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Reset: The post-coronavirus transport conundrum

Why public transport must reinvent itself

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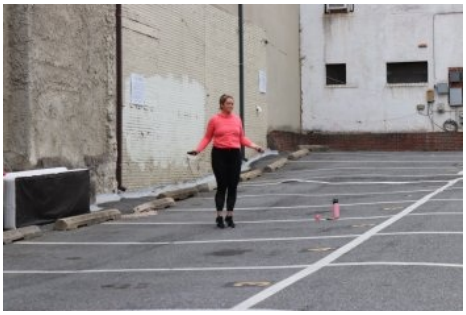

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Introduction

During the coronavirus crisis, cities around the world seized the opportunity to close roads to cars and to expand pedestrian zones and cycle lanes. But what future will these initiatives have when normality is restored? Is there even the risk of a rebound in private car use if travelling on public transport continues to be discouraged? At the same time, the crisis is also a chance for public transport to reinvent itself and play a new role in the post-COVID-19 world.

Transport during the coronavirus crisis – an accelerated revolution?

During the coronavirus crisis, traffic – especially private vehicles and public transport – decreased in almost every city and region, in some cases dramatically. By contrast, walking and cycling enjoyed a surge in their relative importance. Many found the combination of these two impacts a relief, given the reduction in traffic-related stress, deaths and injuries and the widespread fall in levels of pollutants. However, this effect is deceptive because cars' relative weight in traffic has increased almost everywhere.

At the same time, there is growing evidence that air pollutants exacerbate coronavirus-related conditions, whether this is due to damage to the respiratory tract, or the ability of the virus to adhere to pollutant particles. This provides a compelling argument for not returning to the pre-crisis status quo after the lockdown restrictions have been relaxed. Many cities and local authorities have seized the opportunity to make long-overdue changes to public transport in the slipstream of COVID-19 social-distancing rules.

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio even convened an advisory council specifically to look at how transport would be organised after the crisis. One of its members, Sarah Kaufman from New York University, concludes from this exceptional experience that "[t]his is absolutely a time to rethink how we allocate public space".

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Tactical urbanism – small changes with big effects

Berlin

Berlin's pop-up cycle lanes, which enable socially-distanced cycling and proved an instant hit with bike users (and photographers!), are just one conspicuous example of 'tactical urbanism'. In fact, a wide range of plans to expand infrastructure for cyclists were already in the pipeline before the COVID-19 pandemic but had had trouble getting off the ground. The coronavirus crisis gave new impetus to these moves, as socially-distanced cycling became very much the order of the day and the Berlin authorities suddenly joined in the sprint, turning Felix Weisbrich, who heads the Roads and Parks Department in the city's Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg district, into a media star.

The new infrastructure was rolled out at remarkable speed, as – with the help of drone-based aerial surveys and close coordination between the relevant authorities – the district managed to set up cycle lanes within just 48 hours. 'Tactical urbanism' is the term used to describe quick, low-cost interventions in the urban space which, involving paint rather than structural measures, can be implemented without getting caught up in red tape and at the same time have a considerable transformative capacity. Berliners couldn't believe their eyes: something like this normally takes years or decades to happen as the various Berlin authorities wrangle over who is responsible for what.

An increase in cycling was an immediate consequence – and one that came as no surprise to transport expert Weert Canzler: "All transport infrastructure creates demand. So any infrastructure you put in place for cyclists is going to increase cycling." Meanwhile, the conservative opposition fears that this will be a permanent structural legacy of the coronavirus crisis – not without reason, as those responsible for the cycle lanes are already talking about making them a lasting feature and putting them on a firmer footing. Generally speaking, initially unpopular measures, such as traffic calming, the elimination of parking spaces and the creation of low-emissions zones, once the case for them has been won and they have been put in place, have not been reversed subsequently, even when there has been a change in the political wind.

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London

Before COVID-19, nine million people in London used public transport every day. The two-metre social-distancing rules in force in the UK have seen passenger capacity plummet to 15%, according to Transport for London (TfL) Commissioner Andy Byford. The British capital's famed double-decker buses have been limited to 20 passengers, whereas they can normally hold 87.

In May 2020, London Mayor Sadiq Khan unveiled the 'London Streetspace' programme, which aims to accommodate a possible 10-fold increase in cycling and a fivefold rise in walking. "[B]y quickly and cheaply widening pavements, creating temporary cycle lanes and closing roads to through traffic we will enable millions more people to change the way they get around our city," he said. The Mayor's office is consulting with the 32 boroughs to rapidly implement Streetspace funding for signs, stickers, plastic barriers and traffic diversions. The city authorities are in fact working on making these temporary measures a permanent feature.

Some boroughs, including Camden, are also crowd-sourcing suggestions, tips and comments using online maps. Local residents are making extensive use of Camden Safe Travel, which enables the authorities to respond quickly to suggestions from the public and get feedback on measures they have already taken.

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Milan

Milan is a relatively small, densely populated northern Italy city, with 1.4 million inhabitants, 55% of whom use public transport to get to work. The average commute is less than 4 km, making a switch from cars to other means of transport conceivable for many residents. Lombardy – Italy's most populous region with over 10 million inhabitants – was one of the parts of Europe hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. The region, and especially its capital Milan, also has some of Europe's highest levels of air pollution.

Against this backdrop, Milan has announced that 35 km of streets will be transformed over the summer of 2020, with a rapid, unbureaucratic expansion of cycling and walking space as COVID-19 restrictions are lifted. The *Strade Aperte* (Open Streets) plan includes temporary cycle lanes and speed limits of 30 km/h. According to Milan Deputy Mayor Marco Granelli, the aim is also "to support bars, artisans and restaurants. When [the crisis] is over, the cities that still have this kind of economy will have an advantage, and Milan wants to be in that category."

The Milan city authorities have brought in a high-profile adviser in the shape of Janette Sadik-Khan, a former transportation commissioner for New York City, who is working with them on their post-COVID-19 transport recovery programme. She says: "The Milan plan is so important because it lays out a good playbook for how you can reset your cities now. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to take a fresh look at your streets and make sure that they are set to achieve the outcomes that we want to achieve: not just moving cars as fast as possible from point A to point B, but making it possible for everyone to get around safely."

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Barcelona

Since 2015, when a left-wing coalition took power in Barcelona, the city authorities have been pursuing an ambitious plan to reduce

car use in the Catalan metropolis, which was plagued by air and noise pollution, by building new tram lines and rolling out new cycle lanes. While no such moves can be expected from the right-wingers and right-wing populists who have been running local government in Madrid since mid-2019, leftist Barcelona Mayor Ada Colau is set to pursue in her second term the path she took in her first, in an effort to bring about a new type of mobility.

Since the start of 2020, there has been a 95-km² 'Barcelona Ring Roads Low Emission Zone', inside which vehicles without an eco-label are banned. This follows the example of the similar Madrid Central zone introduced in the Spanish capital in 2019, where levels of nitrogen dioxide (NO_2) have fallen by 48% in one year.

Ada Colau, who was re-elected in May 2019, says that the transport changes "are here to stay". Barcelona has already declared a climate emergency, and according to Colau, the coronavirus crisis has only "increased the urgency of making this transition happen much faster". She has said: "Pollution is something that had become normal which we don't want to return to. We don't want streets full of cars." As in other cities, more spaces were created for pedestrians and cyclists during the lockdown, including an additional 21 km of cycle paths and 12 km of pavements or footpaths.

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The post-coronavirus transport conundrum

With pandemic restrictions now being lifted across Europe and the volume of traffic increasing once again, a less idyllic scenario is emerging, one in which private vehicle use gathers fresh momentum, fuelled by fears of COVID-19 infection. Traffic researcher Jens Dangschat, who calls this the 'my car is my castle' phenomenon, even fears that conflicts in the arena of public spaces will flare up or intensify as a result.

Cities are adopting a wide range of strategies to try and prevent a return to the pre-crisis status quo. In an open letter to the European Commission, a number of leading figures in city authorities from across Europe write that "urban mobility is being disrupted dramatically by the current crisis". They see a risk of a rebound in terms of greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution. Their idea to avoid squandering the "huge public momentum to maintain the improved air quality" is to modernise public transport: "Public transport has a central role here: it requires the renewal of bus fleets with zero emission vehicles, and quickly."

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Local public transport caught in a pincer movement

Public transport as we know it could be the big loser from the coronavirus crisis. The crisis has seen a slump in passenger numbers on local public transport, leading to a major loss of revenue. The slate is not simply wiped clean with the lifting of the lockdown, as social-distancing rules and the requirement to wear a mask in public spaces may be with us for a while yet. The fear of infection in enclosed spaces such as buses and trains is also keeping passenger numbers low.

Even before the crisis, public transport was having a hard time of it, often being underfunded, needing modernisation and operating at the limits of its capacity. When profitability is the overriding concern, this ideology leaves its mark, meaning that there is hardly any room for innovation. A host of new vehicles on the one hand (e.g. e-scooters, electric bikes, 'microbuses' (small, usually electric buses available via an app)) and new behaviours and transport models on the other (ride sharing, ride pooling, car sharing, etc.) are putting pressure on traditional public transport. Often, there are insufficient resources to get involved in these innovative mobility solutions.

To make matters worse, capital-driven platforms are muscling their way onto the scene, appealing in particular to a young, urban audience with their user-friendly, app-driven mobility solutions.

German Association of Towns and Municipalities transport officer Timm Fuchs frames the challenge posed by the platform economy in the following terms: "As in other areas, the digitalisation of public transport is revolving around the platform economy, big data and artificial intelligence. For municipal authorities and customers, the availability of data from public and private mobility providers offers new opportunities for better transport planning and customised route planning. It is also all about the digital networking of modes of transport through cross-provider platforms, integrated information and booking systems, real-time information and optimised operational processes, and even driverless cars." There are a host of changes in the pipeline, for which public transport providers often do not have the money, staff or regulatory scope required.

In just one example of how public transport is facing increasing competition from mobility platforms on its own turf, Uber recently announced plans to set up a type of neighbourhood taxi service in Falkensee near Berlin. Uber says the following about its new service Der Falkenseer: "For a fixed price of €5 you can now book trips from any address in Falkensee to Falkensee, Finkenkrug and Seegefeld railway stations and back again via the Uber app." Public transport companies have been calling for such feeder services for years now so that they can offer a proper alternative to private cars outside the major cities. However, the price of this service is set to rise to €8 from September 2020.

The result for public transport is that it is caught in a pincer movement between economic and epidemiological factors – a double strangulation effect that Klaus Dörre has also identified in the automotive industry. It is being squeezed by COVID-19-related revenue losses, social-distancing rules and passengers' fears on the one hand, and loss of sales and underfunding on the other. Take Berlin, for example: workers' representatives on the Supervisory Board of the city's public transport operator Berliner Verkehrsbetriebe (BVG) had to block the procurement of low-carbon electric buses at a meeting of this body, in order to avoid over-indebtedness and the possible worsening of funding shortfalls for workers' wages and salaries.

In Barcelona too, the coronavirus crisis means that the public transport company is facing the threat of bankruptcy, with €200 million in lost revenue, prompting the city's mayor to call for national legislation to finance public transport. However, the coronavirus crisis also provides an opportunity to break out of the current funding system. This should finally put paid to the financial viability and profitability rationale, while discussions about free local transport or low-cost all-year-round tickets like the '365-euro tickets' introduced in Austria and Germany could gain momentum.

Against this backdrop, Michael Brie and Judith Dellheim write in their recently published plea for free local public transport: "Free local public transport could be a sensible way forward to ensure that things do not continue in the same way (...) with today's car-focused society."

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