SPECIAL SECTION: ROAD VERSUS RAIL

Introduction

The Return of Transport Coordination

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Abstract

The coordination of transport was heavily debated in the interwar period, as mechanized road traffic for the first time posed a serious challenge to the railways as the backbone of the transport system. The main issues of the interwar period bear resemblances with current challenges for transport policy, and historical studies may improve our understanding of contemporary transport coordination. This introduction sets the stage by discussing the concept of transport coordination and its historiography.

Keywords

Coordination, rail transport, road transport, transport history, transport policy.

Transport Coordination

The efficient provision of transport has always attracted the attention of people in general and of governments in particular. Transport is important as an economic activity—according to a recent EU White paper transport accounts for 5 percent of GDP and employs ten million people in the European Union.¹ But the importance of transport goes much further. As a prerequisite for mobility—recently identified by John Urry and others as *the* key aspect of modern society—transport is a fundamental service for nearly every societal activity.² No wonder that policymakers in all times have aspired to control and coordinate transport to achieve desired objectives and make the most of limited resources. However, the outcome of their endeavors has often been something other than what was intended. Transport systems tend to evolve according to their own momentum or are transformed by unforeseen circumstances. Historical studies of transport

coordination are needed in order to provide an understanding of the interplay between coordination attempts, historical contingency, and long-term patterns of transport development.

This Special Section of *Transfers* makes a contribution to our understanding of transport coordination by means of three case studies from the interwar period in Belgium, the Netherlands, and California. The word “return” in the title of this introduction has a double meaning. Firstly, there is the sense of returning to that time period when transport coordination first became a major issue. In the wake of the challenge from the nascent road transport system to the railway “monopoly in the 1920s and 1930s,” transport coordination was intensely debated and an institutional foundation was created, which has had major implications for the development of twentieth-century transport systems.³

In another sense of the word return, some of the interwar issues may now be returning to the transport policy agenda. To take an example from Sweden, three changes in transport policy took place in 2010. On 1 April the national agencies for rail and road transport were merged into a new Swedish Transport Administration. On 1 October 2010 the last remnant of the Swedish railway monopoly was abolished, as the state-owned railway operator SJ lost the exclusive right to operate passenger traffic on the most profitable trunk lines. Finally, at the end of the year, the project Transport 2030 was brought to a conclusion, having established a platform for cross-sector cooperation in order to develop a vision for the future development of the transport system in a twenty-year perspective. Each of these cases have their counterparts in the interwar period: the reform of ailing railways, the merger of transport agencies, and the setting up of more or less corporatist bodies to promote coordination. As I will argue below, these similarities can partly be attributed to the malleability of the concept of coordination. However, in a recent article, Claus H. Sørensen and Frode Longva use the Swedish and Finnish mergers of government transport agencies as indications of a recent resurgence of interest in coordination.⁴ Since the 1980s, transport coordination measures have been inspired by New Public Management (NPM), a policy paradigm with a strong focus on the deregulation and unbundling of the public sector into corporatized units, competition and market mechanisms, and measures of performance, output controls, and evaluation.⁵ The Swedish reforms in 2010 could be interpreted as extensions of the New Public Management agenda, with a continuing emphasis on improved efficiency through vertical and horizontal separation, improved output controls, and extended customer and market orientation. From a different perspective, the 2010 reforms suggest that we may be on the threshold of a post-NPM era. “Post” may be interpreted as “reacting against.” In 2010 the Swedish railway system encountered an unprecedented degree of standstills,

delays, and cancellations, leading to widespread public outrage and disillusionment. While an unusually severe winter was partly to blame, many commentators—including the political opposition—argued that too far-reaching deregulation has created a situation where no one assumes responsibility for maintenance and coordination.

“Post” may also be interpreted literally as “after,” as in representing the last possible step of railway deregulation or the removal of tasks from the central transport agency. When other tasks have been severed from the central government transport agency, emphasis in its policy changes too. Coordination, a concept which has accompanied and bedeviled transport policymakers for a long time, may be on the rise again.

Transport Coordination in History

The concept of coordination has been widely used by historical actors but is also an analytical concept for contemporary scholars. In this section I will provide some arguments in favor of historians and mobility scholars treating coordination as an object of study rather than as an analytical category. At a very general level, a common approach in disciplines such as institutional economics, organization research, or political science is a three-way categorization of coordination into the invisible hand of the market, the authoritative command of the bureaucracy, and the mutual trust of the network.⁶ In transport, coordination nearly always involves a combination of these mechanisms, and the analytical models are not always easily applicable. There exists a range of formal definitions and classifications of transport coordination. In transport economics, coordination is often broken down according to the particular policy involved, for example, infrastructure investment, infrastructure charging, pricing, internalization of external costs, and so on.⁷ In their study of public transport coordination, Christensen and Longva point to four forms of coordination: organizational, contractual, partnership, and discursive.⁸ Kaufmann and Sager use a welfare-theoretical concept, defining coordination as something desirable if total welfare is increased.⁹ While categorizations such as these are helpful, they may conflict with the view of coordination as an historical category.

In 1930, a U.S. commentator in the *Journal of Political Economy* started out thus:

In the study of transportation emphasis has recently shifted somewhat from the examination of particular agencies, especially the railway, to a consideration of the relation of one agency to another. Explanation of this change lies in the disconcerting invasion by new facilities of the sphere of inland transport, shared comfortably for many years by steam and electric railways, and horse-

drawn vehicles. Outstanding among the invaders has been the motor vehicle; and the airplane and dirigible have lately induced concern, if not by their achievements, at least through vaguely disclosed possibilities.¹⁰

A few years later, an inquiry commissioned by the International Chamber of Commerce argued that:

the co-ordination of railway and motor transport constitutes a problem of first-rate importance in the organization of economic life today. It is to the direct interest of every producer and consumer that goods carried by rail or by motor should arrive at their destination in the best possible condition and at the least possible expense. But it is equally to their interest that the railways and motor transport should be organized on a sound basis, for the cost of allowing or obliging them to run under a wasteful or inefficient system must, in the final analysis, fall on the general public.¹¹

These quotations point to several features of contemporary as well as subsequent coordination debates. While air and water traffic features in the discussion, coordination between (and sometimes within) different forms of road and railway transport has mostly been the main focus of coordination debates and coordination policies. The expansion of mechanized road traffic and its consequences is the most salient theme of twentieth-century transport. The railways have been dethroned as the backbone of transport, but have received renewed interest and a prominent role in (at least European) visions of the good and sustainable society. The quotations, moreover, point to the inherent difficulty of devising a practical means of coordination. Coordination debates have always been brimming with talk of efficiency, fairness and rationality. In practice, the means available for the coordination of transport have been limited, since transport spans over a wide range of social fields and jurisdictions. In the interwar period nearly every aspect of road and railway transport was scrutinized carefully, but in retrospect it is clear that policymakers did not manage to build an adequate understanding of the forces at work in creating a new division of labour between different modes of transport.

The fact that the challenges we are facing now are not substantially different from those of ninety years ago may be taken as an indictment of a massive failure of transport policy ever since. However, rather than applying the benefit of hindsight in a condemnation of previous policy, I suggest that we should concentrate on some features of transport coordination which have received little attention in the previous literature. Part of the explanation for the difficulty of transport coordination is hinted at in the “vaguely disclosed possibilities” at the end of the first quotation. Transport planning (and thereby coordination) represents, by definition, the projection of current fantasies and yesterday’s experiences into the future.¹² Visions of the future are always contested if they are so detailed as

to be meaningful. The historical case studies reveal a wide range of forms and guises of coordination, as well as a highly contested use of the word itself. Coordination has been used by promoters of horizontal and vertical integration to further their case, such as by railway companies, large road haulers, and motorbus companies in the interwar period. Coordination has equally often belonged to that class of attractive concepts which has a commonsensical meaning but tends to elude definition (cf. current candidates such as knowledge, sustainability, and creativity). This was acknowledged in the 1930s. In the astute words of G. Shorey Peterson:

Through its association with various salutary suggestions the word has acquired a strong appeal among persons concerned with transport matters, and with the potency that shibboleths obtain, seems able to prepossess men in favor of proposals that bear its label. But unfortunately, in its specific applications, coordination lacks the unity of meaning its users assume; and general acceptance of the vague principle accordingly tempts special interests to employ it to denominate programs which clearly are open to debate.¹³

Coordination, in other words, has always been a malleable concept, used to promote particular interests as well as attempting to bridge conflicting interests. Mobility scholars and historians have an important task in analyzing the meaning and context of coordination in different periods and settings.

The Historiography of Transport Coordination

The wider topic of road and railway traffic has been the subject of a large number of historical studies, and in a short research overview it is impossible to mention even a fraction of the relevant literature. The ambition here is limited to providing a general overview based on Britain, Germany, and Sweden, which certainly does not do justice to individual contributions. The historiography of road and railway transport looks different in different countries, mirroring national research traditions. For example, the British literature includes several surveys of transport history but fewer monographs on specific topics, while the German literature lacks overviews but includes a number of Ph.D. theses on important topics relating to coordination.¹⁴ The railways have been the subject of rather exhaustive monographs and articles, mostly reflecting the preoccupations of each nation-state, such as industrial decline in Britain, the German tradition of corporate capitalism, and Swedish institutions for infrastructure management.¹⁵ Road transport has generally attracted scant scholarly interest, apart from studies of motor manufacturing, but in all three countries the last two decades have seen the rise of a new social and

cultural history of the motorcar, often with a critical stance.¹⁶ Neither of these traditions, however, is particularly illuminating on road transport as a service rather than a cultural artifact or a production system.¹⁷ Road construction is another aspect of road transport which has been completely overlooked in Britain and only received limited treatment in Germany (with the conspicuous exception of the Autobahn) but has been the subject of a couple of monographs in Sweden.¹⁸

This historiography has implications for the future study of coordination. While there is an historiography to build upon, the existing literature specifically addressing the road-rail question is limited to the general handbooks, older studies and a few articles.¹⁹ The most exhaustive and up-to-date coverage is still to be found in contemporary publications such as Gilbert Walker's impressive monograph *Road and Rail* from 1942.²⁰ If we are right in identifying a rising interest in coordination, there is a demand for updated interpretations based on the wider transport literature. As so often is the case in history, existing studies tend to correspond to boundaries between nation-states, industries, and organizations. The literature consists mainly of single-nation studies—international comparisons, regional perspectives and transnational narratives are badly needed.²¹ Few works deal with railway and road policy together and few works span policymaking as well as the economic development of transport. The literature on policymaking is often concerned with issues of ownership or regulatory form, rather than its impact on transport services. Studies of coordination may offer insights which cross some of these boundaries.

Finally, while the existing literature refers to a wide range of theoretical discussions, there is scope for more explicit reflections on useful theoretical underpinnings for this specific field. Transport economics and the economics of regulation have offered a sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit, underlying perspective for many previous views of coordination. But there is little discussion of the consequences of applying transport economics to earlier time periods. Neo-institutionalism is sometimes cited as a major theoretical perspective, but it is not always clear what analytical clarity the institutional perspective adds.²² The Large Technical Systems (LTS) perspective in the history of technology, pioneered by Thomas P. Hughes, is often mentioned as an inspiration, but its terminology is rarely used to support the analyses.²³ With a focus on coordination the applicability of the LTS perspective to transport coordination ought to be given further attention. Last but not least, the recent mobility turn in social science has not yet been given due importance in the historical study of coordination, which for example could benefit from the insights offered by the systems view on automobility proposed by John Urry.²⁴

The Contribution of This Special Section

The need for historical perspectives on the current situation and the state of previous research opens up interesting research possibilities into the international history of coordination. The three empirical articles and the afterword in this volume provide an important contribution, focusing especially on the struggle between motor buses and railway companies, a struggle which was played out in the enticing of passengers as well as in national political debates. The paper by Donald Weber entitled, "Road against Rail: The Debate on Transport Policy in Belgium, 1920–1940," deals with the struggles between old and new forms of transport and especially motor buses challenging the light railways. Ruud Filarski's paper, "The Emergence of the Bus Industry: Dutch Transport Policy during the Interwar Years," deals with government policy and passenger preferences in relation to a similar contest between motor buses and light railways. Gregory L. Thompson's paper, "Public Policy or Popular Demand? Why Californians Shifted from Trains to Autos (and Not Buses), 1910–1941," deals with similar issues in a North American context. The three articles contribute important detailed empirical analyses of the growth of motor bus traffic as well as regulations and fares, based on otherwise very inaccessible data. This is most welcome, since public passenger transport has so far been neglected in the literature. The motor bus was important to the early growth of motor transport in its own right and as an intermediate step to private motoring. Motor buses were, moreover, an ambiguous category for transport coordination. All three articles tell a story of initial rapid and uncontrolled growth owing to individual entrepreneurship, soon to be replaced by licensing (1917 in California, 1924 in Belgium, and 1926 in the Netherlands) which, at least in the latter two cases, had the effect of curtailing growth and increasing industry concentration—most dramatically in Belgium where the state-owned light railway company acquired a large market share in bus transport.

A second common theme is the ubiquity of the discourse of coordination. At least in the European cases, the 1920s saw an increasing attention paid to coordination, culminating in the early 1930s with "a war being prepared" in Belgium and somewhat later with the state assuming responsibility for coordination in the Netherlands. All papers point to a popular embracing of the motorcar and the motor bus as a manifestation of novelty, modernity, and freedom. At the same time concern for the accumulated railway capital and the railway as the universal service provider in most cases made railway a preferred mode for policymakers. The article on California provides important insights into railway strategy and consumer choice rather than politics.

Third, all three narratives breathe a sense of failure. The article on Belgium concludes with a note on the striking “short-sightedness of the so-called coordination debate on the political level,” where arguments tended to focus on relatively marginal phenomena. In the Dutch case, the outcome was the state assuming responsibility for transport coordination despite lacking the capabilities to do so. In California by the end of the interwar period, coordination was seen as a dead issue and Thompson’s counterfactual analysis suggests that while the main determinant of railway decline was changes in demand, this was augmented further by an anti-railway bias in policy.

Fourth, all articles adopt a user perspective, focusing on the composition of demand and consumer choice, even managing to integrate the experience of travelling into the analysis of coordination. The extraordinary evidence on the Netherlands reveals the importance of service competition to motor bus competitiveness vis-à-vis the light railways. Flexibility in stops, short journey time via direct routes, access to urban centers, and an air of novelty made consumers of travel shift mode from light railways to motor buses. The Californian case shows how preference for personalized mobility was instrumental in shaping transport policy, using evidence stemming directly from transport companies and consumers rather than political or expert discourses.

As ought to be the case in a comparative volume, the articles also reveal cross-national differences. In an international perspective, the Belgian and Dutch case stand out as densely populated, small nations served by a dense network of light railways. In the Belgian case the light railways were owned by a national company with strong lobbying clout which managed to attain a high market share in both light rail and bus transport. California differs from the European cases in some respects. The early diffusion of mass motoring made a strong impact on public transport policy. Large-scale trunk road investment influenced the coordination debate and the division of the market. The competition between the Santa Fe and Southern Pacific railway lines had few if any equivalents in Europe (even though pockets of competition remained in Britain after the 1921 amalgamation).

As these national case studies are complemented by other, boundary-spanning work in the future, we will hopefully be able to build a richer history of transport coordination, to the benefit of the historical interpretation of the rise of modern mobility as well as of transport policymakers trying to grapple with the challenges ahead.

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Notes

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