

# Urban Development and Transportation Infrastructures: Insights from the Ruhr Region

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## Abstract

*Since the 1960s, urban development in Germany has been shaped by automobile transportation and has suffered as a result both environmentally and in terms of quality of life. Until recent years these developments had come under heavy criticism from the environmental movement. Why is it that this public criticism has now largely been silenced and alternatives to automobility are only discussed by insiders in the fields of urban planning and transportation systems? To answer this question I would like to present two theses for discussion.*

*My first thesis is that the acceleration of these tendencies and their equation with economic progress, technological modernization and spatial autonomy are deeply related to the construction of the male Enlightenment subject. This masculine subject is constructed through the dissociation of the intellect from nature and the body, as well as through the idea of its dominance over nature and through the valuing of individual autonomy over social bonds. Both natural processes and social ties are anchored in concrete, particular spaces. Overcoming social, natural and spatial bonds by forward motion is understood to guarantee autonomy and freedom.*

*My second thesis posits that this imagined link between acceleration and technological and economic progress influences actions not only in the area of transportation policy; it has been internalized as a social metaphor in the minds of people and thus influences their transportation behaviour. The promise of freedom through accelerated transportation is, however, an illusion given that this desire for freedom has contributed to the creation of and reinforcement of power relations that no longer allow for freedom of movement: If increasing speed is adopted as a principle in city and transportation planning, then mobility becomes a necessity. Compulsory mobility has high economic and social costs, making it all the more important to seek alternatives in transportation planning that guarantee equality in transportation conditions and thereby also guarantee the free movement of all urban inhabitants.*

## Theoretical Considerations: The Male Subject in Urban Development

Historically, the city had once been equated with liberation from the social rankings of the feudal order – “City air makes you free.” At the same time, urban society was liberating itself from the dependence on uncultivated nature: food for cities was provided independently of the natural conditions, people didn’t have to build their own houses any more, they didn’t have to travel by foot, even child care and care for the elderly and the sick were taken over by designated institutions. Ultimately, the city was supposed to be

a machine to rationalize everyday life.

But is this image of the city as a place of autonomy and emancipation accurate? Feminist analyses have pointed to the fact that in cities food could readily be purchased, but it still had to be prepared and cooked. Houses no longer needed to be built by families, but they still required housekeeping. Caring for dependants or those who need help has not been solely or even primarily taken over by state institutions, but is still done in private households and among families. And urban mobility cannot be reduced to the forward motion of accelerated transportation; many routes in the city have always been and remain short walks.

Many of these invisible activities based on social ties and personal responsibility are the work of women in our society. They are delegated to women or are taken on by women. There are differing opinions as to whether this is due to the influence of social norms or to individual acceptance of responsibility in order to create meaning in people's lives. For many women, both aspects certainly play an important role. Men are not affected by these phenomena to the same degree, as many studies on time budgeting in industrial countries have shown time and again. Despite the rhetoric of emancipation, patterns of the division of labour and the use of time still run along gender lines. It is not gender relations that have been shaken during the last three decades, but merely their legitimation.

What do these considerations mean for urban development? Instead of viewing the city as a rationalizing machine that frees people from various dependencies via technology and rationalization, the city should be understood as a place where different individuals, often previously unknown to each other, come into contact and build up ties with one another. The distinguishing feature of urban life is not so much its anonymity and foreignness, but rather the interplay of strong identifications in social contexts on the one hand and on the other the freedom to choose social relationships without being subject to social control. Many studies have shown the importance of specific spaces in this mutual relationship between social ties and social freedoms.

But the market requires a freedom from social ties, the market subject is an individual without ties whose freedom consists in being available everywhere and at all times. The market economy thus negates the mutual relationship between autonomy and social ties that is characteristic of urban life. Independent of empirical sex, the market-defined subject – autonomous and with no social ties – is a masculine subject who delegates to women social bonds with and the care of other people. This masculine subject, drifting without social bonds or a spatial and social position, is the primary metaphor for urban development.

## **Empirical Evidence: More Freedom through Acceleration?**

Transportation planning in the Ruhr region can serve as an example of both this androcentric concept of urban planning and the androcentric orientation in transportation planning. In addition, development in the Ruhr region shows that improvements in technology alone cannot solve problems of mobility. Mobility is a complex pattern of social and spatial organization with gendered needs and motivations.

## **The androcentric concept of urban development**

Analysis of the Ruhr region shows that the norms of urban development are geared exclusively toward the market. The idea of a good standard of living and general well-being in the city is closely linked to economic growth, while other value orientations outside market logic, such as health or concern for other people, are not the explicit goals of successful urban planning or are clearly subordinate to economic ones.

Economic growth is identified with the availability of jobs, whereas the sphere of reproduction and the unremunerated work of women do not play a role in establishing economic goals.

Patterns of men's fulltime work were and still are the primary model used in urban and transportation planning. The expansion of rapid transportation both in road construction as well as in public transportation was justified on the basis of economic restructuring and the employment situation in the Ruhr region. The decline of coal and steel industries since the end of the 1950s necessitated a new orientation in the economy. Job losses in coal and steel industries was to be offset by specialization in production and the development of the tertiary sector. Favourable local conditions were to attract trade and services to the area. Attractive transportation access was an essential element in the planning concepts for developing the regional infrastructure. The main objective of the cities and the local government, besides making the area attractive for investors, was to increase the mobility of the working population by expanding rapid transportation infrastructure. After losing their jobs, which were often located close to home, coal and steel workers were to be able to find other work in the newly developed trade branches.

The androcentric concept of the economy, which only considers one half of reality and ignores the interdependence of production and reproduction, can be deemed unsuitable for society as a whole. Better solutions for urban development therefore need to take far more into account the unremunerated work women do on behalf of the home and familial care. This means that women's patterns of mobility and work must be given more attention in planning than they have in the past, because women integrate, through their very being, both of the work spheres vital to society: they are involved in gainful employment and in the reproductive work of provision and personal care.

## The androcentric orientation in transportation planning

The androcentric concept of urban planning leads directly to an androcentric orientation in transportation planning, in which the most critical problem appears to be how people commute to their place of work. The male commuter travelling between his home and his workplace becomes the central focus of this dominant model of mobility. However, people do much more in their daily lives; they shop, they participate in cultural and social life, they accompany small children or elderly adults to various places. A model of mobility based on these patterns usually practiced by women is a more complex and realistic one than that of the male commuter because it represents the entire spectrum of needs and everyday reasons to be mobile. Therefore, the type of mobility practiced primarily by women can serve as a guide to sustainable transportation planning. The analysis of the planning and construction of transportation infrastructures in the Ruhr region after the Second World War shows that the male model of mobility was the only one used in planning. This was true for road planning and public transit systems alike; both systems were conceived as means of transportation between the home and the workplace.

For urban and regional planning in the Ruhr region at the end of the 1960s, the following transportation planning objective can be found: "The concentration of a network of highway-like streets and in particular the development of the expressway in the Ruhr region allow for more distance to be covered in the same amount of time" (SVR 1970, p. 21). Here it becomes apparent how the equation "fast+far=mobile" was realized in transportation planning: Travelling greater distances by means of faster transportation is understood as mobility. These findings coincide with those of Gerda Wekerle and Brent Rutherford for Canadian cities. Transit systems are conceived for men employed fulltime and offer means of

transportation chiefly to the workplace. Transportation is available to places of consumption and leisure as well, but not at all to the same degree (Wekerle, Rutherford 1989).

The past thirty years of transportation policy in the Ruhr region were characterized by immense investments in public transit systems. These investments, however, have not improved the mobility conditions in the area. To the contrary, they have made way for a significant increase in individual transportation, which has drastically encroached upon non-motorized means of transit through increased emissions, noise, and the taking up of space. In addition, infrastructure for highways and rapid transportation systems has destroyed the structures of local public and individual transit. Faraway destinations can be reached more easily and faster than local destinations. With the investments used for high-speed transportation infrastructure, many comfortable, wide pedestrian and bicycle paths could have been constructed in the cities and networks of streetcars could have been developed that meet everyday local mobility needs.

### **Technological solutions versus the social organization of time and space**

As has been shown, mobility has nothing to do with travelling long distances by way of the most rapid transportation infrastructure possible, as most transportation planners and politicians appear to believe. The greatest transportation problems are found in organizing the small details of everyday life. Several examples from the Ruhr region illustrate this point. In 1993, 40 percent of all shopping trips, 25 percent of all recreational and leisure pursuits and even 10 percent of all jobs were located within a radius of a single kilometre from the home. The radius of five kilometres covered 40 percent of all commutes to work, 80 percent of all shopping trips, and 70 percent of all recreational and leisure activities (see Bauhardt 1995, p. 89). These figures point to a high degree of spatial integration among what forces us and what prompts us to be mobile.

Instead of addressing small-scale traffic problems, transportation planners offer complicated yet elegant technological solutions. The construction of highways and rapid transit trains, which takes priority over the infrastructures of slow-moving traffic, does not correspond with the mobility needs of the majority of the population, but is instead a field for technicians and engineers to earn their reputations. As I studied the publications that praised the construction of the transportation infrastructure in the Ruhr region, I was truly surprised by the enthusiasm with which these “daring” and “clever” men – technicians, engineers, and construction workers – were described (see Bauhardt 1995, p. 120 ff.). Technology, in particular complicated but elegant technological solutions, contributes to the reproduction of masculine stereotypes. Yet, what transportation planning really needs in the place of complicated and extremely expensive engineering is intelligent organization. To achieve this, one first needs to understand the gendered organization of time and space in the urban setting.

The most important traffic problems emerge in the organization of everyday life. Intelligent solutions are therefore more often found through organizational rather than technological means. A strictly technical understanding tends to accelerate time and overcome space. Time and space are perceived as economic resources: acceleration aims to save time and overcome space, so that mobility becomes “as fast as possible and as far as possible.”

The historical development of transportation infrastructure in the Ruhr region clearly demonstrates this. Overcoming long distances with the fastest possible means of transportation has long been and still is understood as an efficient way to organize transportation and as an appropriate means of measuring a

population's mobility. Increasing the distances travelled was an explicit goal of the regional planning: "The future image of transportation in the Ruhr region will be very different from that of today. The new possibilities for transportation, in conjunction with the realization of regional planning goals, will lead to greater mobility for people, greater commuting distances, and ultimately to a new distribution among means of transportation" (SVR 1970, p.55). The new distribution of transportation means brought about an increased use of private passenger cars, while environmentally friendly forms of mobility, in particular the number of pedestrian paths, were reduced. Starting from the premise that mobility is a result of the relationship between distance and acceleration, the political concept of decentralized concentration (Siedlungsschwerpunktekonzept) comes to the following conclusion: "As a result of the considerably increased speed of transportation, the distances that will be travelled in the future will be on average much greater than they are today" (SVR 1970, p.56).

In the daily organization of their lives, women combine through time and space the productive and reproductive spheres of life. Their model of mobility can be described as a combination of usually shorter trips or travel sequences. Such an integration of activities in time and space is the basis for a qualitative understanding of mobility, which examines the reasons for the need to be mobile as opposed to the quantitative concept of mobility, which merely calculates the amount of human tonnage that can be moved how far in how much time. A feminist perspective in transportation research and planning perceives time and space less as economic resources than as social categories. This approach raises the issue of re-appropriating time and space as prerequisites for communication and an improvement in the quality of life in the city. In my opinion, these are absolutely essential conditions for a sustainable planning of urban development and transportation systems.

## Conclusion

Transportation policy is a policy for society as a whole. In spatial planning, many "entangled" political, economic, social, symbolic and ethical dimensions are tied up in an almost inextricable knot:

Politically, transportation policy as a policy of modernization is equated with technological and social modernization. The model used for modernization is the autonomously mobile individual who is freed from spatial reference points and ties to particular places. This individual corresponds to the masculine subject of the Enlightenment.

Economically, transportation policy is the prerequisite for economic activity. Infrastructure policy ensures advances for the production of goods and for the mobility of employees. The commonly used model of employees is that of the "normal worker," who is free of family responsibilities. Correspondingly, the male commuter is the model used for the concept of mobility as defined by the market.

In social terms, transportation policy creates and reinforces social inequality. Existing inequalities between those who are "slow" and those who are "fast" are increased by uneven investment in the different transportation infrastructures, and new inequalities are produced.

The symbolic dimension takes precedence over rational patterns of usage: Speed is considered a status symbol or a "prosthesis of power." For men, the equation of speed with power often plays a more important role than practicality, while for most women the symbolic meaning of the means of transportation is less important than practical aspects.

In terms of ethics, conflicts arise between individual freedom and mobility and responsibility toward the natural and social environment. If transportation policy is to be centred around social and economical reasoning, it must reverse previous objectives and centre instead on spatial ties as well as social and ecological responsibility and thereby depart from a model of exclusively male-oriented rationality.

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