Book Review: Peter Frank Peters, Time, Innovation and Mobilities: Travel in Technological Cultures. London and New York: Routledge, 2006. ISBN 0—4153—7072—8, £65 (hbk)

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Time & Society

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In sociology and social theory, the relationship between time, space and travel in technological societies has become an increasingly salient research topic. In his fascinating book, Peters demonstrates that contemporary research of mobility has till now displayed a rather limited and biased theorization. Central to this research is the inclination to reduce travel to three dualisms between (objectively) measured travel time and (subjectively) experienced travel time, between travel as a means of reaching one's destination and as a goal in itself, and between speeding up and slowing down (p. 184).

Peters makes an important contribution to this research area of mobilities by arguing convincingly that problems of mobility cannot simply be analysed in terms of these dualisms (Chapters 1 and 2). In order to transcend these dualisms, he develops an innovative conceptual framework to study travel practices, mobility problems, and to evaluate innovation strategies in a more meaningful way (Chapter 3). It is argued that travel practices and travel time are best understood as the outcome of the work that is done in the historical and contextualized construction of passages. Passages are spatio-temporal orders resulting from a complex interweaving of social, economic and technical relations (p. 62).

In order to explicate the inner workings of travel passages, Peters vividly describes a number of revealing case studies of travel in technological cultures, such as 19th-century train excursions (Chapter 3), car travel to US National Parks (Chapter 4), KLM air travel (Chapter 5), and cycling in Dutch towns (Chapter 6). These chapters culminate in the conclusion that the success or failure of innovative technologies (designed to solve mobility problems) can only be explained meaningfully by answering how material and immaterial elements ('heterogeneous orders') are connected to create a passage, what resources ('exchange') to repair passages are available and to whom, and making explicit the inherently political character of passages (Chapter 7).

Although it is undeniably true that Peters' vocabulary of travel passages enables

VOL. 16 No. 2/3 (2007), pp. 409–414 0961-463X DOI: 10.1177/0961463X07080275
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us to interpret practices of travel and innovation in technological societies in a significantly new and meaningful way, it must be said that after reading the book one is left somewhat puzzled by his arguments about the 'politics of passages'. The book argues that a conceptual framework of passages is better equipped to evaluate mobility problems and innovation strategies than one in which a decontextualized and quantified concept of objective clock time is used (p. 27). Peters' argument seems to be that such a concept of time is unable to address the political and normative consequences of travel scenarios, because concepts of speed and scarcity, interpreted in terms of clock time, are conceived of as neutral (non-political and a-moral) means of establishing a single optimal criterion for solving mobility problems. In his alternative, the historical and contextualized work that is done to create passages is inherently political, because the design of passages is bound to include and exclude people from traffic and will always distribute space, time and risks (p. 149). Moreover, it is argued that the political nature of designing passages implies that there is no single optimal criterion, but that there can only be an argued choice for a specific design that has to be made by citizens; for they will face the consequences of choosing a particular mobility design (pp. 155–6).

Peters' argument, however, fails to be entirely satisfactory. His critique of the neutrality of clock time seems to fail to take into consideration that the concept of travel time is part of a consequentialist approach that is more or less analogous to the one used in the politics of passages. Just as the construction of passages is politically problematic because the moral consequences of distributing risks have to be taken into consideration, the apparently neutral concept of clock time is also political because the moral consequences of speeding up and slowing down always have to be taken into account in developing an optimal solution to problems of mobility.

In addition, it might be asked how different Peters' approach is from the framework of 'objective clock time' in terms of their outcomes. On the one hand, he criticizes the latter approach for its effort to develop a single optimal solution to problems of mobility, while on the other hand there is a sense in which the argued choice of citizens for a certain mobility design is the optimal solution as well.

A final point has to do with the book's emphasis that the adoption of a design for a passage has to be the result of an argued choice by citizens, rather than by technocrats. Essentially, this argument aims at introducing an element of direct democracy to our representative democracy. This leads us right to the heart of a classical discussion about the (un)desirability of direct democracy. Unfortunately, this discussion is absent from Peters' argument.

This said, Peters makes an original and challenging contribution to the research area of mobility. Suited to a broad public – ranging from advanced undergraduates and postgraduates to researchers and practitioners in the fields of sociology, geography, spatial planning, politics, public administration and transportation studies – this book is a welcome addition to the already existing body of literature on travel in technological societies.

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