

## VIDEOS

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# The general trend towards liberal logics and neoliberal logics in transition policy

By Peter Adey (Geographer)

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According to Peter Adey, there is a general trend towards liberal and neoliberal logics in transition policy. An emphasis is being placed on trying to shift the responsibility to individuals and on market-based solutions that can be exported elsewhere.

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In this video, I want to present a particular theme which has become evident across the different country case studies with our project on transition to low-carbon forms of **mobility**. Now, this is a project which is being funded by the Mobile Lives Forum. It involves the partnership between Royal Holloway University and Northeastern University and involves seven different researchers working across fourteen different countries across the world.

Despite the differences of the political and economic systems within which our country case studies are focused, it is possible to see a trend of what we could call liberal logics and indeed neoliberal logics. These logics capture a somewhat inconsistent relationship between the State, local government and non-government actors to transition policy and its regulation, to its forms of investment and indeed to measures, and they place a consistent emphasis upon market-based solutions which are best expressed through policies like road-pricing, carbon credits and mobility budgets.

So in this short film, I'm going to elaborate on three further qualities that capture this characterisation, i.e. these kinds of logics. First, an emphasis towards the individual and choice. Second, this relationship often sees a tendency towards what we could think of as the financialization of transition policies, and third, a deployment of mobility transition policies of competitive advantage. We see this achieved by the stimulation of particular models of transition practice and expertise to be ultimately exported elsewhere. So I want

to consider each of these characteristics in turn.

## Emphasis of policy on the individual and choice

In several of our countries, transition policies follow a wider set of government and local policies that seem to address the individual as the best resource for mobility transition, potentially responsibilising, or what we could think of as downloading responsibility for transition away from the State. So in tune with wider understandings of, as I mentioned, financialization that might include the subjectification of individuals to economic forces within their everyday lives, i.e. the production of particular kind of economic subjects. This has seen a variety of governments encouraging education schemes, awareness-raising and other incentives to push individuals into low-carbon alternatives to mobility. For example, in New Zealand this took the form of a personalised journey-planning project, which was then implemented. In Korea, it took the form of a network of public and private organisations that would also educate and go on to advertise. In the Netherlands, the broader structural change to a government discourse of participation was lauded by some but criticised by others for devolving more responsibility to citizens as a fiscal austerity strategy, and often understood as quite a cynical one.

## The financialization of transition policies to achieve short-term goals

Second in our European case, the changing structures of financial investment for major domestic and cross-border mobility infrastructure initiatives might potentially threaten transition and low-carbon mobilities or transitions to low-carbon mobilities rather than actually encouraging or bolstering them.

### 1. Concerns over the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI) plan

Some organisations have therefore echoed concerns over the recent Juncker European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI) plan, which was known as the Juncker plan. The plan encourages public and private financing to achieve short-term social and economic goals as opposed to longer term environmental ones. With this plan, some suggest that the social & environmental rewards of transition mobility projects do not look as attractive as others to private investment, and therefore would find it more difficult to leverage funds out from this new scheme. The plan also works by reallocating funds from other projects such as the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) which was bound by strict criteria over environmental sustainability. Thus, the scheme potentially moves money away from

transition projects.

## 2. A focus on the economic and quantitative aspects of transition policy

It is not unsurprising then European mobility transition advocates are actively highlighting the rapid economic benefit of transition policy investment. Many of these policies also make interesting equivalences—or quantitative equivalences between things—between energy, mobility, capital and labour, and this seems to turn mobility essentially into a budgetary and therefore company, employee or household or others' decision—a decision that would be based on mobility as well as economic self-discipline. Interestingly, these are the kinds of equivalences, quantitative calculations and formulations that mobility theory and scholarship has been really quite keen to depart. We of course don't only make rational economic decisions and choices. So Urgenda's mobility diet might be one example of this— one which also works somewhat against the Dutch national policy to simply reward those who drive but avoid rush hour. As with other examples of active travel that we see elsewhere, we see that calories are made commensurate with the miles travelled, the carbon used, and even the capital expended. The Korea climate environment network has provided an eco-mileage card, awarding points for low-carbon mobility choices, like using public transport. So far, we see that over 270,000 people have signed up for this scheme, and once they've signed up, cardholders are then able to use the points that they gather for other low-carbon purchases.

## The marketization and deployment of transition models

Coming back to our third characteristic, we see mobility transitions being turned into a thing—into a marketable commodity. Particular models of transition practice and expertise are being made to circulate for the purposes of economic exchange and particular exchange within new markets of transition: transition expertise, transition-related intellectual property rights. Developing the propensity to effectively turn transition expertise, intellectual property into a monetary thing, and to capitalise upon transition praxis and innovation and intellectual property is a particularly strong motivator then for those countries to invest in low-carbon mobility transition schemes. So for example, Singapore's land transport authority effectively translates its mobility planning, and its know-how, along the lines of the wider Singaporean model into publications, into seminars and into training for foreign delegations, for consultancy and for advising other projects elsewhere.

## 1. The mobility of models themselves

Meanwhile, of course, we've already seen Dutch urban planning consultancies finding purchase in local and burgeoning cycling strategies and schemes eager to learn from the renowned Dutch model. Of course, it's clear, even from our research within other national local contexts, that mobility transition imaginaries like these become incredibly mobile themselves. They get shared. Despite the particularities of the context within which they're born, i.e. those place-born idiosyncrasies, transition policies become more like models—they become generic. So we see the way that mobility consultants, visionary mayors, international organisations and transnational engineering firms tend to produce imaginaries that inform actors and publics worldwide. We might compare these to other kinds of ideas and narratives like the liveable city or, for instance, the smart city, where these provide other kinds of generic templates for mobility planning, while specific policies surrounding mobile infrastructures—from cycling schemes to bus rapid transit or BRT—have quite specific origins and trajectories. On the one hand, we see quite specific **movements**, quite specific trajectories, or lines for mobility policy to follow, but on the other, we also see that other movements of transition policy for mobility are not so specific—they are more diffuse; they are more varied. So for example in our Brazilian case of cyclist citizen activism, what we have characterised as drawing on a particularly modern urban and globalised demographic seems to be made up of, or seems to be encouraged by, people that are already inserted into wider global networks which respond to a much wider set of what we could think of as more atmospheric social, political, and economic conditions or backgrounds. So in other words some initiatives do not rely upon so specific circuits of policies of ideas. Some are much more much broader, and much vaguer.

## 2. Exporting transition models through place branding

Producing model examples of low-carbon mobility transition for its exporting and circulation, however, also works by drawing upon places—upon the capital of identity and place. Examples of this could for instance include the support for the production of electric and autonomous vehicles, and we have seen this in different places, for instance, in schemes designed to reinvigorate the South African car production industry. Or in Korea, we see the example of the G-Valley, a place for the development of electric vehicles, which has been encouraged by the partnership of actors using financial incentives, such as tax reduction to encourage electric vehicle production and innovation. Now this of course also draws on other kinds of interest, other local interests that are invested in the branding and place-identity of a city like Seoul as a centre for high-tech industries. In the UK, we see similar kinds of examples for instance: the UK's transport catapult, which has

developed autonomous electric vehicles for what it calls a low-carbon urban transit zone, which has been developed in the city of Milton Keynes and is being praised as a model for future autonomous vehicle innovation. Now in the UK, this has also been matched on a national level by a remarkably low level of regulation, which tries to position the UK as a site for autonomous vehicle research and development. This therefore has ambitions to really capture a global market in this area. Like Seoul, the scheme also married locally, that is it married up with the city of Milton Keynes' aims to become a model for high-tech and low-carbon technologies.

### 3. Harmonising transnational mobility across the EU

Running alongside, but perhaps somewhat counter to these trends, our analysis of the EU & EU policy has revealed how wider global networks and institutions are seeking to attempt to perhaps encourage or motivate transition policies at a slightly different level. They do this at state and transnational scales, relying upon the diffusions and movements of expertise, policy and discourse regarding transition—but still within the EU. So in some respects, we can see that the EU's policies of what we call transnational mobility management, and knowledge exchange, but particularly harmonisation, could appear to undermine what we have just seen, undermining national governments working hard to create their own kind of honeypots for marketable sites of expertise, of policy diffusion, like we have seen in Milton Keynes and elsewhere. So what happens when the EU attempts to harmonise these kinds of policies across the different states? In fact, we see lots of different EU projects that try to detail numerous examples of case studies that move across shared policy networks and we see so-called best practice being recommended, especially through things like awards, recognition and competition. But this potentially levels Europe's market out—or that is at least one argument. And yet we might think of this as another kind of marketization, but just on another sort of scale. So some European leaders see this process as an economic opportunity for Europe. They believe that by levelling out Europe, Europe itself becomes the world's leading exporter of sustainable mobility policies and practices. And they seem to follow the idea that Europe is almost thought of as a laboratory for transition experimentation.

So in conclusion, mobility transitions, as well as the policies and measures that seek to drive them, appear to follow particular liberal and neoliberal logics. As I have argued, these tend to place an emphasis on the individual's choices. So we see words like “devolution” and “responsibilising” taking transition to the lowest possible scales. Second, we thought about the almost financialization of transition, giving rise to what we could think of as market-based products and what are called solutions, as well as the construction of particular kinds of economic transition subjects. And third by turning mobility transition policy into a thing, by turning expertise into a commodity or a model, we saw that

transition policy can be made to flow, can be made to circulate elsewhere.

## Mobility

Broadly, the word mobility can be defined as the intention to move and the realization of this movement in geographical space, implying a social change.

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## Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

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Keywords : [Mobilité](#), [Transition](#), [économie](#)

Disciplines : [Humanities](#), [Social sciences](#), [Economy](#), [law and management](#)

Transport mode(s) : [All modes of transport](#)

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