

Schöller-Schwedes, Oliver; Rammler, Stephan: *Mobile Cities. Dynamiken weltweiter Stadt- und Verkehrsentwicklung*. Münster: LIT Verlag 2008. ISBN: 978-3-8258-0913-3; 304 S.

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On 23 March 2009 the Tata Nano experienced its commercial launch. It is likely that this ultra-cheap car will revolutionize the outlook of cities dramatically and vie with metros, rickshaws, bikes, trains, sidewalks and footpaths for the favor of the mobile urbanite. Countless Nanos will soon choke the streets of Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru, three fast-growing Indian cities that figure prominently in *Mobile Cities*. The publication of a book putting urban mobility into the limelight could not have been timelier. The central theme concerns 'the difficult relationship' (title chapter 2) of the city and traffic. The authors show the potential for an antagonistic relationship between cities and traffic by reminding the audience of the dystopia of American urban landscapes in concrete and noting that in Berlin road construction destroyed more buildings than all the damage of the Second World War combined (p. 10). Such infrastructures have largely deprived urban spaces from their social functions, turning the city into a mere transit area (p. 19). The ultimate challenge we face in the 21st century is how to provide mobility in urban settings that is sustainable in both environmental and human terms. It should not pollute too much, not lay claim to too much space, be affordable to the less prosperous and minimize its death toll. The authors discuss their thematic for all continents and a stunning number of cities appear throughout the book.

Long-term urban traffic development in 'developed industrial countries' presents a dismal model. In the United States, Western Europe and Japan (in descending order) traffic development has centered on the two interlinked processes of suburbanization and automobility. 'Developing' and 'transformation countries' would be well advised to follow alternative paths to mobile modernity – but the tone of the book is not optimistic about the

chances that this will actually happen. While giving some glimpses of the past and particularly the future, the book mainly focuses on the present-day, a logical choice given the authors' affiliation with the Institute for Transportation Design at Braunschweig University of Art.

The future of traffic has a fascinating history of its own¹, but Schöller-Schwedes and Rammler have not written a historical study – nor was that their intention. It begs the question what the book offers to the average historian? Truth be told, not as much as the author of this review as a transnational mobility historian would have liked. The book briefly sketches the historical background of urban settings and the bibliography includes key references to German-language historical literature, but it seems not to have noted prominent works outside the German-speaking realm. The rise of the car in Western cities – a key reference point in the background of *Mobile Cities* – has drawn considerable historical attention, yet excellent monographs on the automobile changeover of say Paris, Melbourne, or American cities go missing completely.² The historical sketches in *Mobile Cities* offer interesting observations, but there is no space to elaborate: we need to jump to the next decade or continent.

What the book thus gains in breadth, it loses in precision and detail. How seriously should we take a section squeezing Caracas and Mexico City in only two pages? The book's attempt to do many cities justice is laudable, but the result is mixed, at best. Africa (mainly Johannesburg, Lagos and Cairo) compares favorably to the much shorter discussion of Latin America. The lion's share of the book is dedicated to 'Asian high-speed urbanism' in China and India. Here the authors choose an attractive three-city setup (Beijing-Shanghai-Pearl River Delta mega-

¹ Hans-Liudger Dienel / Helmuth Trischler (eds.), *Geschichte der Zukunft des Verkehrs. Verkehrskonzepte von der frühen Neuzeit bis zum 21. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt am Main 1997.

² Graeme Davison, *Car Wars. How the Car Won our Hearts and Conquered Our Cities*, Crows Nest 2004; Mathieu Flonneau, *Paris et l'automobile. Un siècle de passions*, Paris 2005; Clay McShane, *Down the Asphalt Path. The Automobile and the American City*, New York 1994.

urban region, and Delhi-Mumbai-Bengaluru respectively). Unfortunately, the potential for comparison is not exploited to the extent that it might have been. Additionally, the choice for particular cities remains unsubstantiated. Size seems to have been a criterion, but if there is something to be learned from the book's discussion of Latin America, than it is that somewhat smaller cities (e.g. Curitiba in Brazil, around 1,8 million inhabitants, pp. 72-75) can be the more interesting ones from a mobility perspective – providing workable examples of urban planning that meets some of the sustainability criteria formulated at the start.

Overall, the book emphasizes urban development more than traffic development, but the connection between the two – a theme that should have been at the heart of this study – remains elusive. It does not help either that the authors allow themselves excursions to urban topics not necessarily related to traffic, or transport themes they fail to link to the city explicitly. It gives the book a somewhat inchoate character, not adding up to a more encompassing whole. To add insult to injury, the book fails to contribute to the burgeoning transnational turn. The subject matter lends itself perfectly for discussing the circulation of urban traffic models, the municipal eagerness to learn from experiences of local authorities elsewhere, the spread of traffic engineering insights and the like, both nationally and internationally. Indeed, the international circulation of people, knowledge, services, and goods in combination with their local appropriations are essential to understand the modern urban fabric.³ Alas – the book does not seem interested in such processes and discusses cities more or less in isolation. The main transnational dimension entering the book's pages is the colonial legacy, though not at great depths.

The extensive use of quotes from secondary sources and the 85 illustrations add to the book's liveliness, although the clumsy reproduction of colored images in grey-scale on pages 32, 162 and 212 makes them hard to interpret. In short, this book offers a brief introduction to an important and highly relevant topic, but it is not the ultimate study of its subject matter. We can only hope that the authors will at some point in the future follow up on some of the fascinating glimpses of mobility

history that their book contains and give substance to their observation that the history of cities is above all the history of their transport systems (p. 4).

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³ Mikael Hård / Thomas J. Misa (eds.), *Urban Machinery. Inside Modern European Cities*, Cambridge 2008.