

Car-restrictive policies and social justice: a troubled blend?

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Cosmopolis Centre for Urban Research – Vrije Universiteit Brussel

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Registration is free but compulsory: https://forms.office.com/e/nkV20mHgq9
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Context

The complex nature of the current urban mobility system in Brussels and Belgium makes the shift towards more sustainable travel patterns challenging to realise. On the one hand, car-restrictive policies are indispensable to facilitate and increase the pace of the ecological transition. On the other hand, policies are never neutral and -intentionally or not- have different impacts on different segments of the population, making critical issues related to social justice emerge. Ironically, in the debate around car-restrictive policies, both proponents and opponents mobilise arguments that refer to social justice. Proponents, for instance, emphasise that low-income will benefit most from car-restrictive policy, as these households tend to live in the most polluted areas, often in dwellings without much private outdoor space. Opponents stress the lack of alternatives for car use and the extent to which they are forced into car-dependent practices, for instance, for work.

In this context, we organize a **roundtable to reflect on the complex relations between car-restrictive policies and social justice**. What are the impacts of car-restrictive policies on different socio-economic groups? Do they exacerbate or compensate for social injustice? How effective are the measures accompanying the most vulnerable people in the transition toward post-car cities? By referring to specific examples and analysing and deconstructing their impact on society, we aim to answer these and other questions. The event is organized as part of the project COGITO: Coping with climate debt through just transition.

Objectives

- Mobilise existing knowledge: if the debate is often based on preconceived ideas, we aim to analyse the existing evidence. We want to start with concrete examples of car-restrictive policies and see what knowledge exists to determine their impact. There are different forms of knowledge, ranging from big data to the experiential knowledge of practitioners and the daily experiences of citizens. We want to bring to the table all of it and figure out how it helps respond to our question.

- Identify knowledge gaps: part of the exercise is also to identify the limit of the available knowledge and the gaps. This is helpful to put the available knowledge into perspective and feed the future research agenda.
- Articulate the concept of just mobility: While our joint effort to respond to the question will hopefully shed light on the main question, it will also help articulate the concept of "just mobility": what would look like a mobility agenda that is at the same time car-restrictive and socially just? How does it articulate with broader concepts of environmental justice?

Approach

Learning attitude. The round table allows participants to learn from each other and from the discussion itself. Emphasis is put on the learning and sharing aspect of the exchange rather than on the advocacy posture that sometimes characterizes debate on the issue.

Start with concrete examples. The discussion starts with concrete examples of policies and initiatives. These examples are presented within a standardized frame that aims to make explicit the mechanisms through which car-restrictive policies are/are not compatible with social justice.

We invite both researchers and practitioners to present a short pitch in which they unpack one or more specific aspects of a policy. The goal is not to provide a universal definition of justice and/or a comprehensive evaluation of the policy but to explain what the measure aimed for, how it was implemented, who benefited most, where the most gains were found and what (unforeseen) drawbacks were identified. We also welcome contributions that shed light on different methods and criteria to appraise car-restrictive impacts on different population groups and geographical areas.

Scope

The few words in the title of our event hide a degree of complexity that we will not fully address. What are car-restrictive policies? What is social justice? Considering that the event's objective is to discuss the interface between the two rather than each of them in separation, we propose an operational definition here. This definition aims to delimit its scope and provide a starting point for our discussion.

Car restrictive policies

With 'car-restrictive policies', we refer to a wide range of possible interventions local or regional policymakers can adopt to limit the use of cars (both trip distance and trip frequency) and to discourage the ownership/purchase of a private car. This means we are particularly interested in the social impact of the so-called pull measures¹. These measures may be financial (e.g. taxes, parking fees), relating to infrastructure or traffic (e.g. redistribution of road space) or involve the demarcation of zones where access is restricted to all cars (e.g. pedestrian areas) or some (e.g. low emissions zones).

Social justice

The definition of social justice that we use here is restrictive, based on the normative claim that all public policies should tend toward redistributing social goods and bads. Two elements of this definition deserve further unpacking: the principles determining "just" distribution and the definition of social goods and bads.

There are different principles to determine a "just" way to allocate the burdens and the benefits public policies consist of (prescriptions, material incentives, nudge). Broadly speaking these can be categorised as follows:

- **Principle of equality.** The benefits and burdens that public policy results in should be distributed equally across society.
- **Principle of need.** The benefits that public policy results in should be distributed in a way that is proportional to people's need. And the mirror formulation: The burdens should be distributed in way that is inversely proportional to people's vulnerability.
- **Principle of responsibility.** The benefits and burdens that public policy results in should be distributed in a way that is proportional to people's contribution (e.g. polluters pay principle).

The social goods and bads we focus on in the round table are particularly those related to urban mobility, and include the social, economic, and environmental advantages and disadvantaged generated by a mobility system (e.g. geographic accessibility, motility, space, time, danger, pollution, traffic injuries...).

¹ One typology that is often used in sustainable mobility policy is one that distinguishes between "pull" and "push" policies: that is pulling out of the car (restrict or make it more expensive to use/own a car); and push into other mobility solutions (incentives of different types to encourage or reward the use of non-car mobility solutions)

We encourage participants to be explicit about their understanding of car-restrictive policies in the context of the example they want to bring on the table: using this framework as a general reference will hopefully help to start with a common understanding of the issues at stake or at least some form of common language.

Agenda

9h-9h30	Welcome & coffee
9h30-9h45	Introduction
9h45-10h45	4 to 5 pitches + questions for clarification etc
10h45-11h	Coffee break
11h-12h	4 to 5 pitches + questions for clarification etc
12h-13h00	Discussion + take aways of the day
13h00-14h00	Sandwiches

The Royal Library is a two-minute walk from Bruxelles-Central, Mont des Arts 28.

Output

The initiative aims not only to further develop a research agenda, but also to bring out the knowledge to the general public, other practitioners, and policy makers. Based on the availability and interest of the participants, potential outputs include public presentations (e.g. event organised by Bruxelles Environnement) and/or a position paper (e.g. in Brussels Studies). Ideally, also this is the first step of a discussion that continues in the following months and years (in the form of other meetings, seminars and publications).

