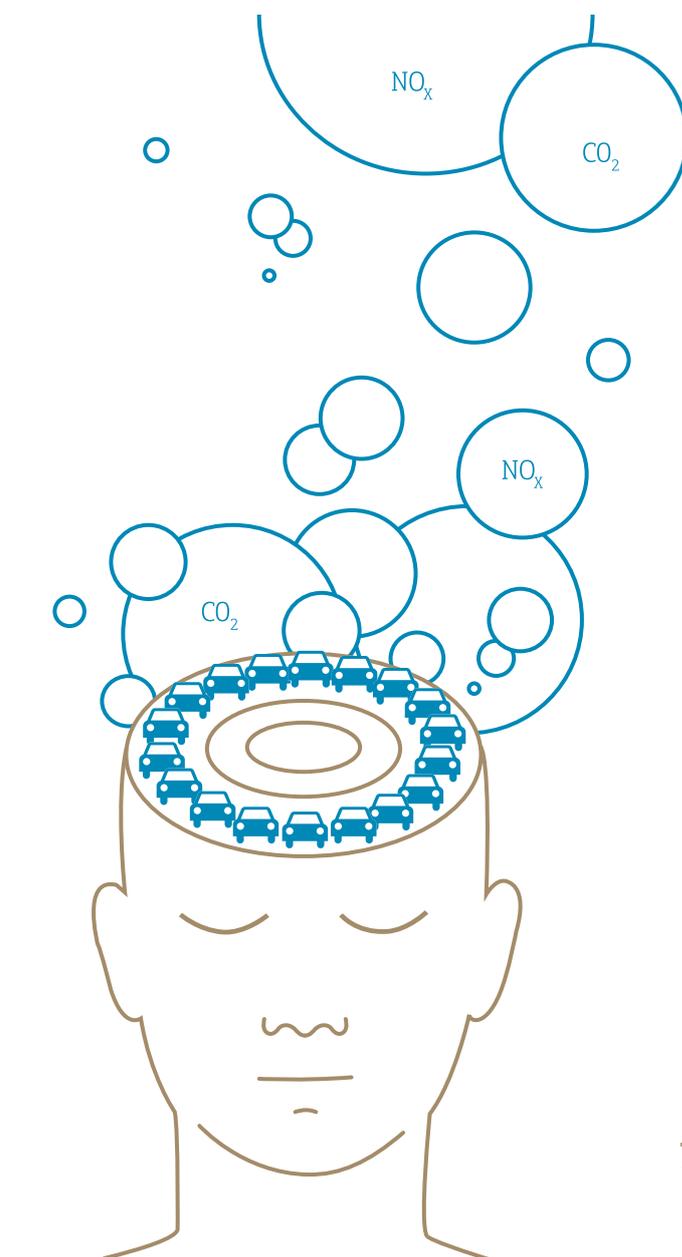


We are gridlocked

Andreas Knie and Weert Canzler

There are things that scientists simply refuse to get excited about, and transport is a prime example. To be sure, there are still a few chairs devoted to the economic aspects of transport, and technological developments in the various modes of transport – roads, rails, air, and water – remain a part of academic teaching and research. Urban and regional planning are also well-established disciplines with various areas of concentration. But, what about studies of mobility? Questions about how and why people move about in space, and about the circumstances under which changes might be feasible in this context do not play a role in the social science disciplines one would expect to consider such questions. Human behavior in traffic is so caught up in routine and impossible to change that it simply doesn't make for an appealing object of sociological inquiry.

As a consequence, the sociology of transport is virtually non-existent as a subject of academic teaching and research. This is a tragic situation, given that the issue of mobility is linked to one of the vital questions facing modern economies. By 2020, for example, the transport of people and goods will require about 50 percent of the primary energy demand in Germany alone, with the share of fossil fuels used exceeding 90 percent. That is also why transport is the only sector in which CO₂ emis-



sions – compared to those in 1990 – continue to rise to this day. This situation exists despite the fact the German federal government has committed itself in binding treaties under international law to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 40 percent by 2030.

German municipalities are helplessly turning to the administrative courts. Not only has transport kept emitting ever more greenhouse gases; for years the output of other environmentally dangerous substances has failed to decline. The limit on nitrogen oxides, set by the EU as early as 2010, is

regularly exceeded in more than 80 municipalities. In early 2018, the European Commission took legal action against Germany before the European Court of Justice. The violations of the emission limits are understandably a problem, but what are the municipalities supposed to do? Purchasing one or two electric buses, installing a few charging stations for battery vehicles, building a new bike lane, or setting up a few additional stops for buses and trains is unlikely to have much impact. It hasn't helped much in the past and can't be expected to have a dramatic effect in the future.

Transport is the manifestation of an old basic outlook in politics and society. It used to represent a way of life and long sparked impressive demand, people were encouraged to drive their cars as much as possible. For decades, this was the history of the European postwar order: "Freie Fahrt für freie Bürger," or "Free reign of the road for free citizen," a slogan coined by the car industry in the 1970s that quickly became part of everyday German vocabulary. Roads were built, taxes were cut and financing arrangements to subsidize private car ownership were invented, with the legal order developed to give priority to cars. It was a consistent and broadly accepted agenda that turned out to be wildly successful.

Unfortunately, that agenda does not feature a stop button. All laws, regulations, and financial commitments to promote the car continue to fully apply. The transformation local politicians are currently trying to achieve in transportation is little more than a cosmetic exercise. Given the virtual stand-

still at the federal level, they are only scratching the surface and tinkering about the edges. They are treating the symptoms but ignoring the disease.

What is missing is a socio-political foundation. How do we want to move about in the future? The postwar car promotion agenda was embedded in a clear narrative that focused on the dream of the good life with a family, a home of your own with a garden, and, of course, your own car.

Yet that dream has lost much of its attraction. The father's role as the head of the household and the sole breadwinner is becoming obsolete. Nearly half of all marriages end in divorce, and the number of single-parent households has risen steadily over the past decades. Nearly 50 percent of all employment has neither a collective wage agreement, nor a works council. The basic elements of postwar society are dissolving and old certainties are losing their importance. The changes in people's attitudes are even evident in their transport behavior. The number of car buyers under the age of 30 has dropped by half in the past ten years, and the proportion of young people biking as their main form of transport has doubled in many cities. In the major metropolitan areas, two-thirds of the population already use a variety of transport alternatives, choosing the car for only about 25 percent of their travel.

The people in charge of transport policy, however, simply refuse to acknowledge these changing circumstances in society. The German Road Traffic Act, the Passenger Transport Act, and the laws governing public streets and paths enshrine a world that has ceased to exist. In public transport, too, there

are rules and regulations for everything. Key parts of the transport system we live in are from a by-gone era. These anachronistic arrangements keep routines in place, but they impede change and keep Germany from reaching its climate targets and cities prevent from improving their quality of life. Furthermore – and this is a point of debate in 2019 – they prevent the necessary structural adjustments to the economy. Coal, lignite, and now also diesel engines are synonyms for missed opportunities for change and a lack of employment perspectives.

It is time for the social sciences, too, to return to the questions regarding the future of our transport systems and to examine how future systems must be designed to meet the requirements of a modern society in urban and rural environments. The possibilities offered by new modes of digitally driven transport, enabled by mobile internet services should be explored, and the effects on social structures should be studied. The question of how the economies of Europe take advantage of these new developments is an important one. The social science agenda is clear. What matters now is that universities and research institutes come forth and embrace it.

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Supplanting the carrier pigeon

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If collecting and processing data is a challenge, so is transmitting them from A to B. An office at the WZB houses a museum piece from the 1970s/1980s that shows how this challenge was handled in the absence of a worldwide digital network: The receiver of an analogue telephone was placed in the so-called acoustic coupler, a variety of modem; data could then be sent via the telephone line.

Acoustic coupler used to transfer data between the WZB and Freie Universität Berlin (Photo: Thu-Ha Nguyen).