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978-0-521-02763-2 - The Decline of Transit: Urban Transportation in German and U.S. Cities, 1900-1970

Glenn Yago

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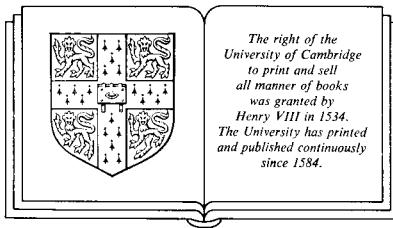
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The decline of transit

*Urban transportation in German
and U.S. cities, 1900–1970*

GLENN YAGO

State University of New York, Stony Brook



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Preface

Transportation captured and shaped Americans' vision of themselves and their country. The image of the railways and the open road reaches deep into our national memory. Physical and geographic mobility often substituted for social mobility—from the westward movement of the nineteenth century to the northern urban migrations of the twenties and thirties to the sunbelt flights of today. The romanticism of the railways and the animism of “Cougars,” “Mustangs,” and “Broncos” symbolize our collective identification with and sometimes alienation from a sense of place and a means of motion.

Today, most Americans live, breathe, and walk within the sight and sound of heavy traffic. Cars, keys, style changes, repair bills, and gasoline prices are so omnipresent in our lives that we have almost ceased to think about them. Transportation, deeply ingrained in our culture, is transparent; its impact on our daily lives is invisible and inevitable, beyond our vision of what can and could change our cities and our lives.

We confront the phenomenal cost of our urban transportation system—oil shortages, rising auto prices, highway repair costs, transit budget crises, mass unemployment in the automobile and tire industries, and rising environmental and highway safety problems. Less tangible, but no less real, are the effects upon community life. The division of urban space resulted in the isolation of the workplace from community life, the invisibility of the elderly and the young, and the erosion of social cohesion that preserved socially mixed and stable neighborhoods. Patterns of residential segregation by groups within classes (ethnic, racial, or age) drained community life

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of political vitality. Community interests are now perceived as separate from workplace concerns; the primacy of private over public life weakens political participation; and the socialization of children isolated from diverse income, age, and social groups reinforces the privacy of consciousness. The decline of mass transit narrows the range of urban experiences, isolating communities and workplaces and insulating urban travelers from the world between. These costs of the decline of transit are really a shorthand for the impact of transportation on ordinary lives.

The urban transportation policy question is usually posed in fragments: How must our means of travel change in the face of energy scarcity? How can we solve the fiscal crisis of transit? How can we improve the accessibility of jobs and services to the poor, elderly, young, women, and handicapped? How can we improve transportation productivity? These questions strongly challenge our past policies and suggest that a reassessment is in order. National policy prescribes bailouts, tax credits, and massive federal subsidies for the auto industry, while Americans are chided for their "love affair with the automobile." Consumers are urged to forgo car travel for a transit alternative that does not exist. The impossibility of rail development is countered by arguments of the energy limits of auto dependency. The options and accounts are contradictory and muddled.

First we must know what happened—the calculated abuses of political and economic power, the well-intentioned, although flawed, designs of planners and policymakers, and the structural changes in technology and the economy. This research hopes to link fragmentary questions and to sort out diverse issues in our urban transportation past by merging quantitative and historical methods in a comparative analysis of German and U.S. cities.

The years of research have produced many debts. I would like to thank Bradford C. Snell, whose work introduced for the first time consideration of economic institutional impact on transportation, for his cooperation and encouragement. I would also like to thank Maurice Zeitlin, Michael Aiken, Manuel Castells, Yudit Jung, David Kramer, Aage Sorenson, Erik

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Glenn Yago

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