A Political Economy of Access

Infrastructure, Networks, Cities, and Institutions

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When we talk about access as a value that should guide transport policy, we need to address access for whom, not just access to where by what mode. In the auto-dependent US, the mode that offers the most access in most places currently is the car. Yet cars are expensive, and many people struggle with basic access (and mobility) simply because they can’t afford it. Transport is the second largest spending category for US households, behind only housing. This is the case even as transport is heavily subsidized, regardless of mode. As discussed in Subsidy, the general approach is to spread whatever help is offered thinly across infrastructure capital investment. This does little to help those with the least.

1 It is likely that transport is so heavily subsidized because it is such a large share of household spending.

2 §4.
If we view access as a necessary utility, such as energy, then we can supply access to ensure that people aren’t left out of the economy. We argue subsidy should be paid directly to travelers. But that is not the world in which we live, nor is there a credible expectation that we will start doing so anytime soon. The reality is that American cities are largely built around the automobile, which means that to access economic opportunity you have to drive. If we accept the US cities are automobile-dependent, and we do, then it follows that people without autos are disadvantaged, as they do not have the thing on which cities are dependent.

One way to think about people at a transport disadvantage is through the lens of transport poverty. The fewer options that people have for getting around, the more vulnerable they are to situations where they can’t do the things they need to survive and thrive. Transport poverty may result in social isolation, loss of economic opportunity, or exposure to negative externalities from transport.

For many, the problematic situation of transport poverty should be addressed through investment in alternative modes of getting around and better cities: walking, biking, and mass transit serving denser residential neighborhoods. Density is good, and we largely agree with these ideas, our preferences for density or our concerns about the environment should not come at the expense of people suffering from transport poverty. Society doesn’t prevent people heating fuel in the depths of winter just because burning it pollutes the air. Staying warm is more important than being a perfect environmental steward. We should apply the same standard to transport.

Transport poverty hits families in multiple ways. First, there is the monetary cost of travel, in particular the cost of owning and operating an automobile. Second, there are the time costs involved to travel if a car is unavailable. We often hear tales of a benevolent boss or group of co-workers who pitch in to buy a car for someone who walks for hours to reach their job. These are not stories that should make us cheer the generous co-workers, but are stories that should alarm us as to just how vulnerable too many people are when it comes to transport.

The time and money costs combine to promote social and economic exclusion among many, particularly people without cars. A story from the Seattle Times illustrates these points. Simon Nakhale is an immigrant from Kenya whose family relied on bus transit for their first few years in the United States. His bus commute was a four-hour round trip. Eventually he and his family realized this routine was unsustainable and they bought a car. The

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3 For instance, Walter Carr was given a car after he walked 12 miles for his first day of work as a mover. His boss found out because he was picked up by the police at 4:00 am, presumably because walking alone at that hour is viewed as suspect behavior (Garrand 2018).

4 (Tu 2015).
car not only shortened their commutes, but allowed Nakhale to get a second job.\textsuperscript{5} Too often, cases like Nakhale reflect the relationship between long commutes and low wages. Even with low wages, people will buy cars as soon as they can afford them just to access more opportunity.

Studies of low-income households show that families go in and out of car ownership frequently. One study that uses the Panel Survey of Income Dynamics shows that while 13\% of US households are car free any given year, only 5\% of households are consistently car free.\textsuperscript{6} This suggests that the value of a car is greater than the expense, even for low income families.\textsuperscript{7} Over the past few decades, a lack of a car has become increasingly associated with poverty.\textsuperscript{8} The income gap between households with a car and those without is greater than households with a college degree and those without, or households who own their home rather than rent. In America, to be carless most likely means poverty.\textsuperscript{9}

Banks and automakers have taken note of the importance of auto access. As cars have become more expensive, but also more reliable, auto loans for eight years are now commonplace. A Canadian study shows how high levels of auto dependence correlates with high levels of household indebtedness for car-related expenses.\textsuperscript{10} Sub-prime loans and predatory lending are also pervasive for low income households simply trying to buy a car so they can be part of the economy. People on the edge of car ownership are vulnerable to many things, and should be protected.

By reorienting our transport thinking to accessibility rather than mobility, we reward transport choices that take advantage of proximity of activities and diminish the status of higher speed travel, which favors the auto. This will naturally make families more resilient with regard to transport, but also will minimize the necessity of automobile ownership, which should be a policy target ahead of minimizing automobile ownership in absolute terms.\textsuperscript{11}

Transport poverty presents many challenges for the political economy of access. The primary challenge, obviously, is how to ensure that everyone has the access they need to the places they need to go. But supplying access to everyone is at least a straightforward goal. The real challenges are trying to achieve it where there are resource constraints, which depends on how policy is made. Money spent on access for some is money that cannot be spent on access for others. Some (most) people are more concerned about their ability to hold a job than their carbon footprint. We know that during recessions environmental concern declines.\textsuperscript{12} Similar attitudes will be held by workers struggling to get by. This

\textsuperscript{5} Whether people should have to work multiple jobs to get by is a separate question.

\textsuperscript{6} (Klein and Smart 2017).

\textsuperscript{7} Each year the American Public Transport Association (APTA) puts out a ‘fact sheet’ that claims switching from driving to public transit will save a household $10,000 on average. They promote this as look at how much money is being wasted by people who choose to drive rather than take the bus or train. An alternate interpretation, if their analysis were accurate at all, is that a typical family is willing to spend $10,000 yearly to have the access a car brings.

\textsuperscript{8} (King et al. 2019).

\textsuperscript{9} An exception to this is Manhattan. Voulgaris et al. (2017) estimate that only 5\% of the population reside in what we would consider “old urban” neighborhoods which are easy to live in without a car.

\textsuperscript{10} (Walks 2018).

\textsuperscript{11} As we have argued elsewhere in the book, drivers should pay the full social costs of driving. If this happens, then we are indifferent to how much driving occurs.

\textsuperscript{12} (Kahn and Kotchen 2010).
creates tension between preferred solutions for transport poverty and solutions to problems that automobility causes.

People have different priorities that affect interventions they will support. For instance, for some people carbon emissions and climate change are the biggest problems associated with transport, and they feel that all policies should focus on reducing emissions. But how to reconcile this preference with improving equitable access? The US is car dependent. People who do not have cars are then, by definition, disadvantaged. To improve their advantage we should expand auto access, which can come in many forms, but doing so will harm environmental policy, cause more congestion and other externalities, and may take away some transit riders when transit can scarcely afford to lose any. So, we need to balance the needs of some people today with the desires of some people in the future. This is not easy.