

**METROPOLIS IN MOTION: URBAN MOBILITY ANT THE POLITICS OF
INFRASTRUCTURE IN MARCELO EBRARD'S MEXICO CITY
[SHORT DRAFT]**

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ABSTRACT

During his six years in office, former Mexico City mayor Marcelo Ebrard undertook some of the most significant investments in transportation infrastructure in several decades: three BRT lines, a bike share program and a network of bike lanes, a new metro line, and a network of urban toll roads. These highly visible projects attracted local and international attention; Marcelo Ebrard went on to play a leading role in a global network of mayors for climate change, and more recently, the city was awarded an international prize for its sustainable transportation practices at Washington's Transportation Research Board meeting. These projects and events illustrate an important transformation in the way planners and officials in Mexico City have redefined the problem of air pollution, congestion, and transportation as a matter of "urban mobility". Along with this concept, different dimensions and qualitative objectives for policy, including sustainability, equity, and citizen participation, were also introduced. As a result, planning for urban mobility requires that different and new actors, logics, and discourses be mobilized. By focusing on how this shift is taking place in Mexico City and by looking at urban infrastructure as a highly political system at the center of social change, this paper argues that far from being a mere discursive shift, the turn towards urban mobility signals a deeper transformation in urban governing practices. Engaging with ongoing debates about the relationality of urban politics and the politics of urban infrastructure this paper analyzes this shift and argues that urban mobility policies constitute an assemblage of global discourses, civil society demands, and technology through which a new context of urban politics and governance structures are created.

INTRODUCTION

In the last seven years transportation infrastructure in Mexico City has received more attention and that in the prior 30 years. This investment has been directed at the production of BRT Lines, urban highways and toll roads, a bike-share program and bike lines, and a new metro line. These projects are diverse and when looked at as part of an attempt to curb air pollution or solve traffic congestion it becomes clear that they are incongruent and disjointed—for instance the promotion of sustainable transportation and concurrent investment in car infrastructure. These disparate projects begin to come together, however, if reconsidered as part of a single policy oriented toward the adoption of the concept of *urban mobility* as the basis for transportation policy in the city. Urban mobility, as an ideal, introduces different dimensions and qualitative objectives and requirements for transportation policy, including sustainability, equity, and citizen participation. Moreover, these projects can be understood as a part of an ongoing transformation in the way transportation policy is conceived: a sort of paradigm shift from *transportation policy* to *urban mobility policy*. As this paper will argue, these very different projects represent a shift in the way transportation infrastructure is being conceptualized in Mexico City and serve as examples of how urban policymaking is changing.

The projects involved in the transition from *transportation policy* to *urban mobility policy* began, were completed, or expanded during mayor Marcelo Ebrard's administration. Ebrard made urban mobility—an environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive way of providing transportation—one of his top priorities. Ebrard's strategy has had very visible and concrete results: they have changed the 'look' of the city, as well as the way a large percentage of people move around. The visibility of the Mayor's strategy was not only local: Ebrard positioned himself as a high-profile actor in a global network of mayors that made climate change a priority. For example, largely as a result of Ebrard's work, Mexico City was awarded the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP) award for sustainable transportation during this year's Transportation Research Board meeting in Washington. While this emphasis on urban mobility and the different mechanisms by which projects were implemented were in part a *response* to challenges of economic development and everyday functioning of the city, in this paper

I will focus on the ways urban mobility is a *result* of a deeper transformation of urban politics and the production of urban space.

Ebrard's investment in transportation, the most significant in at least four decades—is the result of several circumstances. These investments and interventions can be situated in a historical context marked by the critical problem of traffic congestion and long commute times¹. These adverse conditions are the result of a series of spatial transformations in the city that in the last thirty years have made Mexico City an polycentric metropolis with highly disorganized growth in the peripheral areas, and where both poor and wealthy residents travel long distances to and from home to work bypassing central and older areas of the city. While the historical context is important, this paper and the broader research of which it is part, is concerned with how these projects came to be and the actors which both mobilized these projects, and were mobilized around them.

This paper presents preliminary findings of my dissertation project, which ultimately seeks to contribute to debates around new urban political contexts (Alsayyad and Roy 2006; Roy and Ong 2011). It is inspired by approaches that focus on the relationality of urban politics (McCann, Ward, and Cochrane 2011; C. McFarlane 2011) and the politics of urban infrastructure (McFarlane and Rutherford 2008). As such, this paper argues that urban mobility policy is generated by the localization and re-assembly of global discourses and ideas such as 'democracy', 'rights', or 'sustainability', as well as best practices that rely on technologies of governing that are de-contextualized and re-contextualized in different geographies. Relatedly, my research focuses on the different networks, alliances and synergies that produce policy, borrowing from recent debates in urban studies that stem from science and technology studies (STS) and Actor-Network Theory (ANT) which are useful to understand the multiplicity of human and material *actants*—such as Bus Rapid Transit Systems, or electronic parking meters—that participate in the production of complex sociotechnical systems such as urban transportation

¹ The average one-way commute trip in the metropolitan zone is of 81 minutes, compared with NYC's average of 38. (http://imco.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2012/1/costos_congestion_en_zmvm2_final_abril.pdf)

infrastructure (Rydin 2013; Monstadt 2009; MacLeod and Jones 2011; McFarlane and Rutherford 2008; Farías and Bender 2010).

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section describes urban mobility in greater detail as an ambiguous concept and mobilizing discourse that enables novel planning and political processes in the city. This first section also introduces a set of new actors that play an increasingly important role in urban mobility policy and projects. The second section will focus on three examples that highlight how projects undertaken as part of the shift toward urban mobility spark both synergy and conflict among different actors that participate in the production of transportation infrastructure. These case studies rely on data collected as part of ongoing dissertation fieldwork in Mexico City, and make use of interviews conducted with planning officials, activists, NGOs and other experts. The paper concludes with a few preliminary findings and insights about Mexico City's changing urban policy and politics resulting from a relational analysis and a focus on urban assemblages. This section suggests avenues for further analysis and research as I conclude fieldwork.

URBAN MOBILITY AS A MOBILIZING DISCOURSE

In recent years *movilidad urbana*, or urban mobility has made its way from a marginal discourse employed by a limited number of NGOs and civic organizations in their critique of transportation infrastructure in Mexico City, to the center stage of city government campaigns, current policy making and city building efforts. Illustrative of this move is the recent announcement that the Secretary of Transport and Roadways (Secretaría de Transporte y Vialidad) would be rebranded as the Secretary of Mobility (Secretaría de Movilidad), a change that reflects the incorporation of urban mobility ideals into the Secretary's official goals and strategies.

As a concept, urban mobility is of relatively recent coinage and even more recent adoption in activist and planning circles. Despite its incorporation in state policy, it lacks a legal or normative framework on which to rest. Urban mobility is a concept that is broad, ambitious and in flux; and that has

been open to several interpretations and efforts to expand its scope. What is certain is that urban mobility differs from the common transportation planning textbook definition of *mobility* which narrowly describes the dynamic of moving people from point *a* to point *b* (Cervero, Neil, and Paul 2001). What gives *urban mobility* a radically different meaning is that it actively incorporates a series of qualitative and normative dimensions that traditional definitions lack. Under the urban mobility ideal, transportation becomes environmentally sustainable, efficient and safe. Moreover, transportation becomes affordable, and oriented toward meeting users *wants* and *needs*. Transportation, in short, should provide access to the entire city, and satisfy the needs of all the users and citizens.

Also implicit in this discourse, is the notion that transportation service projects produced under urban mobility should enable a more democratic city in at least two respects. First, increased access to the different parts of the city is understood as resulting in a more democratic city, as, in theory, all the people in the city are free to circulate, maintain a livelihood (go to work), and enjoy the different amenities of the city. Second, urban mobility as a model calls for mandatory citizen input and participation in the planning of projects, which should translate into services that truly respond to user's needs, avoid bypassing of zones, and guarantee that new constructions are not disproportionately affecting poor and disadvantaged citizens. Furthermore, several advocates of urban mobility as a transportation planning model have demanded that urban mobility become an actually existing right and that its many different components and dimensions be guaranteed by a legal and regulatory framework.

The two pillars of urban mobility: transportation as sustainable and democracy-enabling seem to be discursively included by all. However, there is lack of consensus around what these mean in practice. For instance, for social movements that oppose toll roads, urban mobility as democracy-enabling means access to participation in planning and transparency in concession contracts. While for NGOs and sustainable transportation activists, the democratic component means pedestrians taking the city back from automobiles even if the methods to achieve this goal require the imposition of certain measures against the will of the neighbors.

Urban mobility is mobilizing a diverse array of state and non-state actors, provoking unlikely alliances and setting in motion interesting governance transformations, much aided by the “coolness” factor of sustainability and democracy. In many cases alliances, especially those between state and non-state actors, have produced *synergies* that have enabled productive transformations in the way infrastructure is conceived, planned and constructed. But the politics of urban mobility are not always harmonious. In a context where transportation planning lacks formal channels of participation, accountability, and a clear sense of the limits of what adopting urban mobility as a model means, conflicts also arise.

MOBILIZING AROUND URBAN MOBILITY

In this paper, I focus on the increasing role of three types of actors that influence urban mobility policy: 1) sustainability and climate change experts, 2) international consultants and NGOs, and 3) social movement activists and independent citizen commissions. For heuristic purposes I have classified the actors in three somewhat distinct groups although in practice they collaborate and interact in multiple ways, blurring the lines between groups, changing their alliances, agreeing in some cases, and in others disagreeing.

I illustrate the relationship between these actors by looking at three cases: 1) *ITDP and the Production of Livability Interventions*; 2) *CTS-EMBARQ and the development of the Metrobús*; and 3) *Social movements and the conflicts over the Supervía*. These cases are described at detailed in the full paper.

CONCLUSION

The actors and logics that assemble around sustainable transportation projects such as BRT and bike infrastructure are reconfiguring the roles traditionally played by the state, private actors, and civil society. These cases above show urban policy as a learning process through which certain practices—progressive

and not-take hold helped by the work of networks of actors that bridge local and global scales (Healey 2013; Colin McFarlane 2011). These actors actively reconfigure governance structures, enabling the transformation of existing institutional and political structures necessary to achieve their goals (Siemiatycki 2013). Such is the case of CTS-EMABRQ and ITDP, who continue expanding their sphere of influence. While they are mostly known for the successful implementation of BRT and bicycle infrastructure, these NGOs seem to be aware of the limitations of design-only solutions and are now pushing for a deeper transformation of urban planning in the country. CTS-EMBARQ, for instance, is engaged in project called *Reforma Urbana*, a seven goal agenda that seeks to generate political clout to convince politicians and decision makers to make deep legislative reforms that can sustain a comprehensive restructuring of urban growth patterns in the country, privileging transit oriented development, new urbanism and compact cities, and combining technologies such as progressive tax regimes with BRT as the main transportation solution. ITDP is also trying to influence politicians and legislators with their Five Percent campaign (*Campaña del 5%*) which seeks to make mandatory the allocation of five percent of the federal transportation budget for funding of alternative and sustainable transportation systems.

The case of Supervía and *Frente Amplio* illustrates another aspect of urban mobility as an ambiguous concept and potential grounds for new rights. On one hand, the juxtaposition of sustainable infrastructure and automobile-centered projects show the incongruent and contradictory ways in which Ebrard's government conceived of mobility. While the imposition of a project such as the toll road or the parking meters make evident the city government's doublespeak of urban mobility as a democracy-enabling initiative, and urban mobility as a goal that must be achieved by any means. These cases also come to show how urban mobility can also be used to justify disregarding legal procedures and citizen participation. Ultimately, the way in which citizens have organized to oppose this projects, and the strategies they have used to make their claims—in terms of human right violations, and of urban mobility as a right—point to the current realm of transportation planning as one lacking formal channels of effective citizen participation and state accountability.

The three cases discussed above shed light on the different ways transportation planning, conceived as a matter of urban mobility, is changing the context of urban governance in Mexico City. These cases unfold in an increasingly disjointed (Caldeira and Holston 2005) and fragmented metropolis (Hiernaux Nicolas 1999; Saraví 2008) where new practices of citizenship and new forms of spatial inequality coexist along with new methods of achieving political legitimacy (Pasotti 2010). This research proposes that in this context, it is by looking at the assemblage of infrastructure policy and by focusing on the formation of new synergies and conflicts between a multiplicity of actors and agendas, that a better understanding of urban politics can be attained.

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