

Street Fight

By Jason Henderson

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Reviewed by Andrea Broaddus

Nowhere are tensions between motorists, bicyclists and buses higher than in San Francisco, the birthplace of the freeway revolts, the Transit First ordinance, and Critical Mass. In *Street Fight*, geographer Jason Henderson offers a fresh perspective into the battle for limited urban road space, delving into the ideologies underlying the politics of mobility. Released this spring, his first book proves a provocative read for those engaged in sustainability and urban livability debates.

It is no secret that transportation planning is a politically charged realm. Henderson argues that one must dig deeper than politics to understand and intervene effectively, especially if one aims to challenge the politics of automobility. *Automobility* is understood as the use of automobiles as the primary mode of transportation, together with the built environment supporting their use, and the everyday attitudes and assumptions of a society dependent upon car use. In the US, this concept is so much embedded in our lives that it seems to be common sense and even inevitable. Henderson writes:

In considering transportation, one cannot transcend ideology or hope that it goes away. It is not enough to acknowledge that transportation is simply political.... One must also comprehend the underlying ideology guiding the various political positions with respect to transportation and mobility (p. 6).

In his first chapter, Henderson discusses transportation planning as a political discourse dominated by ideologically-charged points of view. Invoking Harvey, Davis, and LeFebvre, and building upon Sheller and Urry's "new mobility paradigm," he argues that one must grasp the ideological assumptions about mobility before it is possible to understand how and why transportation decisions are made. He outlines the three competing political ideologies—progressive, neoliberal, and conservative—and their different normative visions of mobility and urban space. Proponents of these ideologies compete in the political realm by invoking the norms, values, and attitudes embedded within their own perspectives. The book's broad aim is to deconstruct each ideology of mobility, make plain its assumptions, and trace how it has shaped the built environment.

The remainder of the book portrays San Francisco as a stage upon which fierce debates challenging and defending automobility have played out over the past fifty years. The city has long been a space of struggle between two competing forces: a vocal population demanding cars and plentiful roadway and parking space for their unfettered movement, and a strong local counterculture that seeks to protect and reclaim space from cars. Two of the book's chapters reframe historical debates over urban space in San Francisco in terms of competing ideologies and the political movements, alliances, and events through which they have been embodied—the highway and transit revolts of the 1960s, and the removal the Central and Embarcadero Freeways in the 1990s. Henderson's analysis explains why the same west-side San Franciscans who rallied to block the city's freeway plans in 1959 subsequently voted against its plans for a rapid transit system in their neighborhood in 1966. The "mobility stalemate" resulting from a popular desire for an urban life with no corresponding sacrifice of full automobility endures to this day.

Three chapters are devoted to contemporary debates by mode of transportation: parking, bicycling, and public transit. Those who have watched these debates play out over the past decade will find Henderson's analysis a useful lens through which to view them. For example, he portrays the politics of the livability movement and its emphasis on creating more compact urban housing and bike lanes as an unintentional overlap of progressive and neoliberal ideologies. Where progressives see a sustainability strategy, neoliberal developers see profitable development opportunities, and working separately in similar directions, both groups create political momentum. Henderson suggests that where the rising political power of the San Francisco Bicycle Coalition has been insufficient to achieve specific goals, such as reform of intersection level of service (LOS) standards, neoliberal interests might be able to resolve the impasse, were they to be induced to join the cause. However, such an alliance, or potential alliance, with the forces of gentrification creates an uncomfortable tension for progressives: "Walkable, bikeable, and transit-oriented livability with premium off-street parking and private commuter transit¹ is livability for the elite and is not progressive. This is a reality that progressives in San Francisco and elsewhere must judiciously navigate (p. 195)." However, the book falls short of a detailed discussion of how to make livability more inclusive.

The book ends on a hopeful note: Henderson lays out a Map of Progressive Mobility calling for slower traffic speeds on city streets, reallocation of street space to non-auto modes, and a massive expansion of transit capacity. Yet he

1. Private commuter transit refers to private employee shuttle services operated by large employers located far outside of San Francisco, such as Google and Genentech, which allow employees to live in the city and take a Wi-Fi enabled coach directly to the corporate campus.

is not saying that we can have it all. He argues that driving is an inherently ideological and political act, and urges progressives to acknowledge this by giving up their cars. He warns that neoliberal strategies such as congestion charging and parking pricing serve to create a two-tiered mobility system, and should be viewed as short-term solutions. The long-term aim, he says, should be reducing the on- and off-street spaces of automobility in cities and reclaiming them for walking, biking, public transit, and housing people. Likewise, he calls for the reduction of regressive methods of transit finance, including fares and sales taxes, replacing them with stable sources such as assessments on commercial land and vehicles.

Regardless of whether readers agree with him or not, Henderson's book is an insightful history and helpful guide to the politics of mobility. For transportation planners, *Street Fight* is a deft navigation into a politics which may appear confusing and inconsistent. It is also a call to awareness for transport planners who profess that political impartiality may be achieved via the use of quantitative methods. The book reminds us that we are all actors who reflect an unconscious system of values and concepts, or implicit ideology, in our actions and in the plans we create.

References

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