently regarded not as a failure of planning or the market but as a "*failure to seize opportunities to make money from traffic*" (p.210).

Packed with facts, names, institutions, and acronyms, this book is not an easy read for readers unfamiliar with London and with the UK political and institutional context. It is also hard to discern the underling theme of some chapters, especially the one about road pricing, where readers keep hoping for a clarification that never comes, even in the conclusions. As noted, the book goes beyond local geography and the hard statistics about congestion. But on doing so, it veers too much towards the author's opinions. Readers are often surprised with unexpected links between congestion and the big issues of power, money, racism, capitalism, colonialism, and neoliberalism. Sometimes, it seems the author is bringing the whole world to the debate of congestion in London.

On the other hand, the book collects many interesting quotes from documents that illustrate the thoughts of those behind the proposed solutions to congestion, giving a voice to lesser-known actors, rather than the "usual suspects". But readers must be warned that some of those voices say things that are hard to stomach, from racist comments made by a traffic commissioner on a field trip to Chicago (p.100–101), to a pedestrian association claiming that "*busy business men*" could not be asked to make a detour to cross the road (but children and the elderly could) (p.92). It also does not take long for readers to recognise a sadly familiar pattern in those quotes: they fail the Bechdel test. Women rarely appear and when they do it is to talk about (the work of) men. It seems that finding problems for congestion has always been a man's task. So a book that involves the whole world in the discussion of congestion could easily have a page or two discussing gender imbalances in congestion problems and solutions.

Overall, the book is a dense, sometimes confusing, but always interesting read, providing readers with a multifaceted view of a problem that is not perceived the same by all. For some, it is not even a problem. In the end, the main lesson learnt is that "*the solutions proposed depend on the problem one sees - and on the world view one holds*" (p.4).

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