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The abandoned social goals of public transit in the neoliberal city of the USA

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A preface and a bus rider's story: "two-tiered" transit system in the making?

Imagine a bus stop in a typical working-class neighbourhood of inner-city Los Angeles, a city with an extraordinary array of peoples and cultures. The bus pulls up with standing room only, filled with a variety of people: Mexican, Salvadoran, Korean, Filipino and African American; men and women going to jobs, some of them janitors, some street vendors. People on the bus include women clutching children and grocery bags, kids going to school, elderly folks off to the Senior Centre. The ride is like always: hot, noisy and desperately crowded. The riders come from decidedly different backgrounds, yet share the same experience daily—jostled against one another, staring blankly out cracked windows, minding their own business, intent on getting where they need to go. And getting it over with as quickly as possible.

In another part of town, people of a different income class are riding in a new train. They come from the suburbs, clacking away at laptops and sipping cappuccino on their way to downtown jobs. These are people taking advantage of what Mike Davis (1995, p. 270) calls "the biggest public works project in fin de siecle America", an ambitious series of commuter rail lines that were budgeted at $183 billion over 30 years

(Sterngold, 1999). These train riders choose to leave their cars at home to avoid the maddening freeway jams of Los Angeles. Some ride the train on principle. Trains are, after all, better for the environment.

Back on the inner-city bus … someone's handing out leaflets and talking about forming a union—of bus riders? First in English then in Spanish, the organizer tells riders how the train that's always in the newspapers is costing more than planners expected, and that politicians now propose to take money away from buses to keep building the train lines. Then the organizer talks about racial discrimination. Racial discrimination? What do buses have to do with racial discrimination?

> "Yeah, I never thought about that! Yeah, look at this bus. We're all of color. Not the same race, but we're all of color. We're poor. We're all waiting on the darn corner. We're all going to a job in general that doesn't pay us jack. And yeah, you have a good point."
> (del Barco, 1997, p. 1)

Introduction

Hidden behind the surge of national headlines about sprawl, Smart Growth, and maddening freeway congestion lies a series of conflicts emerging in cities across the USA. These

conflicts pit poor people of colour in inner cities against mostly white commuters in the suburbs over scarce public transit funds, with questions of civil rights and social equity playing central roles. These emerging conflicts reveal that the very purpose of mass transit in the sprawling metropolis is undecided. As populations continue to disperse, as poverty concentrates at the core, and as costs outpace revenues, transit planners are facing a growing dilemma: should transit serve people who have few transportation choices, or should transit offer drivers an alternative to their cars?

The neoliberal city of the USA is one that must struggle to compete and remain viable in the network of globalizing cities by cutting costs, reducing social welfare, deregulating business activity, privatizing previously public spaces and activities, and engaging in new forms of social control (Marcuse and van Kempen, 2000; Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Goonewardena, 2003). This essay examines how the contradictions of the neoliberal city influence mass transit policy in the USA, creating a worsening divide between disparate transit constituencies and undermining longstanding social equity goals. Mass transit is a new space of emerging social conflict over how the contradictions of neoliberalism will be resolved in cities of the USA (Rodriguez, 1999; Grengs, 2002). This new space of conflict holds special relevance for planners, because the neoliberal agenda involves central questions about public services in an increasingly privatized polity, the agenda contributes directly to changing urban spatial patterns, and the emerging spatial patterns raise new questions for planning theory about the role of social justice in cities where racial and economic segregation are worsening.

Contradictions within neoliberal urbanization highlight an obscure but crucial predicament faced by transit planners. Are current transit policies hurting social equity? Should public transit serve an even higher purpose, as an instrument for advancing social justice?

Transit once held promise as a means for advancing larger social goals. Congress embraced transit as a legitimate means of redistributing wealth, as an acceptable counterbalance to the damages imposed by a transportation system skewed toward the automobile (Fitch, 1964; Smerk, 1991; Weiner, 1999). Despite a commitment to social goals over several decades aimed at providing mobility for people who cannot drive, other goals have taken over in prominence. But transit policy is slowly, almost imperceptibly, shifting away from its broader social purposes. This shift away from meeting social goals toward the more narrow purpose of relieving traffic congestion, from achieving equity toward merely efficiency, is now influenced by a neoliberal political agenda that separates the social from the economic, causing planners to lose sight of the public purpose of mass transit.

In an emerging world order where capitalism spreads American-style to all corners of the globe, three major problems are widely recognized by critics from left to right: a continuous threat of war; persistent economic inequality that threatens to disrupt the social order; and a loss of political community that undermines our ability to address day-to-day problems and decisions (Goonewardena, 2003). By way of analysing transportation policy, I will set aside the question of war even though we grow ever more dependent on oil to feed our bigger and faster cars. The recent headlines about surging gasoline prices and the ongoing wars in the Middle East add up to a compelling case that our highway-dependent lifestyles have as much to do with the threat of war as perhaps any other explanation. But here I focus on the two problems of social inequality and the loss of political community because they both bear on future outcomes of mass transit policy.

The argument proceeds in three steps. First, government support for mass transit has long carried with it explicit social goals. The US federal government took decisive steps starting in the 1960s to advance mass

transit. These congressional actions strengthened transit as a counterbalance to previous federal programmes that had overwhelmingly supported highway construction as the principal thrust of transport policy, and had inadvertently contributed to urban spatial patterns that put some people without access to a car at a serious disadvantage.

Second, the social purpose of public transit is becoming supplanted by the economic imperative of efficiency and competitiveness. Gains in shifting commuters from cars to transit may actually undermine the goal of providing transit for those without cars, so that the social goal of providing mobility becomes displaced by the economic goal of reducing congestion.

The third part of the argument explains how recent changes in transportation policy are influenced by a neoliberal political agenda, heightening the conflict between transit's competing goals in ways that are not readily evident. To the casual observer, support for transit is growing. But national policy has at the same time encouraged a shift in emphasis *within the transit programme*, a shift that is likely to harm those who depend most on good transit.

The case of the Bus Riders Union

Several legal cases emerged during the 1990s that illustrate how transit advocates are fighting back against trends that do harm to transit-dependent riders (Bullard and Johnson, 1997; Committee for a Better North Philadelphia, 1990; New York Urban League, 1995; Transit Cooperative Research Program, 1997). The most prominent case comes from Los Angeles, where a grassroots group of bus riders calling themselves the Bus Riders Union (BRU) mobilized riders to fight for better bus service in the urban core (Grengs, 2002).

After several unsuccessful campaigns since the 1940s, political and business leaders finally convinced voters that Los Angeles County needed a new rail rapid transit system like those in San Francisco and Washington, DC (Adler, 1987). They argued that a system of rail lines was essential for the region's future because it would contain sprawl, reduce air pollution and relieve the freeway congestion that the city is famous for. Voters in Los Angeles County in 1980 approved a 0.5% sales tax to finance construction of a new subway and rail lines (Adler, 1986), and in 1990 approved an additional 0.5% sales tax to expand rail construction (Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, 1995). The plan called for the construction of several new urban rail lines radiating from the central core of Los Angeles, with a network of commuter railroads linking the suburbs to the central business district. The first line opened in 1990, a second line that included a segment of downtown subway opened in 1993 and a third opened in 1995.

When the rail projects faced financial trouble, the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) proposed raising the fare of a bus ride from $1.10 to $1.35 and eliminating monthly bus passes (Mann, 1997). The BRU responded by filing a class action lawsuit in 1994 claiming discrimination under the Civil Rights Act (Labor/Community Strategy Center v. L.A. County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, 1994a). The BRU argued that the MTA was building a "separate and unequal" transit system—by financing new, expensive trains for suburban commuters who were disproportionately white, while cutting back on inner-city bus services for riders who were disproportionately people of colour. The lawsuit made two main claims. First, the plaintiffs alleged that the MTA's decision to construct suburban commuter rail while imposing new costs on bus riders had the effect of discriminating against racial minorities in violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination in any federally funded projects. The new commuter rail system, they claimed, served a ridership that was only 28% minority compared to a

system-wide ridership of 80% minority. And even though 94% of the MTA's customers were bus riders, 70% of its budget went to only 6% of the ridership that use rail (NAACP Legal Defense Fund, 1996). The second main claim was that the MTA was intentionally discriminating against minority bus riders in violation of the 14th Amendment and Title VI.

A US District Court in the Central District of California granted the BRU a preliminary injunction enjoining the MTA from implementing bus fare hikes and eliminating the use of bus passes. The judge ruled that the plaintiffs had presented "more than sufficient evidence to meet their burden of preliminarily showing that MTA's actions have adversely impacted minorities; that MTA's actions were not justified by business necessity; and that the MTA has rejected less discriminatory alternatives" (Labor/Community Strategy Center v. L.A. County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, 1994b). The judge further held that the BRU had presented "more than sufficient evidence" to support the claim of disparate impacts on minorities, and had "raise[d] serious questions going to the merits" on the claim of intentional discrimination (NAACP Legal Defense Fund, 1996, p. 2). In October 1996, the parties entered into a consent decree that provided the MTA with the increased bus fare, but which also established several advantages for bus riders: continuation of the monthly bus pass, commitments to reduce crowding on buses, and establishing a Joint Working Group with representation from the MTA and the plaintiffs to ensure implementation (Transit Cooperative Research Program, 1997).

The case opened up new questions about the equality of transit services provided. Can a transit agency go too far in shifting its emphasis in favour of one constituency of suburban commuters over another constituency of local bus riders in the urban core? How should a transit agency achieve a balance between these different constituencies? Vuchic (1999) describes an efficient transportation system as one that is physically and functionally integrated with the variety of activities and services offered by a metropolitan region. To best serve this variety of places and needs in large cities, a transportation system might accommodate a mix of modes—automobiles, bicycles, pedestrians, and a "family of transit" ranging from buses on local streets to high-speed regional rail. Unfortunately, federal transportation policy—both in highways and transit—has been constructed under a mistakenly narrow view, and has produced a highly imbalanced system that favours automobiles over all other modes (Rose, 1990; Vuchic, 1999). This imbalanced system has in turn produced greatly different constituencies: the majority are drivers dependent on cars; a minority are transit riders who cannot drive a car and who use mass transit for nearly all kinds of trips; and an even smaller minority are transit commuters who seek to avoid car congestion by riding transit to work. A balanced transportation system would provide reasonable options for all these constituencies. An imbalanced system, however, leaves some groups at a serious disadvantage.

Besides contributing to an imbalanced transportation system, federal transportation policy also places transportation users in competition with one another. Transit advocates struggle against highway interests in competition for scarce transportation dollars. Even among transit advocates, one constituency has long been in conflict with another. Jones (1985) argues that from the very beginning federal programmes for public transit were biased in favour of the suburban commuter. Federal policy in the early 1960s was "constructed in terms of the world view of the suburbs-to-central city commuter … built for and around the racehorses, not the workhorses, of the transit industry" (Jones, 1985, p. 121). The workhorses here are the local buses in the urban core where most transit-dependent riders live, including the carless, the poor, students, elderly and recent immigrants.

Is the Los Angeles case, where a transit agency was found to place too much emphasis on one transit constituency over another,

an isolated instance? Commenting on trends in California, Wachs (1997) suggests not, arguing that recent transit initiatives that bring new transit services to suburban commuters lead to diminishing services for riders of inner-city, local buses:

> "With federal subsidies to transit being steadily reduced, to fulfill their commitments for rail construction and suburban bus transit expansions, transit agencies are cutting back on cost-effective inner-city transit routes in order to use their resources to expand services that require higher subsidies and carry fewer riders than the services they are eliminating." (Wachs, 1997, p. 9)

If transit agencies are indeed shifting their priorities to the suburban commuter, are planners and policy makers losing sight of transit's social purpose?

The social goals of mass transit

Government support for mass transit has always carried with it explicit social goals, with surprisingly broad support. "Though its direct constituency was relatively small, its ideological appeal proved to be extremely broad. Whether one's concern was the economic vitality of cities, protecting the environment, stopping highways, energy conservation, assisting the elderly and handicapped and poor, or simply getting other people off the road so as to be able to drive faster, transit was a policy that could be embraced" (Altshuler et al., 1979).

Public officials back their support for transit by citing the economic and social benefits it brings (Jones, 1985; Adler, 1993; Fielding, 1995; Taylor and Samples, 2002). Public subsidies are often justified on the rationale that transit promotes economic development. The economic benefits frequently cited include improved mobility, reduced road congestion and travel time, linkages among different transportation modes, and reduced household transportation costs (Pucher and Lefevre, 1996; Vuchic, 1999). One study

claims that investing in public transit creates new jobs: 314 jobs are created for every $10 million of transit capital investment, that 570 jobs are created for every $10 million of spending on operating transit services (Cambridge Systematics, 1999). Business leaders are often the driving force behind local efforts to increase public transportation investment because good transit expands the labour pool available to firms (Whitt, 1982; Yago, 1984; Adler, 1987). Some claim that transit investment helps revitalize business districts and creates new activity centres, which in turn helps increase the tax base and public revenues in those communities (Cervero, 1994, 1998; Vuchic, 1999).

In addition to direct economic benefits, the claims of social benefits of transit are numerous. Transit serves a broader purpose than merely diverting drivers from their cars: transit systems can also "influence land development, generate new activities, increase mobility for people without cars, and enhance the livability of areas they serve" (Vuchic, 1999, p. 124). Public transportation provides choice and is the only means of transportation for a substantial share of current riders. Indeed, federal legislation requires that local governments give special attention to meeting the social goal of mobility for people unable to drive (Fielding, 1987; Weiner, 1999). Transit reduces road congestion, and it connects and extends transportation networks. Transit provides a vital link for people with disabilities, ensuring that they remain actively involved in the community and maintain productive roles in the economy. Senior citizens are very important riders. By 2050, the number of people over age 65 will double from the number in 1996, from 34 million to 76 million (Rosenbloom, 2004), many of whom will be unable to drive. Transit service can also reduce costly duplication in healthcare-related transportation services. Public transit systems also serve schools and universities. In urban and rural communities throughout the country, transit is an important option that benefits

public programmes and community services (Vuchic, 1999).

Government officials supported mass transit to ensure a minimal level of urban transportation for everyone. A well-known advisory commission report found inadequate transportation to be one of the causes of social unrest. The McCone Commission report on the causes of the 1964 uprisings in Los Angeles found that

> "The inadequate and costly public transportation currently existing throughout the Los Angeles area seriously restricts the residents of the disadvantaged areas such as south central Los Angeles. This lack of adequate transportation handicaps them in seeking and holding jobs, attending schools, shopping, and fulfilling other needs."
> (Governor's Commission on the Los Angeles Riots, 1965, p. 65)

The McCone Commission was explicit about the lack of transportation as a contributing factor in the Watts riots. The Kerner Commission, while placing less emphasis on transportation policy itself, focused its recommendations on resolving the problems that contribute to spatial mismatch, such as inadequate education, lack of jobs in the urban core, housing discrimination, racial segregation and concentrated poverty (Kerner *et al.*, 1968).

Following the urban riots of the 1960s in the USA, scholars and public officials turned their attention to public transit. A 1968 conference studied the interrelationships between transportation and poverty in issuing a report critical of transportation officials' lack of attention to urban problems (Kain and Meyer, 1970, 1968). And a series of government initiatives acknowledged the need to strengthen transit to address social problems. In 1966, Congress responded to the Watts riots by funding demonstration projects in 14 metropolitan areas, at a cost of about $7 million in 1965 dollars, to connect central cities to outlying job centres with mass transit (Rosenbloom, 1992). In 1968, Congress for the first time dedicated a federal agency to public transit, now known as the Federal Transit Administration (Smerk, 1991; Vuchic, 1999). In 1973, Congress "busted" the Highway Trust Fund, providing federal operating subsidies to transit for the first time (Weiner, 1999). And in 1974, the federal government again stepped in to provide additional operating assistance for up to 50% of operating deficits (Kemp and Kirby, 1985). But as suburban development expanded, transit ridership declined, and soon transit systems, even with the subsidies, could not keep up with operating expenses. So, in 1982, Congress took a further step and dedicated a portion of the federal gas tax to transit (Smerk, 1991). Behind this series of governmental actions to strengthen transit was a growing recognition that the changing geographic patterns of US cities—patterns that came to rely more and more on automobile travel—were putting some people at a serious disadvantage in reaching jobs, commerce, schools and recreation (Vuchic, 1999).

What is the purpose of mass transit?

Public transit has long served two primary goals. The first is the social goal of ensuring a reasonable level of mobility for people who cannot drive an automobile. As land-use patterns of urban development came increasingly to accommodate the automobile, people without access to a car became more seriously disadvantaged in their mobility—to jobs, commerce, schools and recreation. The second principal goal of transit is to induce drivers to leave their cars at home. Shifting commuters from single-occupancy cars to transit is an essential step in addressing the serious problems of traffic congestion and air pollution. Congestion and pollution are generating growing public awareness and concern, and an expanding sense of urgency among public officials. However, gains in meeting the one goal of getting drivers out of their cars may actually be undermining the other goal of providing transit for those without cars. And emerging patterns of

worsening residential segregation may be heightening the conflict between these two goals. As a result, most big cities will face this new, complex puzzle as population further disperses, poverty concentrates more deeply at the core and transit costs outpace revenues: *what is the purpose of public transit?* Should transit get drivers out of their cars, or should transit serve people who have few transportation alternatives?

These two goals are in conflict. The conflict stems from the changing spatial patterns of US cities combined with the persistence of poverty: as population disperses and poverty concentrates at the core, the costs of public transit rise faster than its revenues. Transit may be turning inside out in some places—in places where successful boosts in ridership in the suburbs are paired with diminished accessibility for poor people in the central city and inner ring suburbs.

Faced with this intensifying dilemma and limited resources, public officials are forced to choose one of two alternatives. One choice is to pursue a suburban ridership. The other choice is to continue to meet the longstanding social objective of assuring a reasonable level of transit service for carless low-income people in central cities. A recent study in Minneapolis-St. Paul described the tough value judgement between either following riders to the suburbs or meeting social goals: "Transit faces a particularly painful tradeoff between the goal of pursuing ridership … and the desire to serve people who need transit wherever they are, regardless of what it costs" (Metropolitan Council, 2000). But if local agencies shift transit service to suburban constituencies at the expense of local bus service at the urban core, accessibility from high-poverty neighbourhoods will likely worsen. Among other things, such a reduction would exacerbate the very problem that recent welfare-to-work provisions were intended to solve.

The two objectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive but they conflict with one another in several ways. First, they require vastly different service designs, in both the spatial arrangement of routes and in the scheduling of service (Vuchic, 1999). Second, serving low-density suburbs is not cost-effective for transit. Transit works best when large numbers of people travel between the same two points at approximately the same time. Meeting this condition is all but impossible because workplaces and residences are so widely dispersed in the suburbs. Finally, to lure people out of their cars requires highly attractive service. But attractive service means higher costs for cash-strapped agencies, especially for serving far-away, low-density suburbs. Keeping transit-dependent customers, by contrast, does not require good service because these riders have no other choice. That transit officials would divert resources away from inner-city buses would not be surprising given the incentives planners face.

This conflict between transit's goals has been growing for some time. Cleveland planners confronted a shift in transit toward the suburbs in a widely publicized debate in the 1970s (Krumholz and Forester, 1990). Planners in Cleveland recognized the contradiction in serving these two disparate transit constituencies when they argued that a new suburban rail system would provide negligible mobility improvements while diverting scarce resources away from essential bus services. They argued instead for lower bus fares and better service, winning concessions that ensured that transit-dependent riders in the urban core would take priority in regional transit planning.

The conflict in Cleveland in the 1970s was driven in large part by the rapid dispersal of people and jobs giving suburban political interests newfound clout, including a growing advantage in votes and a federal support that favoured suburban constituencies (Mollenkopf, 1983). But the spatial and economic influences behind the Cleveland debate are lately even more powerful and widespread in a time of rapid suburbanization and reduced public funding. How do these conflicts

occur? What explains this shift in purpose, this shift from serving inner-city riders to suburban commuters?

One explanation is that federal policy encourages local transit officials to shift their emphasis toward suburban commuters. Attracting "discretionary" suburban commuters to switch to transit is strongly supported by federal provisions that favour capital-intensive projects (Taylor and Samples, 2002). These provisions favour suburban interests and influence the choices that local officials make: "the federal government induces local governments to prefer projects with high capital costs and to avoid projects with high operating costs, even when the latter may be cheaper over their entire useful lives" (Li and Wachs, 2001, p. 11). Local transit providers are compelled in some cities to shift funding and service away from their inner-city, bus-riding constituency toward suburban constituencies. "While this trend in funding priorities may have improved the range of options available to suburban commuters, the shift in emphasis … and … the resulting inattention to local bus service has diminished accessibility for inner-city residents" (Garrett and Taylor, 1999, p. 9). Successful shifts from autos to buses in the suburbs thus may be paired with diminished accessibility for poor people.

Other explanations for the shift from serving inner-city riders to suburban commuters include a growing public outcry against traffic congestion (Wachs, 2003), the perception that rail transit will stimulate economic development (Richmond, 1998) and a growing share of regional jobs located in the suburbs (Lang, 2000). All of these explanations are likely to contribute to the shift, and all of them suggest possible ways of addressing the problem. But if planners hope to propose solutions to this growing dilemma their efforts may be misguided if in addition to these explanations lies a more encompassing influence on the shift in service toward suburban commuters.

Caught in the contradictions of the neoliberal city

In addition to these explanations, transit officials and planners face changing political conditions that are hostile to achieving the social purposes of public transit. The decline of the welfare state—marked most dramatically by the Thatcher government in the UK and the Reagan government in the USA—represents a shift in what government does, but by no means represents a withdrawal of government. The state has ramped up its support for business activity while simultaneously pulling back on its redistributive objectives (Panitch, 1998; Marcuse and van Kempen, 2000). Public transit is being transformed to fit the larger political project that we call neoliberalism, driven by the same forces that are stripping the social purpose from other public programmes. A dilemma of the neoliberal city is that at a time when regional economic co-operation across municipal boundaries is essential for global competitiveness, our metropolitan regions are becoming more divided, confronted with worsening segregation and social distance (Goldsmith, 2000). And this dilemma is likely to harm transit-dependent riders because it worsens the emerging cleavage between disparate transit constituencies and changes the very purpose of mass transit in ways that undermine social equity goals.

Urban theorists point to a number of developments, including influences from neoliberal political ideology, since the 1970s to explain how cities are taking on a new spatial configuration (Scott, 1988, 2000; Goldsmith, 2000; Marcuse and van Kempen, 2000). Increased capital flows in a global network of cities, changing forms of economic production and the decline of the welfare state have all contributed to new patterns of urban form. And with these new patterns of urban form, some suggest, have come new social divisions that intensify the scale and effect of the separation of peoples and places (Friedmann, 1987; Mollenkopf and Castells, 1991; Goldsmith and Blakely,

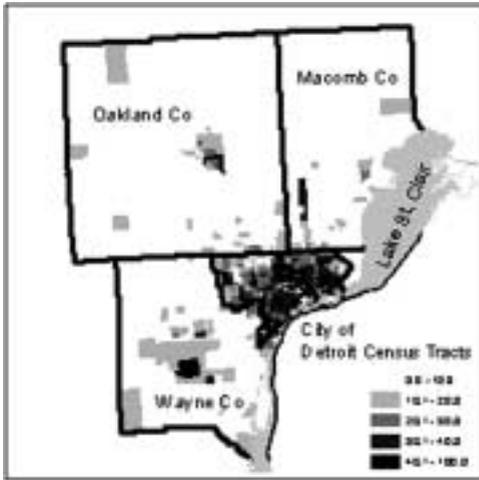1992; Sandercock, 1998; Brenner and Theodore, 2002).

That US society is becoming more polarized is not new, dating back at least to the Kerner Commission's conclusion following race riots in the USA in the late 1960s: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal" (Kerner *et al.*, 1968, p. 1). But among recent work, Marcuse (1989) is among the most explicit in connecting this growing polarization to urban form and, more importantly, in revealing that the changes are caused by people and their decisions rather than from a natural state of affairs. His concept of the *quartered city* helps us see that the worsening divisions are not merely one-dimensional, from rich to poor. Instead, the quartered city has several dimensions of division—the luxury city, the gentrified city, the suburban city, the tenement city and the ghetto. These dimensions are based not on income but on the interrelationships among social groups, "between the rulers and the ruled, the exploiting and the exploited, those who produce less than they get and those who produce more" (Marcuse, 1989, p. 703). And the quartered city concept suggests action, as in "to divide" or "to separate". The concept suggests that these divisions serve a purpose and that the divisions we observe in the city stem from actions that people take, actions that are often built into public policy.

Five trends suggest that growing spatial divisions will harm transit-dependent bus riders. First, transportation networks were built in a way that perpetuates spatial and social divisions (Vuchic, 1999, p. 19). Recent developments in Detroit illustrate Marcuse's quartered city, where "differentiation between areas has grown and lines between areas have hardened, sometimes … in the form of walls that function to protect the rich from the poor" (Marcuse and van Kempen, 2000, p. 250). The series of maps in Figure 1 illustrate such a wall, one constructed with the help of public policy.
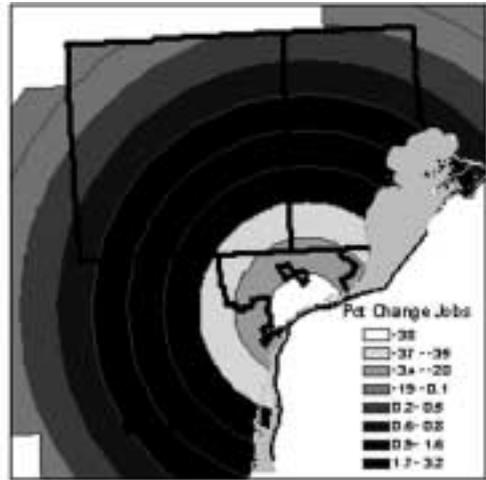
Map A in Figure 1 shows how poverty in the region remains tightly contained within the boundary of the City of Detroit. Map B, using retail employment as an indicator of entry-level job opportunities, shows how jobs are dispersing away from the inner core of high poverty: the innermost rings (light shading) are losing jobs while the largest job growth (dark shading) occurs 15 miles or more from downtown. Map C illustrates the unusual configuration of transit service in the region, with two separate and largely unconnected transit agencies, one for the city, the other for the suburbs. The city buses end at the city boundary. The suburban buses are configured primarily to bring suburban commuters downtown.
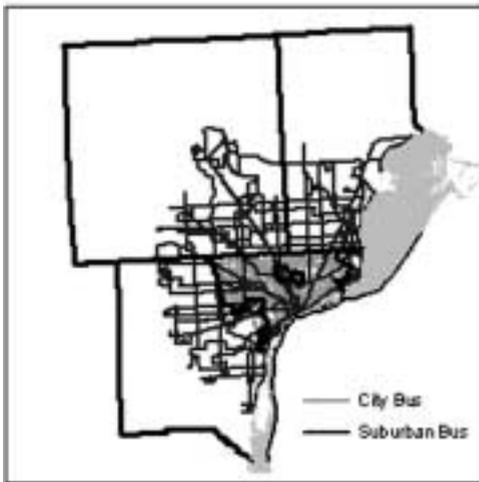
Taken together, Maps A–C illustrate spatial mismatch: jobs are mostly in the suburbs, the people who need them most are largely in the central city, and travelling between the two is difficult because of uncoordinated transportation systems. Finally, Map D shows the result of this transportation configuration, showing the geographic pattern of what transportation planners refer to as *accessibility indicators*. The accessibility indicator takes into account several factors that make reaching opportunities feasible: the spatial location of jobs, the spatial location of residences, whether a worker travels by car or bus, the relative travel time required and the spatial location of other workers competing for a job.[1] The result is a clear demarcation between city and suburbs in the ability to access jobs. Dark-shaded regions are accessibility-rich and occur almost entirely outside the central city. Light-shaded regions are accessibility-deficient and occur at the furthest periphery of the region. What is surprising about this map, however, is that most of the central city is accessibility-deficient, despite the presence of a central business district. Indeed, the "wall" between accessibility-rich and accessibility-deficient areas occurs at the central city boundary, due largely to the unusual configuration of separate transit services. The central city contains the region's neediest transportation constituencies, the place where the greatest share of poor residents reside and the place where the largest share of carless households reside. The
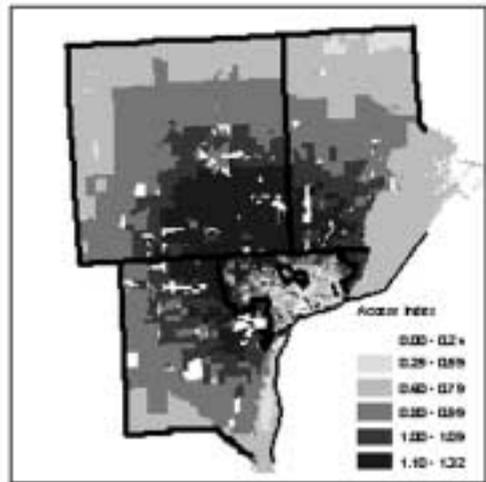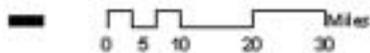
(A) Poverty Rate by Census Tracts, 2000

(B) Percent Change in Retail Jobs
by 5-Mile Ring, 1990–2000

(C) City vs. Suburban Bus Coverage

(D) Accessibility Index to Retail Jobs, 1990

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census 1993, 2002, 2004a, 2004b

Figure 1 Poverty, Job Dispersal, and Central City Isolation, Detroit Region, 1990 and 2000.

well-known racial and economic "wall" that divides Detroit from its neighbours is fortified, due partly to the inability of planners and policy makers to integrate two separate transit systems.

Second, the spatial divisions that transportation perpetuates prevent regional co-operation. Unfortunately, the spatial divisions illustrated in Figure 1 help to reinforce yet further the social divisions that underlie

them. Metropolitan regions—not states or municipalities—are now widely believed to be the most important geographic unit determining economic success. And each local government in a metropolitan region is linked together by a transportation network that transcends political boundaries. The need to co-operate regionally in transportation has long been recognized: requiring regional co-operation has been codified in federal law for decades (Wachs and Dill, 1999; Weiner, 1999). Despite a growing need to connect expanding metropolitan areas, regional co-operation faces serious challenges. In the case of Detroit's transportation divide shown in Figure 1, for example, integrating the unusual system of separate transit services has been thwarted for decades because of an inability to co-operate across municipal borders (Gerritt, 1998).

The principles of neoliberal policy—favouring the market over government in solving public problems, with an emphasis on the individual rather than the community—promotes local selfishness (Macpherson, 1977; Frug, 1996). Local selfishness prevents solutions to regional problems like those of mass transit. By clinging to local concerns at the expense of overall regional welfare, urban residents and local politicians risk damaging the many spheres of economic activity that make a region competitive (Orfield, 1997; Dreier et al., 2001; Frug, 2002).

In a third trend, segregation leads to misunderstandings that prevent finding solutions. Segregation has a tendency to reproduce itself by undermining our ability to collectively solve our common urban problems. Physical separation can lead people to misunderstand one another: "Living in separate neighborhoods, they are unable to learn to develop, to be tolerant, to work things through, to compromise" (Goldsmith, 2000). And when people in power are removed from the problems of others in need, when they have only a superficial or misguided understanding of problems, they readily

make decisions that cause yet more pain for those in need (Sennett, 1970).

Recent evidence suggests that social divisions are contributing to the widening gap between transit constituencies. Public transit by bus in the USA is becoming largely the ride of the poor, too removed from the attention of elite decision makers to warrant reversing the new emphasis on suburban riders (Garrett and Taylor, 1999). Politicians and leaders—in metropolitan planning organizations and departments of transportation, for example—cannot engage in solutions because they often do not know about the problems.

A fourth trend that explains how spatial segregation may harm transit-dependent riders is growing fear. Segregation's effect on transit stems not only from neglect, but also poor judgement. Segregation raises racial fear and, in at least one well-known case, leads to transit officials depriving transit-dependent riders from the service they need. The case comes from Buffalo, NY and is another illustration of how transit policy can divide city from suburb (Barnes, 1996). A young woman was killed in 1996 when she was hit by a truck crossing a seven-lane highway on her way to a job at a suburban mall. She was African-American, and the case caused feelings in Buffalo to run high, with a clear split of opinions along racial lines about the underlying causes of such a tragedy. From the black perspective, the issue was this: finding a job close to home was all but impossible in her inner-city neighbourhood—there were no supermarkets, no hardware stores and no family restaurants. Without a car, a bus was her only option for reaching the suburban mall where she worked at a fast food restaurant. The problem is that managers of the mall allegedly prevented her inner-city bus from entering its grounds, in response to community fears, and in response to fears from potential tenants of the mall. A store owner in the mall reported that mall management assured him that "you'll never see an inner-city bus on the mall premises" (Barnes,

1996, p. 33). So the bus driver was forced to drop her off at a dangerous intersection. A lawsuit was settled out of court, with both the mall and the transit agency compensating the young woman's family.

Finally, regional politics are disproportionately biased in favour of suburban interests, undermining participation in democratic decision making. The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA) required that a wider range of factors be considered, including social equity. The law shifts unprecedented funding discretion to local levels of government, increasing the transparency of political decisions. It introduced stronger public participation rules. And it shifted power away from state departments of transportation toward metropolitan planning organizations (Dittmar, 1995). ISTEA undermined traditional political attachments and introduced openings in a decision-making process that was previously dominated by state transportation engineers. The openings have elevated non-traditional political interests to new prominence in planning and have redistributed federal transportation resources among a much broader range of constituents.

To illustrate the rise of new constituencies following ISTEA, consider that annual federal funds for bicycle projects soared by nearly 800%, steadily increasing each year from $30 million in 1990 to $260 million in 1997 (Surface Transportation Policy Project, 1998). Examples of a broadened range of constituents after ISTEA include environmentalists who fund new air quality programmes through the highway trust fund, preservationists who save precious landmarks with federal support and community activists who revitalize neighbourhoods with transportation "enhancement" projects.

Unfortunately, not all interest groups are equally capable of adjusting to new political openings. So although ISTEA would appear on the surface to benefit vulnerable households, this new reliance on a more open bargaining process may disproportionately burden inner-city bus riders. Voter turnout is significantly lower in central cities. Many residents of high-poverty neighbourhoods, furthermore, are deprived of any political participation by their social isolation. And metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs)—the agencies that allocate millions of dollars of transportation funds—tend to underrepresent central city interests (Lewis and Sprague, 1997, p. 12). By successfully promoting a broader distribution of transportation resources, these welcome revisions in federal policy may be distorting participation and thus intensifying the damaging trends that threaten to deprive low-income people from good job access over the long term.

Conclusion: planning and resistance

Federal policy encourages local transit officials to shift their emphasis toward suburban commuters, primarily to reduce traffic congestion and air pollution. Local transit officials must juggle competing goals, and are likely to increasingly face the difficult trade-off between serving people who have few transportation options and following their ridership further into the suburbs. Providing good service to both groups of riders is possible but unlikely in the current political climate. The case of the Bus Riders Union in Los Angeles highlights a growing conflict within the federal transit programme, a conflict that has increasingly favoured one constituency of riders over another. It suggests that successful shifts from cars to transit in the suburbs may be paired with diminished services for poor bus riders in the core.

Several trends influenced by the neoliberal political agenda suggest that planners and policy makers may be losing sight of transit's longstanding social purpose of providing mobility for people who cannot a drive a car. Finding solutions to the problem of low mobility for transit-dependent riders goes deeper than merely applying redistributive

government policies, helpful though they may be. Finding solutions will likely require changes in the underlying causes of the undesired distribution. Following Bourdieu (1998), Goonewardena (2003) suggests organizing social movements to fight back against such trends, by "planning in the face of neoliberalism". In the face of a project that subordinates our social goals to economic efficiency, it is more planning—not less—that is needed to reinvigorate a radical democracy (Goonewardena, 2003), and cities are the places to do it. Like the capitalism that took root in feudalism's nooks and crannies, highly differentiated political activities and economic islands are rising out of what capitalism discards. And planners have special skills for nurturing these nooks and crannies: "The new planning is more entrepreneurial, more daring, less codified … its expertise is increasingly sought not only by the state, where planning powers formally reside, but also by the corporate sector and even groups within organized civil society itself" (Douglass and Friedmann, 1998, p. 3).

The BRU movement is a story of people planning on their own behalf, who came to ally themselves with people who identify themselves as planners, and who engaged in a struggle in the tradition of community building. Social movements are one viable route toward achieving more equitable outcomes, resulting in solid, lasting policy changes backed by the courts. The BRU case shows that political opportunities change as a result of actions that planners are skilled at taking—in constructing a forceful counter-methodology, in acting as intermediaries and in fostering participation (Grengs, 2002). Planners may be uniquely qualified to take action that re-shapes the external political environment in ways that benefit social equity movements, because of their interdisciplinary nature, their close connection between theory and practice, and because they can bridge the gap between government and the grassroots (Clavel, 1986). By focusing on particular dimensions of the larger political environment, planners inside and outside of community-based organizations may be able to use their unique skills to help introduce social justice into the transportation planning process, a process that has yet to tap the potential of meaningful citizen participation.

Note

1   The formulation of the accessibility indicator is not included but can be found in other works (Shen, 1998, 2000; Grengs, 2004).

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