

Three cases of assemblage - making up the past and future city in São Paulo, Paris and Johannesburg

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Theme 21: Making up cities: urban policy mobilities, assemblages and urban politics in a global age

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Abstract

City development plans and policies most often elude comprehensiveness, though there may be exceptions in some powerfully planned places. But concerted public action and investment certainly shapes cities, often in combination with private action and investment: examples over more than a century abound, many involving transport infrastructure such as (sometimes underground) railways, and highways. The recent past and present abound with further cases. With the simultaneous appearance of major city mobility infrastructure projects across different continents, the question arises: what drives these immense projects, what brings them to fruition (when indeed they reach concrete form)? How do these projects link to wider city policy and strategy movements? And is it reasonable to point to assemblages involving actors and ideas both fixed in diverse places and circulating among and within them, as key to the present eruptions of such projects?

This paper draws on experience in São Paulo, Paris and Johannesburg to explore these questions. Its empirical material relates to several mobility megaprojects in each of these city regions on three continents (e.g., Rodoanel, Grand Paris Express, and Gautrain), some of which have direct interlinkages (e.g., the RATP from Paris is the operating component of the Gautrain consortium ... engineers and construction companies interweave across the cases). All three cases appear to involve the rise of new assemblages in the present period. The paper identifies complexes in which professional, political and popular ideas and actors drive the new. It explores the nature of such constellations – the agents, paths and sites involved in the ‘circulation, diffusion, mobility and assemblage’ of huge urban projects, including the issue of how elsewhere works in framing and opening discourses and practices of plan and implementation. It acknowledges both the circulation and the limits of mobility of models and ideas. Two particular features are explored: mobilization of the past in constructing want, and ‘making up the city future’. The political impress of these constellations and their consequences receive consideration to close the paper.

Alors que les dispositifs participatifs ne cessent de se multiplier, l'abstention aux élections locales n'a jamais été aussi forte. Loin de renouveler la « démocratie locale », les expériences de participation tendent plutôt à renforcer des pouvoirs locaux de moins en moins proches de leurs citoyens.

Mobility is central to construction, experience and imagination on the part of metropolitan residents. In many large metropolises, mobility megaprojects attempt to open mobilities but seem to challenge democratic practices. A particular source of anxiety lies in the global assemblages which characterize such projects. Some examples drawn from São Paulo, Paris and Johannesburg and their regions suggest that there may be irresolvable contradictions between the apparently necessary scale of the megaproject and democratic citizenship.

Getting from place to place is essential to making boundaries more supple, opening the multiplicity of spaces to people, and shifting identities. Thus mobilities hold a special place in how cities are experienced, how city imaginations are expressed, by many city inhabitants. There are large literatures intersecting with these matters, and several major projects around the world in the field. It's not the purpose of this article to engage directly with those (for which see inter alia Offner 1993, Thrift 2004 and Bridge and Watson 2011).

Growth, connection/interconnection, networks, circulation, flows, movement, communication, all these are concepts which resonate with the city as the site of mobility and mobilities. ... mobility/ies are central to understanding the ways that cities have developed since their origins ... but the concept as a framing device has not been typically deployed in urban literature and analysis until recently. At the same time, the converse of this is equally pertinent, thus cities are also about the regulation of movement, control, segregation, exclusion, discipline, immobility, restriction ... (Bridge and Watson 2011b)

In slippery ways, mobility infrastructures alter how the city is lived and thought. At moments when mobilities come under debate, at moments when enormous projects seek to 'develop' mobility, windows open into the kaleidoscopes of how the *métropole* is thought by its inhabitants. In Paris, massive resources and huge amounts of citizen time have gone into debating future mobility megaprojects in ways that intersect with myriad questions of governance. In São Paulo future directions of investment in a presently limited metro system jostle against anti-freeway protests for attention. Particularly apparent in Johannesburg and its region, named Gauteng, a lot of noise around highway tolling proposals and other mobility related issues (taxi routes, parking, bus transport) is presently evident. I cannot claim to exhaust the massively complex terrain of metropolitan governance transformations and their relationships to global groupings of actors; so in this paper I have chosen to focus on one element accessible to me: how some professional and political views of the large city and its future gain strength and pass into concrete forms through large mobility projects, with potential to disrupt not only other ways of seeing the city but to destabilize or at

least shift modes of being in the city. These projects are set in messy terrain of arguments about and conflicting representations of cities and their forms of government and any approach to them is likely to be partial. And they have in common elements of 'worlding' each city, multiple groupings of advocates and participants, and a series of connections to the globe which appear to go further than earlier though similar elements.

What is 'really' going on in the metropolis eludes easy apprehension. Part of the dissonance around mobility megaprojects seems to arise from how city inhabitants do, and do not, apprehend 'what is going on'; how control is developed and exercised around these spheres and how that affects people's lives. Here I am touching on the contrast eloquently represented by De Certeau (1980, 1984) between the tactics of city dwellers as they use what I term the mobility infrastructures of the city environment, and the strategies of institutions and structures of power who produce – and make 'real' - maps that represent the city as unified whole. I am of course not suggesting that all mobile behaviour is determined by the powerful. Rather I suggest that ways in which people react to mobility infrastructures and projects providing both opportunities for and constraints on movement, and can open ways of seeing city relationships in new ways. The proposition is that elements of means of engaging these questions can be glimpsed from time to time and mobility megaprojects provide moments at which those flashes occur. They open opportunities to see a little (more) of 'how people in different cities see their urban world' (McFarlane 2012).

Very large investments in mobility systems and infrastructure form a sensitive focus in many large cities, generating vast archives of discussion and contest. They invite and make possible 'increased attention to the interconnections between physical and imaginative movements' (Jaffe, Klaufus and Colombijn 2012). Such projects intertwine with debate and organizing around forms of government of the extended city space. If public action can help to realize the 'promise of the city' (Tajbaksh 2001), huge mobility projects are certainly where a great deal of public resources are applied. How do citizens relate to the scale of the mobility megaproject? In many ways this is a subset of the question, how do citizens relate to the scale of the enormous city region, to the city as Leviathan (as Davis 1994 labeled Mexico City)? These questions pose themselves in the recent past perhaps most spectacularly on the global stage in *Grand Paris Express*, leading for example Enright (2012 p. 30) to say 'In a public and spectacular fashion, Grand Paris demands a rethinking of how and to what end the city is made'. But mobility megaprojects and their political underfelts in other cities also 'demand a rethinking'; what is more, shifting the focus to include transformations in cities which have much less global attention than Paris, is surely a requirement of 'rethinking' in the present situation of 'urban theory' and research (Choplin 2012).

Having had the opportunity to work in them over two decades, I draw from events in three large city regions: greater São Paulo, a huge urban place (over 20 million people); Paris and its metropolitan region (variously defined); which has a similar population to Gauteng, the 'city region' of about 12 million people

around and including Johannesburg. These three cities or city regions appeal to me because each is at the centre of a national political economy; they have much wider roles too; and are places of democracy in which deep anxiety about past, present and future are openly expressed, all the time. The character of each is continuously contested, from within and without, around forms of government and its territories, and around many other related axes, one of which involves mobility megaprojects. I claim that the comparison is unusual (Robinson 2011) for it stretches across continents as well as settings of 'south and north'. Of course it is far from exhausting the range of city regions.

Stories of mobility megaproject conflict from the three cities have been described in a recent conference paper (Mabin 2012). The intention is to flesh out some of the detail in the presentation to be made in session 21.1 at RC21.

The first story is from São Paulo - it examines contrasting representations of material and social transformations experienced by inhabitants over recent decades, and how they intersect with trajectories of political power and mobility megaprojects. Since the end of military rule a quarter century ago struggles to define the course of the city and region are reflected in battles over investment in extension of the metro system. State (Estado) scale government seeks strategies for the metropolitan region often contested by the thirty plus municipalities which make up the complex; citizen voices, sometimes very effectively expressed at large municipal scale, struggle to find effective vehicles at the metropolitan. Investment inexorably continues in, for example, the hugely expensive ring freeway around most of the region, the *rodoanel*.

"The idea of a beltway around São Paulo is not a new one. Since the fifties there have been projects and initial developments which were partially executed The traffic jams in São Paulo continued to intensify over the years in spite of the road investments ... To address some of these issues a new beltway project has been developed in the late eighties and beginning of nineties and that is the origin of the 'Rodoanel Metropolitano.' ... The announcement of Rodoanel was made in January 1995. Mario Covas was then state governor, elected in November 1994. As soon as Covas took office he decided to take up the new beltway project and start its construction" (Fernandes and Biderman 2013).

The Rodoanel project is probably the largest construction project in Latin America. Its actors include governments, engineering companies, consultants ... who are spread around the globe. It appears that it is over roughly the past 15 to 20 years that such a constellation could begin to realize the 40 year old idea ... (cf. Sette 2010).

A second story concerns recent and ongoing debate in Paris (and of course its region) about the nature of the city and its forms of government, intertwined with contests over mobility projects in its urban spaces. Celebration of official public debate over routes for proposed new automatic subway lines seems to ignore highly centralized creation of an agency to build the lines not to mention control station planning and realization of associated rising land values.

Extensive accounts (Subra 2012, Wiel 2011) provide a foundation for further exploration of metropolitan democracy dynamics.

In the case of 'greater Paris' – we lack a common and agreed term to describe the city region, whose extent and nature is anyhow contested, and the region must be one of the most resistant to conceptual decentering anywhere.

In brief terms evidence can be assembled to show how the moment of a particular set of political regimes at national, regional and more local scales, provided a setting if not the possibility for a new approach to an old idea, taking it forward towards potential realization. The 'new' idea of a rail ring in the banlieu of Paris turns out of course to be 'old' – to have roots as far back as the fifties, frustrated non-development in the seventies, and a re-emergence in the early 2000s (Lecroart 2012).

The impress of the Paris Chamber of Commerce, and the multiple connections of professionals, politicians, companies and global organizations again provides the setting in which these ideas began to move towards realization in 2010. Despite regime changes and altered directions, the major megaproject – Grand Paris Express, a many billion euro – thirty year- project – is getting materially under way, with law, special forms of agency and some connection to new governance arrangements.

The third story concerns the region around Johannesburg, more or less coterminous with the South African province of Gauteng. In this post-apartheid and electorally democratic environment, as in the two other cases, it turns out that renewed freeway investment as well as the expensive new Gautrain rail system linking emerging centralities including the international airport, have long, tangled and deep roots. There is a persistence of old alliances and new ways in which professional voices dominate, linked in new ways to recently emerged political forces. Divergence between professional perceptions and ambitions for the region and the structures of citizen life and imaginary casts recent events in a similar light to other cases.

Fascinatingly both the expanded freeway system and its tolling, as well as the expensive new rail system, have origins in the 1970s and 80s (Mabin 2013). These are projects which were dreamt by engineers, bureaucrats, and some politicians over more than 20 years before their acceleration towards fruition began. Indeed, they were projects generated under an older and far less democratic regime than that which has held power since the 1994 installation of Nelson Mandela as president of South Africa. Far from being jettisoned by the new regime, they provided opportunities for new coalitions of power and mutual benefit to emerge.

These three stories are quite distinct: but contain elements which lead me to venture some remarks on how they might affect and reshape answers to the 'urban question', how they might reveal some new pieces of the jigsaw of social life in the city. My conclusions are tentative, which I think is in line with present needs in the ways we think cities (Robinson 2011 p. 19). My argument is that

attempts to address matters at metropolitan scale appear necessary to realizing the promise of the city but very often entail limiting effects for metropolitan democracy. The terrain of research into practices of democracy at metropolitan scale is wide open and awaits creative and energetic students (cf. Purcell 2007).

Each of the three situations described, finally, is characterized by a very long gestation. Each has origins as 'plan' or at least 'vision' going back several decades. Therefore, a signal question is what it is which brought these project to, or at least close to, material implementation. The common answer has to do with global assemblages.

For discussion at RC21 Berlin will be (a) vocabulary to describe, examine and contest such developments, with a certain degree of scepticism on my part concerning the use of the term 'assemblage' despite my adoption of it in the paper; and (b) the material and other elements which combine to make these new kinds of constellations possible, resulting in the realization of projects once imagined but not realizable; and how we may establish the generalities as well as the specificities of these global groupings.

The issue is not merely that 'governance' in the sense of multiple organizational interactions, introduces potential for lack of accountability and transparency but rather that brave attempts to address metropolitan scale problems seem to open doors to what I term semi-oligarchies – groupings which seem to take hold of metropolitan scale questions – perhaps most starkly in very damaged cities – Rodgers (2012) reveals the recomposition of oligarchy in Managua, for example, in the aftermath of earthquake, revolution, civil war with external involvement, and dramatic shifts of power.¹ But it appears to me that this is a more general pattern. In sum the promise of metropolitan democracy can slide from 'great transformation to grand illusion' (Jouve 2005), and often does. There appears to me to be even more opportunity for empirical investigation to inform concepts of metropolitan democracy in the wake of such globally known developments as have occurred in Paris, and those unfolding in São Paulo and Johannesburg (or Gauteng).

Is there an irresolvable contradiction between democratic practice and addressing large city regions at the scale of the whole? The question is not exhausted by the apparent contradiction between local institutions and metropolitan institutions (Lefèvre 2010 p. 634), for democratic practice is surely not exhausted by such institutions. Perhaps the metropolitan scale presents a horizon beyond which 'deep democracy' exists more in the eye of the enthusiast than in citizen experiences. At this point, the 'promise of the city' of which Takbaksh wrote in 2001, remains elusive, as the contests and projects of which I have written in this article paper seem to take us further away from

¹ I use the term oligarchy rather loosely in the text presently – meaning less 'the prince and those around him' (Machiavelli) in the sense of the reproducing group controlling state power and more similar kinds of social groupings exercising substantial if not complete power over particular large and significant sectors in which state power at different scales is significant.

'communities built around multiple spaces, supple boundaries and hybrid identities' and to subvert rather than 'deepen connections between democracy, difference and social justice'.

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