
The need for a critical geography approach on transportation: the case of "Metro North" project in Brussels / Le besoin d'une géographie critique des transports: le cas du projet " métro nord " à Bruxelles

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Abstract

As for other transport studies, urban mobility issues are often analyzed based on rather apolitical sustainable or technical approaches.

However, for now, these approaches seem inefficient or at least insufficient for addressing metropolitan mobility issues. For example, the use of private cars and related pollution and congestion remain high, urban sprawl continues, the development of new road capacities is not stopped and many public transport projects fail. Moreover, these approaches neglect social issues related to metropolitan mobility: higher and unfair transport costs, social relegation, territorial inequalities... Our aim is to demonstrate that a critical and socio-political oriented analysis is needed.

When studying the Brussels metropolitan case, it is clear that technical, best practices or cooperative approaches aren't adapted methods for understanding the situation. Indeed, the complicated and competitive political structure or the important social cleavage within the Brussels metropolitan area have important impacts on metropolitan mobility policies and their results.

In order to demonstrate the need for a critical approach, our presentation will be based on an analysis of the "Metro North" project: Brussels authorities (and Belgian federal authorities) aim at developing a new metro line in Brussels. This project is based on the use of a tunnel boring machine for digging a profound new tunnel under a dense urban area and on the refurbishment of "premetro" tramway tunnels in order to create a new metro line under the city center.

Both the route, the technical choices, the location and layout of the stations, and the choice of operation and financing this new line raise questions: Not taking into account the technical experience available in Brussels, very low traffic forecasts, very high cost, public-private financing ...

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Nevertheless, because of political and economic reasons, both Brussels and federal authorities want to go further on this project, without taking into account any critics: it appears as a brand new project, with low impact of the works on surface traffic, it participates in the redevelopment of Brussels image...

Based on a critical vision of this project and by developing alternatives, we identify and explain the decisional structure, the role of the various stakeholders and their consequences on these projects. In a second step, we highlight the potential social impacts of these projects and the way they address metropolitan social issues. This lead to a critical framework for understanding urban mobility, in Brussels and elsewhere.

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