

## Decolonial approaches to urban transport geographies: Introduction to the special issue

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## **Decolonial Approaches to Urban Transport Geographies: Introduction to the Special Issue**

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### **Exploring decolonial approaches to urban transport**

The goal of this special issue is to argue for decolonial perspectives on urban transport, and to begin exploring them empirically. The point of departure for this endeavour is our observation that northern thinking continues to underpin transport geography, limiting the development of the academic field as well as opportunities for locally-derived innovation in diverse localities across the global south and north.

At least three dynamics of knowledge production, which we perceive to be particularly prevailing in the field, support this claim. First, we argue that while informative, the existing scholarship in transport geography has drawn chiefly on expertise produced and modelled in the global north (Schwanen, 2018a). Second, we contend that transport geography continues to build upon neoclassical approaches that emphasize economic efficiency, rationality and utility, and further frame the discipline as technocentric and apolitical (Kębłowski and Bassens, 2018). Third, transport geography still predominantly envisions urban transport as a matter that is organised formally and regulated by the state.

This special issue proposes a radical departure from predominantly northern, technical and formalist approaches to transport geography, offering to draw from theoretical perspectives produced outside the global north, beyond techno-managerial preoccupations, and employing informality as a way of understanding transport policies and practices across geographical contexts. Below we begin exploring this counter-hegemonic theoretical proposal before it is further developed in each paper in the special issue. Together, this set of contributions forms part of a broader attempt to transform transport geography into a more inclusive and global endeavour that takes into account diverse aspects and practices of decolonising the production of knowledge (Schwanen, 2018b).

Fundamentally, decolonising urban transport geography involves building an explicit connection between transport and long-standing debates on the need and challenges of decolonising knowledge (Chakrabarty, 2000; Smith, 1999; Spivak, 1999). These shifts have significantly influenced diverse fields of geographical thoughts and practice, offering to provincialise Europe in the knowledge-making practice, and to give more power to knowledge produced in colonised parts of the world (Chakrabarty, 2000; Roy, 2009a). Particularly relevant to the arguments made below, this process has inspired an on-going shift in urban geography, as cities “off the map” are increasingly approached as legitimate sites not only for empirical explorations, but also for formulating new urban theories, rather than as localities in which the established northern conceptual language is to be applied (Robinson, 2016, 2006). Put simply, cities of the global south are no longer perceived as peripheral localities, but rather as central nodes in knowledge production (McFarlane and Robinson, 2012; Edensor and Jayne, 2012). Yet, despite a growing number of notable exceptions (Kwan and Schwanen, 2016; Lucas et al., 2018; Priya Uteng and Lucas, 2018; Schwanen, 2018a, 2018b), transport geographies have remained largely immune to decolonial thinking. The yet nascent links with urban studies suggest a potential for revising and revitalising transport geographies by bringing these together with other debates in the field of geography (Kębłowski et al., 2019a; Tuvikene, 2018; Wood, 2019, 2015). Importantly, this entails engaging with more explicitly (re-)politicised and critical perspectives into how and in whose interest transport policies and infrastructure are developed (Kębłowski and Bassens, 2018; Wood, 2015), and how they allow the capitalist ideology and accumulation regime to be set in motion on the urban scale (Enright, 2016).

In line with the framework of modernity/coloniality/de-coloniality (Mignolo, 2008; Quijano, 2007), we posit that decolonialising transport geographies may involve three interrelated, counter-hegemonic shifts: a geographical one (beyond the global north), an epistemological one (beyond techno-centric oriented transport studies), and an empirical one (beyond ostensibly formal systems). Consequently, we posit that any decolonial project in transport geography must incorporate the corpus of knowledge that is radically at odds with hegemonic, northern ways of thinking and doing. Notably, by dissecting social and political relations among transport passengers,

drivers and regulators in informal transport provision in Beirut, Samaha and Mohtar (2020) reveal logics that can also inform transport planning in northern cities such as London, Paris or New York. Other examples explored subsequently include, the socio-cultural values and practices of transport in Namibia (Baker, 2020), the embeddedness of political agendas in Johannesburg (Wood, 2020a), and the elite-drive urban regime in Moscow (Trubina, 2020), all of which aim to challenge the economic and efficiency-driven rationalities dominant in the north. We argue that these elements constitute the core of decolonialising knowledge and practice in transport geography — we proceed by unpacking them below.

### **Locating transport research outside the global north**

Decolonising research involves moving beyond Euro-American mainstream geographical knowledge. This requires a fundamental shift in the dynamics of knowledge production, giving a much more pronounced role to subaltern knowledge, notably coming from geographical areas that have experienced colonisation. The authors contributing to this special issue thus follow a counter-hegemonic vector of knowledge production, building on existing efforts towards de-centering various fields of geography (Jazeel, 2017; Noxolo, 2017), in both urban geography (Wood, 2020b; Tuvikene, 2016) and transport geography (Schwanen, 2018a). Of course, expanding geographically the empirical corpus of transport studies is but a first, and perhaps the most obvious step towards their decolonisation. A further strategy involves questioning mainstream positions of traditional centres of transport knowledge (Wood, 2015), widely accepted as the power-holders over defining transport problems, and over assessing the legitimacy of transport solutions (Verlinghieri and Middleton, this issue).

Transport scholars have begun to engage with these strategies. For instance, a special issue in this journal discusses diverse contexts located in the global south (Priya Uteng and Lucas, 2018), in particular in Latin America (Lucas et al., 2018). Yet, while studies of transport systems in global south and global east—in particular in Brazil, China, and India—can be commonly found in transport journals including in the *Journal of Transport Geography*, they often frame their subject matter through either the supposedly objective neoclassical lens of economic growth, efficiency and utility (Zhang, 2020) or the equally de-politicising framing of sustainable development (Jones et al., 2019) and the related concept of transit-oriented development (Mu and Jong, 2012; Phani Kumar et al., 2018), without critically considering the shortcomings of these analytical frameworks originating in the global north (cf. Malhado et al., 2013). Hence the contributions to this special issue are not only geographically located in Beirut, Johannesburg and Moscow, helping to further expand the geographical scope of the transport debate, but they are also intellectually ensconced within decolonial thinking. They are unremittingly critical of discourses of efficiency and sustainability arriving from the north and west (Samaha and Mohtar,

this issue; Trubina; this issue). And they rely on theories and ontologies that originate from outside the established centres of transport expertise, and outside the global north (Verlinghieri and Middleton, this issue; Schwanen, this issue).

The editors and authors, even if they are speaking from the global north, not only conduct empirical work in the global south, but also attempt to reshape those landscapes by re-positioning the subaltern. Consequently, they do not simply explore transport *in* the south or east, but also *from* the point of view of south and east, raising questions about the directionality of transport knowledge and best practices across the south, east and north (Baker, this issue, and Wood, this issue). Thus in addition to functioning as a geographical site, the south constitutes both an orientation and a way of thinking about and interpreting knowledge that challenges the conceptual hegemony in transport geography (Verlinghieri and Middleton, this issue, and Schwanen; this issue). We maintain that simply expanding geographical focus is not enough and needs to be accompanied by a shifting in the centralisation of knowledge, sometimes also finding closer links between research and practice to build upon locally-produced forms of knowledge (Parnell and Pieterse, 2016; Rynning et al., 2018).

### **Challenging technically-oriented transport studies**

We argue that decolonising transport further involves challenging technically-oriented transport studies by confronting conceptualisations of transport as a neoclassical discipline predominantly focused on utility, efficiency and economic growth (Baker, this issue; Samaha & Mohtar; this issue). This tactic for research entails moving beyond operational and economic questions when defining mobility-related problems, formulating visions, and delineating specific policy solutions, thus paying much more attention to the diversity of social, cultural and political facets of each context, as the central object of transport research. Consequently, this perspective rejects the supposedly predictive powers of mathematical modelling and forecasting that continue to dominate in transport geography. These methods are often insensitive to the particularities of specific contexts and prone to prescribing ideas from one locality—usually located in the global north, where best practices are deemed legitimate and transfer-worthy—to another (Wood, 2015). In particular, this strategy suggests questioning scholarship on “sustainable development” (Banister, 2008; Hickman et al., 2013), which albeit denounces the economic rationales of neoclassical approaches, advances primarily technological and behavioural innovations (Kębłowski and Bassens, 2018). Crucially for the argument developed in this special issue, technically-oriented research has often conceptualised spaces and communities in the global south as lacking key qualities present in the global north, for instance speed, accessibility, quality, and modernity. This line of thought often relegates southern localities as under-developed, awaiting to be saved by catching up with the north. Proposing a radically different approach, we emphasise the

importance of directing transport scholarship towards theories that centrally position the political underpinnings of policy and practice (Enright, 2016; Kębłowski et al., 2019b; Mattioli et al., 2020).

Moreover, the history of colonialization is inseparable from the development of engineering as an objective field preoccupied with deriving context-independent truth, exhibiting little regard for local knowledge. Colonised spaces and communities have provided urban engineers with a generous playground for experimentation, yet while many of their failures have remained etched in socio-spatial landscapes of the south, their successes have often been deemed northern. Therefore, much of the history of urban transport planning is colonial (King, 1976; Power et al., 2006). Vast colonial engineering projects are further tied to imaginations of modernity (Mitchell, 2002; Scott, 1998). While the concept of modernisation may well be defended on the grounds of the advances and benefits it has brought across geographical contexts, for instance in the form of road and vehicle safety and mass transit systems, we argue for remaining particularly sensitive to the theoretical and geographical origins of any modernisation project, as they often emerge from the centres of colonial power, transferred to colonised spaces without attending to local social, cultural and political geography (Beier, 2019). This further involves complicating (rather than rejecting outright) the notion of technology, not only by criticising its supposedly uniform effect across society and space and showing its geographical variegation and unevenness (Baker, this issue), but also by exposing its colonial history as a state and market project of ignoring, or even eradicating locally-derived knowledge.

Thus, recent discussions about decolonising engineering have challenged a number of earlier assumptions about the definition and impact of advanced infrastructural development, and have offered new lines of thinking about and practicing design and construction, drawing more closely from experiences of indigenous communities (Escobar, 2017). However, we argue that core challenges faced by transport geographers today—such as the climate catastrophe and transport-related socio-spatial inequalities—should not be approached as series of engineering puzzles. Rather, responding to these challenges means paying close attention to the power relations, rationales and assumptions that underpin them, and have contributed to their emergence in the first place. In turn, decolonising transport geography involves critiquing modernisation from yet another perspective, looking into its role in destruction of nature, and overuse of resources, with its aim to move away from approaches more attentive to locally rooted practices. Valuing major engineering infrastructure projects over community-driven, informally-driven or less expensive projects means that transport planning in the south, even if it serves or could serve the masses, will always be undervalued and misunderstood.

## **Incorporating informal transport**

Decolonising transport further signals our intention to deconstruct the binaries of formality and informality by devoting attention to regulated as well as unregulated, under-regulated and de-regulated forms of transport, all of which can provide mobility solutions (Behrens et al., 2015; Rizzo, 2017). This involves breaking with conceptualisations of informality that consider it as a sign of under-investment or under-development, and instead engaging with the informality scholarship in geography and urban studies (Bunnell and Harris, 2012; Marx and Kelling, 2019; McFarlane, 2012). This entails engaging with historical, social, economic and geographical situatedness of informal transport practices (Mulley, 2011). Bringing informality into the perspective of transport planning also directs attention to the state involvement in producing the condition for informality—often via various institutional failures (see Samaha and Mohtar; this issue)—as well as the informality within state practices itself (Roy, 2009b). Nevertheless, attending to the informal transport from a decolonial perspective importantly entails taking such modes of organising as central and vital for urban mobilities.

Taking such nuanced perspective on informality from geographical and urban studies literature thus challenges the predominant perspective on informal transport as a phenomenon that exists primarily in the global south (Cervero, 2007), and demonstrates that its practices, structures and logics are just as likely to be detected in northern cities (Rekhviashvili and Sgibnev, 2018). Thus, while modes of organising transport in the global north may at first appear innovative or modern—perhaps just by being more technologically-driven—in reality, they are often a reprise of longstanding informal modes of organising widespread in the global south (Kovacs et al., 2017). Likewise while the grey spaces (Yiftachel, 2009) of transport provision are mostly investigated via questions around paratransit (Heinrichs et al., 2018; Shlomo, 2017), there are many other informalising spheres of transport provision, including shared taxis and cycling (see Wood, this issue; Baker, this issue). Moreover, the very same modes of organising—such as mobility sharing platforms—can increase “formalization of more ad hoc mobility infrastructures in the global south” while simultaneously increasing “informalization of infrastructure” in the global north (Stehlin et al, 2020, p. 6). Thus, informality is not just a matter relevant for the global south but the lessons learned from the global south could form valuable scholarship for transport systems in the global north (Hentschel, 2015, Hilbrandt et al, 2017).

A decolonial approach then involves questioning the technical and economic rationality that underpins conceptualizations of efficiency and success in transport planning, for example by embracing the inherent flexibility, responsiveness and utility of informal transport. This approach explains how second-hand bicycles sent to the Namibian countryside as utilitarian transport instruments become appropriated by their local users in unexpected and contradictory ways (Baker; this issue). Or it explains the discourse of making Moscow more comfortable and liveable for its inhabitants by expanding pedestrian zones and enabling the local urban regime to consolidate power by generating new spaces for accumulating capital, all while failing

to address the actual structural causes behind the unsustainability of urban transport (Trubina, this issue). Questions of informality in transport are thus complex necessitating interdisciplinary approaches beyond the existing repertoire of transport planning. This means taking informality more seriously in urban transport geographies, not simply as an aberration to the formal means and logics, but as itself a logic to build from.

### **Approaches for decolonising transport scholarship**

The approaches for decolonising transport scholarship outlined in the special issue discuss ways to transform transport geographies into a more inclusive and global endeavour. The six papers, however, do so in different ways. While all the papers in the special issue offer theoretically-informed and empirically-rigorous analysis of one or more cities in the global south, some are more attentive to methods of knowledge production while others develop alternative concepts and frameworks for analysis. All the papers push for theorisation from the global south, but they do so either by highlighting transport policies beyond technology-centred tactics or by considering informal ways of organising.

The first two papers by Wood (this issue) and Baker (this issue) focus on the bicycle in African mobilities and its associated flows from the global north to South Africa and Namibia, respectively. They both highlight the mismatch of policy ideas emanating from the global north to African socio-cultural landscapes. In Wood's paper, we learn that while bike-share has spread all around the world, South African cities—despite generally welcoming approach to policy ideas of elsewhere—opted not to introduce this scheme. Wood shows how policy non-adoption was tied to the morphology and politics of the urban landscape. Whereas for the most part bike-share in global north cities serves the dense business areas and is financed by advertising schemes, in Johannesburg, the combination of low-density development and a pro-poor policy agenda made bike-share particularly inappropriate.

Observing how second-hand bicycles are appropriated by local users in rural Namibia, Baker (this issue) challenges the neoclassical discourse of rationality, utility and efficiency. She demonstrates how the local communities' practices, meanings and identities around bicycles divert from how northern actors such as development agencies and NGOs normatively "script" the Namibian context. The paper further shows the importance of engaging with the particularities of the local context, and deconstructing policy models to open up space for diverse mobile subjects and uses. In advancing a decolonial approach, both papers stress the pivotal role of local actors, which is even more central in cases where policies, practices and materials from elsewhere do not have the same meaning when applied in situ.

Turning towards our focus on informality, the papers by Samaha and Mohtar (this issue) and Trubina (this issue) blur the binaries of formal/informal, public/private within the provision of urban transport services and infrastructure. In furthering a



decolonial approach to transport, both papers recognize the highly politicized relationship between the economic and social conditions of their respective contexts. Specifically, Samaha and Mohtar (this issue) rethink what counts as a success in transport systems development and planning. Drawing on a robust case study of Van Line 4 in Beirut, they challenge prevailing assumptions of informal transport provision by revealing that private services can be efficient, organized and profitable. The paper thus positions informal transport as positive: in particular, Samaha and Mohtar demonstrate that informal transport provision has a socio-economic role in Beirut by providing access to marginalized communities. And importantly, they note a prominent role for local politics highlighting that the informal is not simply the lack of technical expertise but rather a consequence of state failures.

Continuing with this theme, Trubina (this issue) offers a damning critique of the dominant discourse of sustainable urbanism originating in the north. She demonstrates how the pressure to make cities more pedestrian friendly, green and comfortable does little in terms of addressing the structural reasons behind environmental and social un-sustainability. Instead, it allows for elite manoeuvring oriented towards capital accumulation, achieved through the infrastructural agenda, which Trubina sees through the redevelopment of streets and sidewalks. In this way, the paper looks at transport as an essentially urban phenomenon, allowing local regimes to sustain uneven patterns of development, and to open new spaces for generating rent and engaging in corruption.

The final two papers by Schwanen (this issue) and Verlinghieri and Middleton (this issue) attend to knowledge production beyond the global north and beyond neoclassical rationales. Schwanen stresses the move beyond homo economicus to incorporate various rationales for transport planning, whereas Verlinghieri and Middleton problematise a switch to global south teaching and education. Schwanen approaches decolonizing by bringing the metaphysical together with the physical via the writings of Sylvia Wynter and her conceptualization of Man2. Unlike other decolonial theorists (i.e., Fanon or Glissant), Wynter's interdisciplinary philosophy integrates humanness with nature and culture, and allows Schwanen to push for new approaches that integrate quantitative transport scholarship with decolonial thinking. Importantly, Schwanen explores the possibilities of using this approach not only to sharpen our understanding of human subjectivity in transport geographies but to also associate conceptualizations of colonialism, racialization and mobility justice with quantitative research.

In a more practice-oriented way, Verlinghieri and Middleton (this issue) seek to provincialize knowledge within the university by drawing on their experiences organizing short courses for transport planners and practitioners. In particular they critically reflect on their use of strategies and patterns that reproduce neo-colonial relations between global north and south within transport expertise. Methodologically, Verlinghieri and Middleton draw on the experiences and expectations of transport practitioners who typically work in alternative arenas to the academics pushing for decolonial thinking. Like Schwanen, they too seek to challenge the predominance of

quantitative methods in transport geographies. And they too consider the role of human subjectivity within attempts to promote critical thinking. Taken together, these six papers offer a way forward for transport geography that is attentive to the decolonial approaches of contemporary geography scholarship.

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