Re-politicizing Transport with the Right to the City: An Attempt to Mobilise Critical Urban Transport Studies

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Abstract: The contemporary urban transport debates appear to be dominated by an orthodoxy according to which transport is on the one hand perceived through the ‘neoclassical’ lens of utility, efficiency and economic growth, and, on the other, framed within the question of ‘sustainable’ development. We argue that this orthodoxy to a substantial extent functions as a masquerade veiling fundamental political-economic choices embedded in transport planning and practice, hence contributing to a largely technical, descriptive and de-politicised character of urban transport studies. By proposing to re-connect them with explicit political-economic considerations, we intend to mobilize and strengthen critical perspectives on urban transport. To do so, we develop a framework for studying transport practices and policies inspired by Henri Lefebvre’s conceptualization of “the right to the city” and illustrate it with a critical de-construction of the empirical example of a ‘pedestrianisation’ project in Brussels.

Keywords: urban transport, mobility, critical urban geography, right to the city.
1. Introduction.

In January 2014 the municipal authorities of the City of Brussels announced their plan to extend the pedestrian zone in the historic inner-city. Their project aspired to become much more than a major intervention in terms of mobility. While it involved closing off to motorized traffic a part of a Haussmannian boulevard that thus far functioned as major traffic artery cutting across Brussels’ city centre, it also incorporated a complete refurbishment of public spaces re-designed to produce a new centrality around a pedestrian street attracting shoppers, festival-goers and tourists. According to its municipal proponents, the project constituted a bold move in terms of urban development and city marketing, as it intended to give the “capital of Europe” a “new heart” that the mayoral office has dubbed “Brussels’ Times Square” (Colleyn, 2013).

In spite of these aspirational slogans, ‘le pietonnier,’ as it is often called by local media, has sparked a heated debate since its inception. On the one hand, it has been forcefully praised by several citizen movements and public intellectuals for undermining the dominance of car-oriented planning in Brussels, and hence for heralding the vision of a more ‘sustainable,’ ‘attractive’ and ‘liveable’ city centre (Corijn, 2015; Van Parijs, 2012). On the other hand, it has been heavily criticized by numerous and multifaceted groups of shopkeepers, local residents, and other citizen organisations. When focusing on questions of mobility and transport, their critiques have inter alia highlighted the problematic issues of transferring car traffic from the central boulevard towards a network of narrow streets in adjacent neighbourhoods, and relocating bus stops to the limits of the new pedestrian zone, thereby decreasing accessibility to the city centre for public transport users. When offering more general critical evaluations, opponents of the ‘pedestrianisation’ project have pointed out its anticipated detrimental impact on local business, as well as its prospective effect on accelerating speculative real estate projects, likely to put incumbent low-income inhabitants under increasing threat of displacement (ARAU, 2015a; Platform Pentagone, 2015).
In our view, the extension of the pedestrian zone in Brussels’ historic core accurately illustrates a number of key political-economic dimensions that undergird contemporary transport policy and practice. It exemplifies a project that at first sight appears as a harbinger of a more progressive and environmentally-friendly mobility framework, yet actually brackets questions of uneven development, gentrification, class politics, and urban democracy. Beyond this particular case, these political-economic dimensions seem largely absent from most of transport debates, as they seem to be dominated by an exchange between two main strands of academic literature. On the one hand, the issue of urban passenger transport continues being perceived through the lens of utility, efficiency and economic growth, all three expected to be achieved in a ‘neoclassical’ fashion by ‘experts’ utilizing ‘rational’ planning tools such as econometric computation and forecasting models (Girnau and Blennemann, 1989; Grant-Muller et al., 2001). These instruments are developed around a fundamental assumption about individual passengers’ capability to act as rational actors consciously maximizing their utility when choosing a ‘mobility solution’, for instance in the case of opting for a particular trip or transport mode. On the other hand, in an ostensible disagreement with the predominantly economic tenets of the neoclassical approaches, a growing body of researchers has attempted to frame the debate about urban transport as a question of ‘sustainable’ development (Banister, 2008; Hickman et al., 2013). They have highlighted a number of environmental and social problems related to urban transport identified as a key component of a “good city”: dense, diverse, economically vibrant, socially cohesive, and environmentally-friendly. However, while this conceptualisation has offered numerous policy templates—including car- and bicycle-sharing systems, electric vehicles, congestion charging, and pedestrianisation of central urban boulevards (Reigner et al., 2013)—the solutions and ‘fixes’ it advances are of primarily technological and behavioural nature. It has failed to propose broad, explicitly political conceptualisations of transport issues, leaving unanswered the fundamental question about what sustainability actually wants to sustain.
We argue that the debate between the proponents of “neoclassical” and “sustainable” perspectives to a substantial extent functions as a masquerade veiling fundamental political-economic choices embedded in transport planning and practice, hence contributing to a largely technical, descriptive and de-politicised character of urban transport studies (Kęblowski et al., 2015). The pressing need to understand political-economic issues shaping transport—that is, questions related to uneven distribution of transport-related costs and benefits in economic, political or symbolic terms—(Henderson, 2009; MacKinnon and Shaw, 2010; McCall, 1977; Wood, 2014) calls for the mobilization of more critical approaches. These would break altogether with, on the one hand, the dominant preoccupations with economic rationales and neo-classical formulas, and, on the other, the continuous infatuation with ‘sustainable,’ ‘smart’ or ‘green’ technological innovations and the emphasis on individual behaviours. Despite calls for an explicit focus on social, political, and economic relations as well as on regulatory frameworks underpinning transport (Schwanen, 2016; Shaw and Sidaway, 2011), critical perspectives on urban transport remain fragmented, their fuzziness and frailty being mirrored by the lack of coherent political agenda and dispersion of knowledge about transport in actual urban policies. At the same time, there have appeared a number of ‘critical’ transport initiatives including participative transport planning in Santiago (Sagaris, 2014), the abolishment of public transport fares in Tallinn (Cats et al., 2016), or the planned radical reduction of car presence in Hamburg and Madrid (O’Sullivan, 2014). While these practices claim to offer a more progressive, inclusive and just approach to the way transport and policy infrastructure take shape, they are not impervious to forces of “alter-washing”, that is, attempts at institutionalising, hijacking or aligning them to the neoclassical-sustainable orthodoxy.

Therefore, the main objective of the paper is to re-politicise the debate on transport and mobility by re-connecting it with explicit political-economic considerations, and thereby to mobilize and strengthen critical urban transport studies by offering a framework for studying transport practices and policies. To do so, we find inspiration in contributions (Corsín Jiménez, 2014; Jouffe, 2010; Kęblowski
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and Van Criekingen, 2014; Kusters, 2016; Levy, 2013; Scott, 2013) that have proposed to critically scrutinise urban policies and practices through the lens provided by Henri Lefebvre's conceptualization of “the right to the city” (RTTC) (Lefebvre, [1968] 1996). In our view, the relevance of this approach in terms of analysing policies and practices related to transport and mobility lies in Lefebvre's insistence that the essence of any urban theory or policy claiming a genuinely “critical” character lies in foregrounding the use value of urban space to the detriment of exchange values. This entails a strategy dedicated to transfer power over the appropriation and production of urban space away from for-profit and pro-growth politics driven by market actors and state technocracies, and towards politics of the inhabitants—all the more so in contexts where urban economies are not delivering substantial job creation and welfare redistribution policies are severely attacked. This strategy ensures that inhabitants' participation in framing transport policies and practices acquires a genuinely transformative and empowering character, relates in a holistic manner these policies and practices to broader agendas of urban development and governance, and places them in a long-term, utopian perspective—rather than reduce them to as blueprints of ‘fast’ policy solutions and ‘fixes’. By proposing to study transport policies and practices against this framework we hope not only to reveal a series of political-economic aspects that underpin and mould them, and to highlight their achievements and deficiencies, but also help to systematize recent efforts at conducting critical investigations into urban transport.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section discusses the largely depoliticised condition of urban transport debate. Section 3 provides a non-exhaustive review of approaches critical of this condition, and, in the light of their frailty, explores how the theoretical lens provided by Henri Lefebvre could act as a catalyst to mobilize critical urban transport studies. Inspired by his concept of “the right of the city,” section 4 presents a theoretical framework for analysing transport policies and practices, in which the project of pedestrian zone in Brussels serves as an empirical vignette. Its analysis leads to a conclusive remark (in section 5) about the fundamental role of political-economic dimensions in shaping
contradictions of contemporary transport policies which, while seemingly limited to the field of mobility, appear to invoke a variety of questions relating to urban development agendas writ large.

2. A de-politicised debate on urban transport

The process of setting of transport agendas is repeatedly depicted as a response to primarily technocratic challenges and a result of matter-of-fact tasks that advance the “successful” implementation of “good,” “pragmatic,” and predominantly “rational” solutions and technological “best practices,” to which no alternative seems to exist. Continuously conjugated contemporary buzzwords of “sustainability,” “governance,” “urban design,” and “smartness” have become common ingredients of mobility-related panacea—of which the policy of transforming parts of city centres into pedestrian zones is but one example (Reigner et al., 2013)—that effectively conceal the fundamental role of social and political structures on transport research, policy and practice (Debnath et al., 2014; Eichhorst et al., 2011; Holden and Norland, 2005). They employ what Marcuse (2015) identifies as “one-dimensional language that closes off examination of critical questions as to what is really going on in the world. Its political content is wiped out [as] it supports the status quo, implicitly suggesting that, if there are difficulties, they are subject to correction within existing structures and with existing means” (p. 153-4). Paradoxically, turning a blind eye to ideological and political aspects in thus de-politicised transport debates obfuscates an essentially political, neoliberal agenda that advances splintering (Graham and Marvin, 2001) and entrepreneurial (Harvey, 1989) practices. This trend hinges on three main components.

First, it upholds the neoclassical ontology according to which territorial connectivity can be monetized and maximized through more fluid traffic management to play central role in growth-oriented urban agendas. Mobility is thus no longer primarily conceptualised as a framework for moving people and goods, but also
a key component of public-private land rent valorisation strategies, and a territorial asset in inter-urban competition for external financial and social capital (Medda, 2012; Mullen and Marsden, 2015). This approach conforms to the logic of prioritizing supply-side interventions aimed at improving market conditions for investors, and leads various urban actors to attempt to ‘re-brand’ and ‘re-imagine’ their cities by seeking “fast solutions” and “policies-that-work”—a process that has embraced transport policies (Wood, 2014). Yet the repertoire of ready-made “recipes” that circulate among cities—often irrespective of contextual differences—is greatly limited. The resultant standardization of urban transport policy models and practices translates into construction of strikingly similar transport infrastructure reproduced in a near-uniform fashion across a plethora of urban contexts. In France, for instance, this phenomenon has led urban activists to raise questions about the supposed social and economic benefits of such infrastructural developments, and to denounce them as ‘major useless projects’ (Camille, 2015). A number of their cases can be found in “best practice” urban transport portfolios, which include inter alia “pedestrianisation” of urban boulevards, creation of bicycle-sharing systems, installation of congestion charging, construction of large-scale “starchitectural” transport hubs (e.g. railway stations and airports), often embedded in urban renewal and embellishment programmes. Meanwhile, the ever-increasing mobility of transport policy ‘fixes’ and ‘fads’ is inversely proportionate to the rather slow circulation of knowledge about potential socio-spatial costs they may generate, such as real-estate speculation or gentrification (Reigner et al., 2013).

Second, formulating transport studies as a de-politicized field has helped deepen various forms of spatial splintering (Graham and Marvin, 2001). Investment in infrastructural “spatial fixes” (Harvey, 2014) linking “premium networked spaces” (Graham, 2000), identified as one of key policy schemes, leads to improvement of connectivity between strategic nodes and corridors that is expected to generate “trickle-down” and “spillover” effects. Furthermore, while historic urban cores are designated to be “protected” or “saved” from the automobile, large-scale car infrastructure including expressways, parking lots and logistics
parks is concomitantly developed in suburban areas. Spaces of mobility in inner-cities are subject to a further vertical split: while ‘soft’ modes and public transport are given a more prominent position on the surface, highways and car parks are often moved into the underground, hence keeping issues of automobility out of sight and untouched (Reigner et al., 2009).

Third, the de-politicisation of the transport agenda has entailed an exacerbation of transport-related social variegations. By paying insufficient attention to the highly uneven character of day-to-day choices made between different modes, destinations and lifestyles, the proponents of sustainable transport (Banister, 2008; Hickman et al., 2013) have contributed to a rationality that holds individuals accountable for both creating and solving transport problems. As Reigner (2016, p. 5) puts it, “through their behaviour and choices, individuals are considered as being the source of problems (air pollution, road insecurity, traffic congestion, etc.) while holding the keys to solving [them].” This perspective operates in tune with a shift of the function of public transport from providing equal accessibility to all, to increasing transport options (e.g. vis-à-vis the car) for the benefit of social classes that are highly mobile already (Geurs et al., 2009). Public transport is thus increasingly conceptualised not as a common good, but rather as a service first catering for selected social groups and users—the more affluent, privileged city residents and users, the “visitor class” (Eisinger, 2000), or the “creative class” (Florida, 2002)—who are offered better access to a wider variety of “mobility solutions” while the overall quality of transport services diminishes and becomes more uneven (Dibben, 2006; MacKinnon and Shaw, 2010). Critical transport researchers have thus demonstrated how transport projects that supposedly contribute to urban “quality of life” and promote a “return” to the “dense” city, hinge on a hierarchisation of urban classes, behaviours and territories in the name of urban marketing, allowing to disregard social and political costs generated, including gentrification (Jones and Lucas, 2012; Reigner et al., 2013).
3. Critical transport theories and allegedly critical transport practices: systematising theory and praxis with Lefebvre's right to the city.

While de-politicization of urban transport has entered the policy mainstream across a stunning variety of cities, numerous theoretical contributions have attempted to re-politicize transport theory by explicitly recognizing socio-political processes, power relations and dynamics, norms and regulatory frameworks that condition mobility (Aldred, 2012; Butcher, 2011; Enright, 2013; Levy, 2013; Reigner, 2016; Schwanen et al., 2011; Timms et al., 2014). A particularly influential addition to what we identify as “critical” approaches to urban transport theory is the proposal to recognize the “mobility turn” in social sciences (Sheller and Urry, 2006). By joining perspectives provided by social sciences, geography, cultural studies, political studies and ethics (Cresswell, 2010; Sheller, 2014; Urry, 2000) the proponents of the mobility turn question the spatially fixed and scalar perspective on mobility. On the one hand, they acknowledge the “need to imagine questions, methodologies, and epistemologies beyond those bequeathed to us by economists and civil engineers” (Hanson, 2006, p. 232), proposing inter alia to perceive mobility as an activity that has a value in itself (Jain and Lyons, 2008). On the other hand, however, they have seldom engaged in debates about social unevenness of mobility, let alone have studied its relation with the issue of class.

Following Urry's (2002) work on mobility-related inequalities, Kaufmann et al. (2004) further conceptualised mobility as a form of capital—termed “motility”—that is unevenly distributed among social classes and individuals. For many scholars, speed and mobility constitute a discriminatory norm that may assume a controlling and disciplining role (Borja et al., 2013; Reigner, 2016), and hence functions as a ‘mobility dispositive’ that heralds a highly individualistic and de-socialized vision of ‘free-to-move’ subjects put under ever-increasing pressure to become an ever-more flexible and mobile citizen, worker and consumer (Cass and Manderscheid, 2010). A variety of contributions to transport studies have therefore scrutinised how this pressure relates to a wide range of social issues including (but not limited to) class, gender, race, ethnicity, disability and age.
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Therefrom has emerged a proposal to consider transport as a common good and major contributor to social justice, rather than to market it as a commodity for which different social groups and territories are supposed to compete (Gössling, 2016). A framework for a just re-distribution of transport service has been put forth which—in radical departure from the neoclassical transport forecasting and the cost-benefit analysis—applies “the criterion of need” instead of the criterion of demand (Martens, 2006). This approach resounds in calls for the “right to mobility” (Blickstein, 2010; Cresswell, 2006) as well as those demanding “the right to immobility” (Cass and Manderscheid, 2010; Orfeuil, 2011) understood as a challenge to the capitalist growth economy championing liberal-individual norm of ‘free-to-move’ mobility.

However path-breaking the recent theoretical contributions to critical approaches to transport may be, in our view they have not yet provided a sufficiently comprehensive and systematic framework to assess the actual nature of existing, allegedly ‘critical’ urban policy models and practices. In the last decade such ‘critical’ transport initiatives have sprung up in cities across the globe, often related to the activity of urban social movements. Despite operating in very different local contexts, their message is strikingly coherent. Whether protesting against the increase of public transport fares across Brazilian cities (Bialakowsky et al., 2014), opposing the construction of highway bridge in Istanbul (Voulvouli, 2011), destroying urban light rail stations in East Jerusalem (Barghouti, 2009), or contesting the development of high-speed rail link cutting across Stuttgart (Novy and Peters, 2012), citizen groups have formulated their transport-related demands in a wider context of political struggles for more democratic urban decision-making and citizen appropriation of urban space. Their resistance against increasingly fragmented and non-democratic development of transport infrastructure and policy has thus become one of “emblematic quilting point[s] [representing] a desire for a fully-fledged transformation of the political structuring of life, against
exclusive, oligarchic, and consensual governance” (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014, p. 3).

This desire has inspired a variety of practices that claim to offer a more progressive, inclusive and just approach to the way transport and policy infrastructure take shape. However, the numerous cases of “alter-washing”—i.e. institutionalization, diversion or hijacking of policies and practices “alternative” to the mainstream institutions and agendas—suggest that the potential of these practices to represent critical perspectives on transport cannot be taken for granted. Important contextual differences leading the apparently similar “critical” policy models to produce drastically variegated outcomes in different urban milieus, as it is in the case of participatory budgeting (Kęblowski and Van Criekingen, 2014), must also be considered, requiring careful and critical examinations.

We argue that Henri Lefebvre’s [1968] (1996) notion of “the right to the city” (RTTC) may be fundamental in this regard. In our view, it may inspire a more coherent, theoretically robust and empirically applicable framework to analyse urban transport policy models and practices. Looking at them through Lefebvre’s lens—a project that draws inspiration from Corsín Jiménez (2014), Jouffe (2010), Kusters (2016), Levy (2013), and Scott (2013)—we hope to connect the fragmented critical approaches to transport with the well-established traditions of critical urban studies. According to Brenner (2009), their main tenet lies in the continuous strive to expose power-relations underpinning urban policy and practice and to “reject instrumentalist, technocratic and market-driven forms of urban analysis that promote the maintenance and reproduction of extant urban formations” (p. 204). Hence, their aim is to “excavate possibilities for alternative, radically emancipatory forms of urbanism that are latent, yet systemically suppressed” (Ibid.)—a mission statement that we adopt to contribute to a genuine re-politicization of the debate on urban transport policy and practice.

To achieve this, we identify the primary relevance of the RTTC in Lefebvre’s insistence that one of key attributes of any urban theory or policy claiming a genuine-
ly “critical” character would lie in foregrounding the use value of urban space to the detriment of exchange values. Thus conceptualised strategy dedicated to transfer power over the appropriation and production of urban space out from the market’s and state’s hands, to those of the inhabitants (Purcell, 2002, 2014), opens the path to genuinely re-politicize urban issues. Consequently, we feel encouraged to use Lefebvre’s theory as a catalyst allowing to re-embed transport and mobility questions within explicit political-economic urban considerations and thus systematize critical transport studies. We also refer to Lefebvre to analyse and possibly to strengthen “practices and ideas that are already taking place in the city, practices and ideas that are inchoate, that have not yet come to full maturity, but are nevertheless being expressed” (Purcell, 2013, p. 23).

The point here, however, is not to advocate RTTC as another addition to the list of existing liberal-democratic rights to separate socio-economic aspects such as housing, natural resources, aesthetics, education, healthcare or, last but not least, to transport and mobility (as suggested by Attoh, 2011). Neither is it our ambition to engage in a debate about what RTTC is (or is not), by whom it should be claimed (and by whom not) and how should it be put into practice (or not), or to transpose Lefebvre’s theory onto banners calling for creating new “ideal-type” practices that would “embody” or “realize” the right to the city. Rather, our aim is to use RTTC as a heuristic to detect political-economic contradictions underpinning urban policies and practices. To this end, we propose an analytical framework that builds on RTTC as a radical antidote that cuts through discursive veils surrounding material effects of transport agendas, and consequently opposes “easy” alternatives, that is, policy practices that—despite their alleged ‘critical’ dimension—leave untouched the positions of those who dominate the capitalist production of space, or install dominant actors in a position to co-opt and legitimize some “innovations” from civil society, while repressing others.
4. A RTTC-inspired framework for transport analysis and action

The framework we are proposing below refers to four fundamental elements of RTTC combined with insights from contemporary critical literature on citizen participation in urban planning. The theoretical discussion about political-economic contradictions it helps to detect is illustrated with a critical de-construction of the empirical example of pedestrianisation project in Brussels (see Figure 1).

*Figure 1.* The extended pedestrian zone in Brussels’ historic inner city (in pink), as presented in January 2014, compared to the existing pedestrian area (in green). Source: Ville de Bruxelles, “Un nouveau cœur pour Bruxelles” (“A new heart for Brussels”), Press dossier, January 31, 2014.
4.1. Participation: Enabling appropriation and production of urban space

Given the centrality of users and use values of urban space in Lefebvre’s conceptualization, participation is an undoubtedly key component in any possible operationalization of his call. While participation may help to widen the spectrum of stakeholders in transport-related formal decision-making (Batterbury, 2003), its relationship with transport policy remains weak (Legacy, 2015). Moreover, as anticipated by Lefebvre, experiences of citizen involvement in urban policy-making have now proven to entail highly controversial practices in many different urban contexts. This has even brought some critical scholars to conclude that participation is “entirely appropriate to the neoliberal age” (Baierle, 2010, p. 14), or, more subtly, that urban entrepreneurial agendas are prone to harness citizens’ participation in “thinly veiled attempts at securing legitimacy for and cooperation with policies already adopted that favour capitalist growth” (Silver et al., 2010, p. 454; see also Huisman, 2014). This perspective has often been adopted by the proponents of the sustainable approaches to transport (Epprecht et al., 2014; Isaksson and Richardson, 2009), for whom the underpinning goal of citizen participation is to build acceptability for “good” policy solutions, rather than staging a genuinely political debate in which a variety of transport scenarios could be considered.

Contra utilizing citizen participation as political instrument for legitimacy-building and consensus-forcing, the concept of the right the city provides a lens through which transport is assessed against it capacity to become geared towards the appropriation and production of urban space by its inhabitants. The reference to the appropriation of space stretches far beyond the possibility for urban dwellers to physically occupy existing urban space (Mitchell, 2003). According to Lefebvre (1970) (2003), appropriation introduces a fundamental change in terms of how urban space is produced. It involves a radical transition from “abstract space” dominated by its economic function and exchange values to “differential space” in which use values are the centrepiece (Lefebvre, 1966). Considered from this standpoint, transport constitutes “a use value that has become a necessity for urban inhabitants” (Levy, 2013, p. 12). This signals a strategy that Lefebvre calls
autogestion. The term—which literally means “self-management” but perhaps is better translated as “workers’ control” (Brenner and Elden, 2009)—denotes a process that introduces citizen control of the city by and for its citizenry. The control of decision-making and consequent radical decentralisation of spatial governance is envisioned to regard the totality of urban issues—including those related to transport and mobility.

The strategy of autogestion begins with a more participative, inclusive transport debate that directly responds to diverse and unequal needs and capacities among potential participants, and poses a fundamental question about the audience of transport policies and practices. Inclusivity further implies an interactive process that embraces participants—citizens and experts—in an empowering mutual learning experience approached “as a right, not just the means” (Pretty, 1995, p. 1252). This further entails a deliberative character, as participative urban debate on transport may provide a possibility both to achieve consensus and to formulate and voice potential conflict and dissent. We argue that thus opened path towards autogestion, despite its strong emphasis on self-organisation and grassroots forces, whereby people actively take up the project of managing their own affair for themselves” (Purcell, 2013, p. 37), need not radically exclude state institutions, and may be well reconciling institutional ("top-down") and non-institutional ("bottom-up") elements, motivations and processes. In Lefebvre’s own words, herein lies

“the principal contradiction that autogestion introduces [...]. In essence, autogestion calls the State into question as a constraining force erected above society as a whole, capturing and demanding the rationality that is inherent to social relations (to social practice). [At the same time,] autogestion tends to reorganize the State as a function of its development, which is to say it tends to engender the State's withering away” (Lefebvre, [1966] (2009), p. 147).

In our view, the failures of informal transport practices to incorporate long-term progressive agendas (Cervero and Golub, 2007) confirm the potential of including
Figure 2. The marketing campaign surrounding the extension of pedestrian zone in Brussels city centre incorporates participatory slogans. It calls its users to “imagine tomorrow” (top-left) and “make the heart of Brussels beat, together” (bottom-right).
Source: Mathieu Van Criekingen.

the state—rather than rejecting it altogether—in the radical shift envisioned by Lefebvre.

Citizen participation has been heavily publicized by the promoters of the newly planned pedestrian zone in Brussels’ city centre (see Figure 2). However, it has involved merely conducting a street-level survey with passers-by, holding a handful of public meetings formally open to everyone, and organising a series of working groups bringing together a limited number of (officially) randomly-selected citizens. The deeply un-deliberative and un-interactive character of these
participatory moments has been exposed by many of their participants (Frenay and Frenay, 2016; ARAU, 2015). They have further denounced the predominantly informative character of the process, as its primary role was to provide city planners with a platform to communicate their objectives and ambitions to citizens. This was done without much latitude—if any—for the discussion of the various impacts of the project and a fortiori for the discussion of alternative proposals. Only secondary issues were left open to deliberation, most of them focusing on the design and aesthetics of the public spaces to be refurbished once the zone closed to motorized traffic. Moreover, contested mobility-related questions were consistently uncoupled from issues of housing development, retail change or the regulation of uses of public spaces in and around the newly-pedestrianized area. Accordingly, the authorities of the City of Brussels appear to have utilized participation as a means of fostering a form of individually-based adhesion to the project, while trying to circumvent and downplay the influence of existing citizen organisations. This strategy, however, has not proven fully efficient, since several existing organisations came together in a new platform—“Platform Pentagone”—to voice their disagreement through press conferences, street demonstrations and petitions, and to engage in legal recourse against the granting of planning permit.\(^1\) Despite being pushed out the window, the genuinely political character of urban mobility issues—and related issues of urban change—has repeatedly crept in through the back door.

4.2. Power: Revealing and challenging its existing configurations

Appropriation of urban space through autogestion further questions the extent to which transport enables inhabitants to reveal and consequently challenge the existing configurations of power. The point here is not to involve citizens that are “friendly to innovation” in “small-scale participatory efforts” that merely complement existing transport planning paradigms (Sagaris, 2014, pp. 75, 79). Instead,

\(^{1}\) See http://www.platformpentagone.be
the newly-appropriated participatory decision-making process refuses to join the arsenal of de-politicised, consent-manufacturing techniques and thereby defies “technocratic thought [that] oscillates between the representation of empty space, nearly geometric, occupied only by concepts, by the most rational logics and strategies, and the representation of a permeated space, occupied by the results of those logics and strategies. They fail to perceive that every space is a product [that] results from relationships of production that are taken control of by an active group.” (Lefebvre, 1970, p. 154)

Thus conceptualised critical approach to urban transport resists becoming obscured by the blind belief in technological innovations, and refuses the invitation to join the continuous search in the dark for brand new technocratic frameworks and solutions to age-old political problems (Geels, 2012). Instead, the RTTC-inspired perspective clearly identifies the full potential of (often already existing and established) social and political innovations in terms of tackling the issue of uneven socio-spatial relations and power dynamics that continuously shape transport policy and practice. This means that critical transport policies and practices acquire a redistributive character in terms of decision-making, becoming co-created with and by, not for inhabitants. In other words, enabling city-dwellers to engage in an inclusive, interactive and deliberative debate is not enough as long as it does not lead up to transferring of significant power over means of production of transport agendas—explicitly highlighted as political—towards city-dwellers. Therefore, the reference to the strategy of autogestion opens the fundamental question about the agency of passengers and employees of transport systems and mobility authorities. Rather than being reduced to the role of customers, digits or zero-hour contractors, all transport ‘participants’ are approached as political actors, whose potential—or perhaps even right—to act as not only co-discussants, but also co-managers of transport policies, practices and infrastructures is examined by critical transport research.

Pedestrianisation in Brussels appears to directly adhere to Lefebvre's call to “limit the rights and powers of the automobile” (Lefebvre, [1970] 2003, p. 18) as a pro-
foundly political, “key object” that renders power-relations drastically uneven, destroys social relations and subjects urban space to dictate of technology for circulation, commodification and consumption (Elden, 2004, pp. 145–146). According to its public promoters, the pedestrianisation project in Brussels’s centre is political as it supposedly represents a turning point in terms of redistribution of power over urban planning: away from car-oriented and functionalist planning and towards a “people-oriented” city centre enabling inhabitants and visitors to “re-appropriate” its streets and squares, in the spirit of new urbanist guidelines developed inter alia by the Danish architect Jan Gehl, whom local policy-makers and journalists cite as one of their main sources of inspiration (Vermeersch and Hendrickx, 2016). Some supporters of the project even make the point that it would bring a much welcome opening of the urban governance of Brussels, claiming that “a 20-year long debate about the development of the city centre has been moved on. A city for its inhabitants, visitors and urban flâneurs. For the first time, it is up to the car user to adapt [...] We must understand this change. The order of priorities has been reversed [...] The new pedestrian downtown is an urban development project bearing a large impact on collective imaginary. The governance of Brussels may have really taken a different course.” (Corijn, 2015)

Yet, a closer look at the project suggests that interpreting it as a herald of a new urban planning model that significantly downplays the importance of car mobility in Brussels is an instance of wishful thinking. For the project entails the addition of 1,600 parking spots in three new underground car parks located in immediate proximity to the pedestrian zone to the existing 19,000 underground parking spots in the central city, while pushing away from its territorial limits a number of surface public transport services. In this sense, the extension of the pedestrian zone in Brussels’ centre cements—rather than questions—the local mobility paradigm. The pedestrianisation project has barely altered the existing governance frameworks that continue to produce socio-spatially uneven transport policies as a result of which private motorised vehicles continue to occupy

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2 Translation from French by the authors.
urban space to the detriment of public transport, cycling and walking. Except for a new clustering of existing citizen groups in a new platform, no new significant stakeholders have emerged that would for instance lead to an empowerment of public transport users vis-à-vis car owners and road-and-parking construction lobbies.

The political dimension of the pedestrianisation project appears to lie elsewhere. Contra repeated claims by its proponents, it may be understood as an attempt to significantly reinforce an elite-driven urban strategy devoted to bring Brussels’ central city—now still largely populated by low-income population groups—to its ‘highest and best use’ through the attraction of high rent-yielding functions such as upscale housing, franchise retail and new tourist equipment such as ‘Belgian Beer Palace’ capped with a giant waffle-shaped sculpture.

4.3. Beyond the right to mobility: concerning all aspects of urban environment

Surely, the challenge to existing power-relations determining transport policy must enable an effective transformation of mobility patterns. However, contra the proponents of “sustainable mobility,” research emerging from the RTTC-inspired approach might not be limited to studying and encouraging alterations of individual mobility behaviours or a shift from one mode (e.g. private cars) to another (e.g. public transport or cycling). Instead, genuinely critical investigations into urban transport could reach beyond a mobility-centred perspective to embrace all aspects of urban development. Since Lefebvre applies the term “city” as “a synecdoche for society” (Marcuse, 2009, p. 244), seen through his lens, critical urban transport is not about transport alone, but also about its impact on a plethora of social, economic, political, built and aesthetic dimensions of space (Purcell, 2014). Besides inquiring about the holistic and multi-scalar potential of transport policies and practices—their (in)capacity to reach beyond administrative boundaries, parochial spaces and interests—this approach further entails highlighting the political-economic underpinnings of the relationship between transport and climate change, the centrality and urgency of the latter Lefebvre
perhaps did not fully foresee. Critical urban transport studies thus openly admit and anticipate the catastrophic consequences of the finite character of carbon-based energy resources combined with “an open-ended drive for ‘growth’ and ‘development’” (Atkinson, 2008, p. 81), thereby conceptualising critical practices as seeds for a fundamental change of spatial and socio-economic relations in the post-carbon city.

A RTTC-inspired critical framework thus goes beyond the oft-formulated calls for “the right to mobility”: a simplistic slogan that obfuscates major social and environmental consequences of unlimited and unconditional movement. The postulate of providing equal access to mobility—or its particular forms, modes and practices—appears equally controversial. For “the right to an accessible city diverts it into the neoliberal order” (Jouffe, 2010, p. 43), further justifying and reproducing uneven socio-spatial competition among evermore dispersed inhabitants and workers, intensified by the processes of commuting and urban sprawl. After all, providing individuals with better access to mobility is not the ultimate solution to solving systemic undersupply of jobs, affordable housing, educational and leisure facilities.

This leads a RTTC-inspired critical perspective on urban transport to break with portrayals of mobility as a “natural” or [...] ‘god given” phenomenon (Levy, 2013, p. 8) or social norm. Instead of centering on the search for more efficient mobility patterns and more environmentally-friendly energy sources that could help to sustain current mobility levels (Geels, 2012), the critical perspective recognizes the need to radically reduce them. This opens the question about the central position of mobility as cornerstone of urban development, and foregrounds the necessity to provide urban inhabitants with the choice (or right) not to live in a perpetual motion (Garnier, 2014)—a perspective that resounds in Lefebvre's calls for the right to centrality (Lefebvre, 1970) and proximity (Jouffe, 2010).

The Brussels example shows that such a holistic vision is not achieved easily. Throughout the development of the pedestrianisation project in Brussels, its public promoters have consistently sought to keep discussions of the many inter-
connected dimensions of the project—including mobility, real estate development, retail change, and streetscape design—separated from one other. Notably, parallel planning procedures have been used to give mobility and public space refurbishment their respective legal foundations, while systematically refusing to launch a comprehensive impact studies concerning the multiple facets of the project. Furthermore, the governance of the project has been held firmly in the hands of the sole Brussels’ municipal authorities, although the zone covered by the pedestrianisation plan lies at the centre of an urban region exceeding by far the limits of the municipality. This lack of multi-scalar perspective was notably made clear with the attempts of the municipal authorities to impose their views on the regional public transport operator, eventually forcing the latter to accept a reduced public transport service in the city centre.

4.4. An “urgent utopia” on the horizon: reaching beyond existing socio-spatial configurations.

Put this way, critical urban transport studies are prompted to acquire an inherently transformative character, inspiring a continuous reflection on transport policy and practice that looks beyond existing socio-spatial configurations and institutional frameworks. In this way, critical transport puts forward the need for an “urgent utopia” and “the possible urban” (Purcell, 2014), directly building on Lefebvre’s recognition of urban society as a “virtual object” (Lefebvre, [1970] 2003, p. 16). This process employs Lefebvre’s progressive strategy of “transduction, [...] cut[ting] a path that leads beyond the actual world already realized and toward a possible world yet to come” (Purcell, 2013, p. 21). Seeking such a world encourages RTTC-inspires critical transport practices to advance towards the ‘horizon’ in a continuous and self-reflective manner, rather than provides clear-cut, off-the-shelf replicable models. As noted by Brenner (2009) “critical theory is [...] not intended to serve as a formula for any particular course of social change; it is not a strategic map for social change; and it is not a ‘how to’-style guidebook
Figure 3. The expansion of the pedestrian zone in Brussels’ centre appears to champion a vision of a middle-class city ultimately liberated from any kind of divisions, inequalities, or power struggles, and turned into an attractive shopping and leisure environment for residents and visitors alike. Source: Ville de Bruxelles, “Ensemble faisons battre le cœur de Bruxelles” (“Make the heart of Brussels beat, together”), Press dossier, March 2016.

for social movements” (p. 201). The framework proposed above is therefore as much about assessing tangible results, as it is about investigating and delineating a process towards achieving them.

Looking at the visualisations of the future pedestrian zone displayed by the Brussels’ municipal authorities (see Figure 3), one could interpret the project as theoretically championing a vision of a middle-class city ultimately liberated from any kind of divisions, inequalities, or power struggle and turned into an attractive environment offering 24/7 shopping and leisure options to residents and visitors alike. However, the ways in which the newly-expanded pedestrian area has thus
far been practiced and appropriated are more complicated: among its users are not only middle-class visitors and tourists, but also residents of nearby inner-city working-class neighbourhoods and the homeless. This contradiction might indicate the project might not necessarily realise the initial expectations of its municipal proponents, who had originally conceived as a singular ‘fix’ and ready-made recipe taken from urban managerial cookbooks tested elsewhere, referring to Copenhagen, New York, and Strasbourg as inspiring ‘best practices.’ Instead, the ongoing public debate and fierce contestation by a various social groups has perhaps transformed ‘le pietonnier’ into a more open-ended project, and its horizon is yet to be identified.

5. Conclusion

The main purpose of this paper lies in providing a response to de-politicisation of the debate on urban transport and mobility, which in our view has been dominated by neoclassical and sustainable concerns obfuscating its fundamental political-economic underpinnings. In our attempt to re-politicise urban transport theory and practice, and hence to mobilize and strengthen critical urban transport studies, we have found a useful theoretical reference in Henri Lefebvre’s conceptualization of “the right to the city”: a tool conceived to analyse and strengthen allegedly critical urban practices, including those related to transport. Thus constructed analytical and explicitly normative framework helps seek and reveal political-economic contradictions that shape transport policies and practices. It is not to be read as a checklist of unambiguous or objective parameters, as none of the concepts offered by Lefebvre—including RTTC and autogestion—are meant to function as ready-made models. Rather than help to distinguish a pure, global and cross-contextual blueprint of critical transport, they highlight a multi-faceted and complex evolution that is locally situated. Instead of seeking de-politicised ‘fixes’ and ‘recipes’ from elsewhere, it is built around an analysis of how different positions and stakes in situ condition transport policies and prac-
This approach encourages researchers, activists and policy-makers to pose a variety of questions that are seldom on the transport agenda—about the modalities of citizen participation around transport policies and practices; about the power dynamics underpinning and affected by them; about their relation to broad agendas of urban development, beyond mobility; and about their utopian dimension.

To demonstrate how the analytical framework works in practice, we have briefly looked at the case of the extension of the inner-city pedestrian zone in Brussels. This empirical vignette exemplifies the fundamental role of political-economic dimensions in shaping contradictions of contemporary transport policies, demonstrating that ostensibly progressive and ‘critical’ intentions in terms of challenging local mobility and urban planning paradigms do not necessarily translate into participative, transformative and utopian practices. It shows that decisions seemingly limited to the field of transport and mobility—such as banning cars from the inner-city—may often invoke a variety of social, economic and political questions that relating to urban development agendas writ large. Ultimately, the pedestrianization example in Brussels raises the urgency of re-embedding transport within urban studies, and more specifically within urban political economy approaches, as a powerful toolbox to start unveiling how transport policies are part and parcel of a largely depoliticized redistribution exercise towards (socially) mobile members in society.

The challenge of effectively analysing allegedly critical urban transport ideas is far from complete. Their claim to make our cities more equal and less socio-spatially uneven—for instance through radical suppression of car mobility, abolishment of public transport fares or opening of transport policy-making to bottom-up groups—should further be studied in thorough and comprehensive way, and in multiple local contexts. Lefebvre’s work may be a true inspiration in the path towards our better understanding, and ultimately our strengthening of these critical transport innovations.
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