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SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC TRANSPORT POLICY – DEFINE, DECIDE, APPLY

AT A GLANCE

Politics is never purely pragmatic. Interests are always at play. The current discussion about the transformation of transport needs to focus more on protecting the interests of hardworking and low-income groups. This will require a decisive, proactive reorganisation of the entire transport system, zero tolerance for rule-breaking, greater powers for the state and a socially just redistribution of traffic space.

What is social transport policy? Is there such a thing as transport or mobility policy whose social orientation distinguishes it from other approaches?

For decades transport policy has been understood as a largely pragmatic policy field whose uncontested objective was to construct and upgrade infrastructure. The role of government was to provide sufficient infrastructure to satisfy demand. Political differences played no discernible role and were ostensibly irrelevant. Social aspects were addressed through reduced fares and at a very general level in the scope of public services. The consequence of this supposedly pragmatic approach was the dominance of the motor car. For a number of years now this discourse has come – absolutely justifiably – under increasing pressure. Large sections of society are demanding a “Verkehrswende” or “transport transformation”, to follow the “Energiewende”, the energy transformation, i.e. the move from fossil fuels to renewable and green sources of energy. The role of the transport sector in meeting the CO₂ reduction targets set by Berlin and Brussels comes up especially frequently. Urban quality of life debates also play a role, which emphasise cycling and new mobility services, including all forms of rental and sharing services.

Yet, the important social aspects are rarely discussed in the discussions on future mobility. In fact, those with less purchasing power often use neither cars nor the mostly expensive forms of new mobility. But other questions certainly are relevant to their lifeworld: Which modes of trans-

port are prioritised when public funding is tight? Which is granted the larger share of public space? What does the regulatory framework look like? If they are to make their interests felt, they need a strong voice in the debate.

SOCIAL TRANSPORT POLICY: GUIDED BY THE NEEDS OF THE WEAKEST

Social transport policy gives a voice to the weakest and seeks social equilibrium. The goal is a transport policy for the overwhelming majority of society. Four target dimensions can be distinguished:

1. Maximise participation;
2. Maximise quality of life for all;
3. Maximise social efficiency;
4. Maximise safety.

In this contribution we discuss all four dimensions, seeking to initiate a fundamental debate on the principles of a socially grounded, proactive mobility policy.

MAXIMISE PARTICIPATION

People with low incomes and people with restricted mobility – which includes older people, children and youth as well as people with disabilities – have a right to participate in society and its activities. Enabling maximum participation means ensuring that all the associated functions are

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accessible. But maximum participation also means providing attractive and affordable journey-to-work options, in particular for those who live of their work and possess little in the way of savings. Maximum participation also implies ensuring that access to information associated with socially organised mobility is available to all and that everyone can travel if they wish.

Providing the absolute minimum for the poorest and most mobility-restricted is not socially organised or socially structured “social mobility.” The fig leaf of “public services” is not good enough. Social mobility means securing attractive, needs-based transport services for everyone. In fact, if we focus on fully satisfying the needs of the weakest we will automatically create a comprehensive service for everyone else too. This will require social integrated mobility, involving a nested system of national, state, regional and local networks with synchronised regular timetables. Coordinating the different levels and modes of transport will make it possible to travel anywhere in the country conveniently and without long waiting times. It is the responsibility of the respective tiers of the state to prepare the required legislation and mobility plans. Coordinated timetables should be configured to prioritise the options most beneficial to society as a whole. That means the railways and conventional local public transport. New mobility options can play a supplementary role.

Certain mobility needs in rural areas can also be satisfied by bringing the functions to the people. Integrating private cars into public transport systems may also be an option. To do so, local authorities need more rights and better funding. But social mobility policy cannot repair the errors created by careless and wrongheaded land use planning and housing policy. If social integrated mobility is to be affordable, settlement and mobility policies need to be adjusted, not vice versa.

The information required to make use of integrated mobility systems needs to be provided by public institutions. Only then can we ensure that the communication is completely barrier-free and data security-compliant. As well as online services, we need phone-based channels to include those who have no access to online media or choose not to use them.

Only a small proportion of the world’s population (about 3 percent in 2018) uses aeroplanes for travel at all. Even in Germany most people fly very rarely or not at all. Those who fly most are younger, more educated and higher-earning. A significant proportion of the figure of 220 million passengers annually (as of 2018) in Germany is composed of frequent fliers who chalk up fifty, one hundred or more annual trips. For this group flying is often part of the lifestyle. In other words, the subsidies for air travel primarily benefit a small affluent minority and need to be abolished.

Travel should not remain the privilege of the top one-third of society – all the more so in light of the climate debate. There is a special place for rail in particular. If more long journeys within Europe are to be made by train – including holiday travel – it will be essential to radically improve the infrastructure, significantly expand and synchronise the timetables, and introduce attractive fares.

All destinations within Europe should be reachable within a day by train. Here the European Commission needs to take the initiative.

MAXIMISE QUALITY OF LIFE FOR ALL

Social mobility policy also means enabling everyone to enjoy a good quality of life without unhealthy emissions and noise, regardless of their income and social status. High priority must be given to tackling emissions hotspots. Securing the elementary prerequisites for quality of life is the heart of the matter. As well as eliminating the immediate effects of emissions, creating a liveable environment (attractive public spaces) is also a guiding principle of social integrated mobility. For society as a whole reducing CO₂ emissions is also vital.

The groups with the lowest incomes also tend to generate the lowest CO₂ emissions. Especially in light of that fact, it is clearly unacceptable that the environmental impacts are felt most strongly by those people who are unable to afford a house in the suburbs or a place in the country. In fact, it is the lowest-income groups that tend to be concentrated in the unattractive and unhealthy quarters along major traffic arteries, which suffer from high volumes of motorised personal transport. Their justified interest is to drastically reduce the emissions in their own neighbourhood. There can and must be a limit to the use of the car once society has a public transport system that is regarded as adequate. Those who still cannot do without their car will have to live with restrictions in areas like parking and speed limits. Economic incentives such as parking fees, congestion charges and toll systems can and should be used in a publicly funded system that provides universal, affordable alternatives. Promoting public systems in this way creates a virtual circle where having more users from all strata of society enhances the social reputation of the systems, thus benefitting the socially weaker and the hardworking population.

Commuting represents a special problem, as the cost of housing has forced many people to move out to peri-urban locations. Yet, commuters also represent part of the problem for low-income households living close to major roads. Wherever possible commuters should be offered social integrated mobility alternatives. The classical park and ride option remains for all those unable to profit from social integrated mobility because of historic planning errors. Park and ride parking tickets can double as public transport tickets. But the costs of park and ride should be borne at least partly by the users and the location of such facilities must be socially acceptable and avoid creating new emissions problems.

Looking ahead, mobility policy cannot and must not be misused as a remedy for misguided planning and settlement policies. New housing developments must wait until the required transport infrastructure is available. And the cost/benefit maths need to be adjusted. Scattered settlement patterns should be avoided on account of the disproportionate cost of integrating them into publicly funded integrated mobility systems.

The pressure is greatest for those most affected. We need instruments capable of speedily improving the situation for those living near airports, motorways, main roads, and railways: physical modifications, meaningful speed limits, (partial) driving bans on particular vehicle classes, and other rapidly implementable measures. It will also be necessary to modify the legal framework to accommodate the objectives of social mobility policy, for example the Federal Pollution Control Act.

Wherever possible traffic axes and junctions in residential areas should be converted into attractive public spaces. Returning some of the space to the public and generally improving the quality of the environment should be conditions for every overhaul and redevelopment of urban main roads and intersections. In addition, wherever possible vehicle lanes should be rededicated to eco-mobility.

MAXIMISE SOCIAL EFFICIENCY

Social integrated mobility seeks to bring about a quantum leap in the reliability and plannability of transport use.

What this means is a balanced interconnection of transport systems so that everyone gets to their destination quickly, comfortably and reliably. Integrated mobility for all will also make it possible – at last – to establish true cost comparisons with all other modes of transport. That applies to flying, to driving, and to all the new mobility components that are not offered as public services. However, maximising social efficiency also means setting priorities – for the expansion and maintenance of systems and transport management – according to purely social criteria. Maximising social efficiency also reduces resource consumption.

A situation where there is gridlock on the roads while public transport, the rail system and eco-mobility (not least cycle paths) are underfunded makes nobody happy. Aside from all the problems it generates, road expansion encounters natural limits because space is scarce in Germany. Experience also shows that road expansion does not even solve the problem of congestion because the additional capacity is completely negated by the additional demand it generates. The solution must be to expand collective systems. This does not mean tinkering with the status quo. The collective systems need a comprehensive overhaul if they are to function as the socialised provider of social integrated mobility. This includes a massive expansion of services (also in rural areas), quality improvements, optimal eco-mobility connectivity in mobility hubs* and a thorough resilience upgrade. People will only shift to collective modes of transport if the systems can be depended on. This applies particularly all the more to social groups that can or must otherwise resort to the motor car.

Once we have a functioning social and integrated mobility system drivers will have to shoulder the real social costs of their cars. As well as pollution, these also include land usage. Large cars (especially so-called SUVs) must bear their true share of the costs: they require more space

than conventional cars, cause more emissions on account of their weight and air resistance, present significantly greater danger to pedestrians and cyclists, and generate additional infrastructure costs also on account of their weight.

Once a functioning socialised system has been established, inter-modal duplication becomes inefficient. It is therefore justifiable to price driving and new mobility which is not incorporated into the integrated mobility system in a form that covers all their real social costs. This would include all infrastructure costs, as well as costs attributable to environmental harm and accidents. Dynamic road-pricing can and should be applied to tackle the especially negative social effects of congestion. Revenues from road-pricing and savings from the abolition of existing subsidies for automobiles (low diesel tax, tax privileges of company cars etc.) must be channelled into the integrated mobility system.

Altogether a mobility policy orientated on social efficiency can be expected to lead to significant reductions in greenhouse gas emissions.

MAXIMISE SAFETY

In 2018 alone there were 3,275 road traffic fatalities in Germany and 396,000 injuries. More than enough reason to improve safety. A closer look at the figures reveals an additional social dimension: Almost one-third of those killed and injured were pedestrians and cyclists. In other words, groups who pose no danger to others become victims of their mobility. Without getting into the blame game, the threat posed by motorised traffic is no longer acceptable – not to mention the stress caused by aggressive drivers, illegal parking, over-dimensioned vehicles and so on.

The right to physical integrity is universal. It should apply especially to those who present no danger to others. That means pedestrians – in particular those with restricted mobility – and cyclists. The objective must be zero road deaths. The constant and massive threats of people on the roads through no fault of their own has to end. The fate of the weakest is the measure of road safety.

The rules must be enforced. There must be stronger penalties for parking offences, turning violations and speeding. A zero tolerance policy must also be reflected in significantly sharper penalties to underline the gravity of the offences (traffic fines in Germany are relatively low in international comparison). To ensure confidence in public safety, visible security in the integrated mobility system needs to be stepped up. The police and other public order instances need to improve coordination of their traffic policing activities in order to prevent and penalise violations (more personnel is also needed). Generally, society needs to foster an awareness that traffic offences are a serious matter and will not be tolerated.

Safety is also a matter of infrastructure quality. The poor state of repair affecting all transport systems needs to be remedied. And traffic spaces need to be reconfigured if there is to be rapid progress towards zero deaths.

* Mobility hubs are public transport locations offering interchange to various mobility services (for example bike-sharing, car-sharing).

This applies especially to cycling, which needs to be given better protection in the form of separate cycle paths. Traffic light timing needs to be improved for pedestrians (including all-green phases), clearer and more general speed limits are required (in built-up areas, on country roads and on the motorways). Objective and subjective safety are central factors affecting the public's willingness to use public transport. We therefore need measures to improve security in public transport vehicles and associated facilities (stations). As well as more staff, architectural and CCTV solutions are potentially helpful.

A MATTER FOR ALL TIERS OF THE STATE

Successful implementation of social mobility policy will require all tiers of the state to play a considerably more proactive role than they have to date. National, state and local government need integrated instruments for planning and implementation. We want to offer all population groups real possibilities to participate in the decisions

shaping mobility. Mobility needs to be understood in holistic terms: Public participation, the impacts of traffic on people, social efficiency and the question of safety need to be considered in unison. Progress has already been made on developing mobility legislation; this needs to be pursued further.

The current funding instruments are inadequate for achieving those aims; they deny the state the possibility to realise social integrated mobility. We therefore aim for a social contract for a massive tax-funded infrastructure expansion. The operating costs of social integrated mobility can be covered by revenues from road-pricing, parking charges and the abolition of existing road traffic subsidies.

We do not expect the discussion to be easy. But we do expect progressive mobility policy to address these questions head-on. We have confidence in the value of a socially responsible and socially orientated mobility policy. If we can communicate this clearly and credibly to the public, as a vital investment in the future, we will also be able to win the argument on funding.

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