



Group Assembly Process (GAP) - Stirring Paper

Initiative on socially responsible mobility – saying no to traffic madness

by Sabine Leidig

Infrastructure and services for mobility, traffic and transport are basic social essentials and at the same time they reflect the economic activity and lifestyle of a society. (Motor vehicle) traffic throws up a whole range of contradictions; countless reasons why we should place the question of mobility at the strategic heart of sociopolitical discussion in the degrowth debate.

Already we see that in many areas – especially in large swathes of the southern hemisphere – the “curse of natural resources” is destroying the living environment of millions of people. Oil spills are poisoning whole tracts of land; access to rare minerals is often secured by force of arms, by “geostrategy” and wars. The threat of “peak oil” to the development of our fossil-fuel-based, capitalist (growth) society still seems to be underestimated. The realistic expectation that oil and petrol prices will rise a lot higher yet calls for speedy and carefully targeted processes of reconstruction, if we are to avoid dramatic collapses and acute social crises. Along with energy, a key sector in these processes is traffic and transport. Our captains of business and industry are currently relying on technological innovation and voluntary behaviour change to improve transport, as they are also doing with energy supply or food.

But the factor that will really make a difference is changes in social and economic structures.

Transport structures, however, typically reflect the interests of the automotive and aviation logistics companies and oil producers – powerful multinationals which have a huge influence on governments and parliaments but no ability at all to “think outside the box”. The airlines are aiming to treble their capacity, despite the enormous damage this will do to the climate. For years now freight transport has been growing at least twice as fast as GDP; Germany’s logistics industry (the biggest transport market in Europe) bemoans the fact that growth between now and 2025 will be only 25 per cent and is pressing for expansion of the road network. Car manufacturers plan to double the number of cars on the world’s roads over the next 20 years, even though this will be disastrous for the planet. Whilst the Ministry of Transport has the largest amount of the federal budget for investment and thus has significant power to decide what gets done, transport policy is currently in a state of paralysis. It is stuck between globalised capitalism’s obsession with growth and the maze of lobbying activity. It is cementing the foundations of a model which has long ceased to promise “prosperity for all” but is now designed to safeguard the competitive advantage of exporters and transport companies. It continues to increase *transport volumes*, when it ought to have started looking, long ago, at how to reduce

transport volumes.

This transport policy, a relic of the last century, needs to be countered by a concrete ideal of socially responsible mobility. There are at least three dimensions to this.

Firstly: prospects for alleviating climate change

The proportion of climatically relevant CO₂ emissions produced by transport in Germany has risen to about one fifth of total emissions. Those suffering the most from global climate change, which will soon be unstoppable, are people living in the southern hemisphere, whilst it is the economic activity and lifestyle current in the northern hemisphere that are causing that change. So it is a precept of generally accepted international solidarity that we must design our mobility in a way that impacts as little as possible on the climate. In other words, we must cut CO₂ emissions in such a way that everyone on earth can “pump out” the same amount without damaging the climate. And Germany, as a leading car exporter and major economic power, sets the standard for a lot of countries. (It was Germany that built the first cars and the first motorways. It was Germany that designed the car-friendly city.) So it would be internationally significant if Germany were to pioneer climate-friendly alternative solutions to this problem.

Secondly: standing up for the weak

Today, and in Germany too, it is already the poor who suffer more adverse effects from transport than the affluent, even though they contribute less to traffic pollution. It is chiefly people who cannot afford better housing who live along busy roads, or under the approach flightpath to an airport. Of the 25 percent of German households that do not have a car, 70 percent cite money as the reason. And for many on low incomes, fares on public transport are too expensive, and/or the service is not good enough. More and more of the “middle-class elite”, who can choose where they want to live, are nowadays allowing themselves the worthy luxury of living the good life without wheels – but this luxury should be an option for everyone! So justice also requires that we create good and affordable public transport services and in this way protect everyone against traffic pollution. The weak, including those who use transport, need support: pedestrians and cyclists must be given priority, space and freedom.

Thirdly: prospects for secure employment

Those working in automotive construction must be protected against unemployment and social decline. This requires appropriate transitional arrangements. And a constructive, directed policy based on the systematic development of rail transport and (electrically powered) public road transport, urban redesign, regional business circuits, conversion, resource circuits and recycling systems. These alternative options are more labour-intensive than the highly capital-intensive process of automotive and motorway construction, so the number of (socially worthwhile and good) jobs created with one unit of capital from the same budget (government budget for transport) could be greater than the number of jobs lost elsewhere. Radical changes of this kind over the medium term require a policy on employment and working time which encourages the retraining and redeployment of the workforce and gives people adequate social protection. The automotive and aviation industry has to be “downsized”. There may be a place for the car in the future – but its social role needs to be “reinvented”. The focus here is not on technology, not on smaller, lighter, more economic models which will help “green capitalism” to retain or achieve market dominance, and neither is it on new types of propulsion or fuels. Both these things bring too little change to the car itself, but they create massive additional problems: for the electric car these are electricity

consumption, the scarcity of raw materials (e.g. lithium) and battery disposal; for biofuels the problems are above all land grab and competition in agriculture with crops grown for food. The mass-produced private car is a dinosaur. The future belongs to publicly-operated vehicles which are part of an environmentally sustainable transport system – smaller, lighter, slower and above all far fewer in number.

Electrically powered vehicles have a future too: in public transport as trams, trolleybuses and trains. And likewise two-wheeled vehicles: electric bikes are also an attractive option for mountainous regions and over long distances, and electric scooters can replace noisy, smelly mopeds. The challenge is to encourage and develop public, collective, economical transport in such a way that no one needs their own car any more. And it is equally important to pedestrianise our towns and cities so that people no longer want to drive, because they can “rule the road” in other ways.

Towns that are “human kind”, and a different *modus operandi* – these are the targets and the outcomes which socially responsible transport will achieve.

There is no shortage of suggestions and ideas for traffic avoidance and environmentally sustainable mobility: development of integrated country-wide transport systems with new tramways, regional and interregional railways, modernisation for easy access, and refurbishment of small and medium-sized stations and construction of numerous new stopping points. Sophisticated (trolley)bus networks providing links to rural areas too. Urban construction and development of short routes in such a way that schools, services and cultural establishments can be reached on foot. Spatial planning which avoids monostructures and housing sprawl and requires access points to public transport rather than car parking.

Closely interlinked with passenger transport, but different from it, is freight transport. This too needs to be radically reduced in the interests of “sustainable economic activity”; what remains can largely be switched to (electrified) railways and inland waterways. (Cutting freight train services in many rural areas was a fiasco. Freight train services must be made efficient and profitable again, at local and regional level too, and they must be quiet, so that people living nearby do not suffer. Industrial and trading estates must be linked up to the rail network again.) It is time now for aviation gasoline to be taxed, and freight carried by road must be made more expensive – and slower, so that it is no longer worthwhile having North Sea prawns shelled in Morocco and then sold in Berlin. But what is really needed is a paradigm shift which fundamentally challenges the whole model of accumulation and with it the model of consumption. Cutting freight traffic is not primarily a technological or organisational issue, but a question of social production relations.

In the field of transport, social and environmental issues are inextricably and visibly interlinked – locally, nationwide, Europe-wide and worldwide. It is altogether the ideal field in which to develop the theory and practice of social and environmental change. An emancipatory, democratic and sustainable policy can be pursued at all levels – locally, in the *Länder*, at federal level and at European level.

On the matter of mobility it is good that different and specific innovative measures are already being adopted and that there are positive examples and models. But as yet we have not seen any broad-based initiative being mounted on behalf of socially responsible transport against the power structures of the capital faction that remains committed to fossil fuels.