

Interview



Interview with Karen Lucas

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Issue: Just mobility, transport and urban infrastructures

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Karen Lucas, you are one of the more prominent scholars worldwide when it comes to transport equity and social inclusion, you are cited in almost any paper I can think of dealing with issues on transport and social exclusion and you have contributed in significant ways in opening this research field. Firstly, I would like to say thank you for taking your time and share your thoughts and knowledge with us in this issue of Urban Matters. Going back to where I first learned about your work, the report on transport and social exclusion for the British government social exclusion unit, to me it was such an eyeopener, tell us about it, how did you come to work for the government on this topic?

You know, you are very timely, transport is coming back as an issue for low-income and vulnerable populations because of the austerity climate. Well, my background as a social scientist has trained me to do policy analysis, asking questions like what is the policy trying to do? What is the problem to overcome? Who benefits? After finalizing my PhD, I was engaged to do an evaluation of the extension of the London underground Jubilee line and the question was what are the benefits? And I replied: 'Benefits for whom?' The people who hired me didn't understand the question. They wanted a cost-benefit analysis. It became clear to me that there is a policy gap when it comes to the distribution and benefits of transport investments, about its system and services. But these questions are not being asked for by transport decision-makers.

So when the new Labour Government came into power, there was a chance for you to engage with these issues?

When New Labour came to power, they had this mantra and embarked on the project to do something about the 'really poor social housing estates' characterized by large unemployment and poor education. These estates are also very peripheral. The Social Exclusion Unit was set up in the Cabinet Office to solve these problems – putting people back into work and increasing participation and education. But the population was immobile – no one was thinking of transport and people couldn't get into main economy because lack of transport, so mobility and transportation became an issue. I had already published on the missing dimension of transport and poverty, so I was in the right spot at the right time.

We managed to put together an urban renewal action agenda, working bottom up – academia, expert practitioners, and policy makers – where we defined why lack of transport matters, what can we do about it, who needs to do it, who is responsible and who can do it right? Finally, nothing was done because there was public spending cuts due to the 2008 economic crisis and so there were no subsidies to run subsidized bus services in these peripheral social estate areas.

And as I said initially, now in 2022 we are seeing again exactly the same groups and places we had in the Social Exclusion Unit report (2003), low socio-economic housing and low-income households. They are saying, 'Hey, we cannot afford the transport, and even if we could, the transport doesn't take us where we need to go.' So, it's becoming as an affordability narrative, but once you get there, it is also an accessibility narrative. The car is essential to people's inclusion, so at the same time, we have this climate net-zero narrative going on; we have very poor people getting into their cars. And there is also this healthy active cities agenda with all this active travel stuff, but again this stuff, bikes and

scooters, is not being delivered in the places where the low-income people are, in the peripheral estates. Today, I would say it is even more embedded and even more pernicious, more severe. Welfare benefits are being rolled back, people now cannot be immobile and participate in the economy, which they have to, if they don't they are on the breadline. You hear things like people cannot get to the food banks because of lack of transport, young offenders can't get to their programs they have to attend otherwise they go back to prison, young apprentices cannot take up apprenticeships because lack of transport, old people get stuck in their homes. It's getting worse, it's very upsetting.

This leads me to the next question. You are part of the international advisory group of the Swedish national knowledge center for public transport, K2, and know about Swedish public transport planning. In the preparation for starting the center, a recurrent mantra was to make public transport attractive to the middle-class to make them get out of their cars and thereby contribute to the reduction of greenhouse gases. Some research that has been published finds that strategic planning has the well-off middle class in focus. Do you find any difficult tradeoffs between making the well-off leave their cars and start to use public transport and the urban poor's need for accessible public transport?

I would not disagree that public transport needs to be seen as effective, affordable, accessible, and attractive – we don't need overcrowded trains in the mornings. We need good ways of travelling, but we only have so much public funds to support this. I would say it depends on how you filter these funds and use the money to get well-off people out of their cars.

In my view, public funding is supposed to be for the safety net, so people don't fall beneath the breadline; are healthy and employed. The problem is the ones who have and the ones who have not in society. You have to understand when you subsidize for people to get out of their cars, you are not making public transport better for low-income people because they live in completely different places, conduct totally different trips and have totally different demands during the day when things operate.

If you have a more of a socially inclusive transport agenda you are talking about providing the absolutely necessary services to undertake all their activities and this makes a much more scattered peripheral type of focus, cost a lot more of money, but also, why should these people have poor-quality services? So, we need a stellar public transport system which goes everywhere for everyone, all the time. And I believe if we had a stellar system in peripheral areas for lower income people, rich people would actually decide to use them as well.

As it is, you have a good concentration of investments in good high-level public transport like metro systems in city centers and looking at new jazzy BRT – this kind of flagship project, I mean even when it comes to cycling and walking the flagships happens in the center of the cities, not where poorer people are going or living most often – I am generalizing here, but the problems is if you don't provide good public transport system for the low income people they would obviously get a car because the only way that they can get to work in these more fragmented peripheral location is to drive.

You have to accept you have public finance and how much are you going to put into it and

are you going to use it for the purpose of justice or are you using for the climate imperative? They are seemingly the same, but they are not for the same places, the same people or the same purposes – it's not a win-win situation.

In relation to the tradeoffs between climate and social justice is the debate on free public transport. The discussion arises from time to time and some research argues that transportation should be considered as a public good due to the sprawl of urban regions which forces people to be mobile. Is public transport a public good and what should we pay for it?

We need to go back to the Social Exclusion Unit report, we have a totally immobile population where you find strong bonding capital but very little bridging capital, which makes this population even more precarious. It would be totally insincere to say there is no merit from mobility, but I think that the hyper mobility we have created for ourselves as a basic requirement for everyday life is problematic.

I'm not a total fan of the 15-minute city, it's rather too small, but actually, to start to look at urban morphology through that lens and doing some analysis on connectivity and accessibility by walking and biking to some key destinations would start us to think not only about climate change but also from a social inclusion perspective. You would start thinking, ok, we shouldn't be building these houses and estates here around anymore because you can't get here in 30 minutes by public transport.

I think the emphasis on mobility would be reduced, emphasis would be on connectivity and accessibility, and it would be very clear to see which are functional urban morphologies and we can start to think how to retrofit them and stop building in areas where people become dependent on cars.

Talking about free fares in public transport would bring us back to square one. Of course, there would be people who would start to use public transport if it was free, but it would basically be the same who is already using it. If we want to get people out of their cars, we need to have a public transport which is effective, connects important destinations, and is attractive. It's a huge cost to have free public transport and who should pay? In this country people 65 years and older get free fares if they can afford it or not, but we have groups who can't afford it and who can't get subsidies. You got four kids going to school and that is 20 pound a week per child, it's a lot of money.

We need a new planning paradigm, not just from a neighborhood perspective but from a political economy perspective of the urban environment. We need functional mixed neighborhoods. In the Social Exclusion Unit report, there are thresholds for what needs to be accessible at a local level – kids should be able to walk to school within 15, 20 minutes, people should be able to reach work in 35 minutes by public transport. But we don't need a hospital in 15 minutes walking distance, or a supermarket in every 15 minutes.

You are also invited and engaged in research and development on transportation issues and research in the global south. I would like us to touch upon your experiences on knowledge transfer between urban contexts. There is also, I believe, interesting experiences that can be shared from a global south and north perspective. In the summer of 2022 Dr. Hoai Anh Tran and Dr. Stephen Marr, colleagues of mine, were organizing an international workshop at Malmö university with researchers and

practitioners from global south and north. And in the closing discussions a community developer from US reflected upon a presentation from southeast Asia and said that the description could be from the kind of neighborhoods she is working with in Detroit. What experiences do you have?

I think the woman of the workshop you had is right. There are situations that are similar, it's the intensity and the extent that differs. In Uganda, 90 percent of the population is walking, imagine 90 percent of the English population walking! They should probably not be walking as much as they are but embed some of this and have public transport for longer trips, that is sustainable.

Working with these issues in the Global South is difficult, and I'm always working with people living there, my role being like a bouncing sponge, asking questions, that kind of stuff. Sweden is a fairly flat society economically, you have fairly good public transport, the government is looking after the public transport system, most people are included, economically, socially and physically, there are few people and few places that are not. You can put it right, it's not too difficult or expensive. The more people who are excluded, the more difficult [it is].

Working with these countries we try to protect the majority that are not in the transport system, mostly the people that are walking and raise awareness that safe walk environment needs to be put in place and educating traffic to understand that the pedestrians are there, the children are there. So, we try to stay out of the main public transport planning problems, it's too difficult, but ask questions: how can we make it safe for the kids to go to school? Fixing crossings for pedestrians, sidewalks, can we talk to the informal taxi drivers about their vehicles to make them safer, such things, basically bridging awareness to the urban planners. Planners who are educated by the British and American planning systems which are not inclusive or environmentally friendly. So, we try to introduce the thinking of a human-centric transport system and if a human centered system is guiding the planning, then the solution is not another road.

You know, students are coming to Manchester from these countries, and they find the public transport fantastic. And then we show them the statistics on how many still use the private car. And they ask – why would you do that? Yes, why would you? Then we open up for discussions on structural and individual behavioral change. Developing countries thinks we have sorted all out and we haven't!

In 2004, your book *Running on Empty* was published. It was a collection of initiatives and cases from Britain and United States which showed the important connection between public transport and social policy and how access to fair and just transportation is fundamental for including people in society. Where are we today?

At the same place, with the exception that the good examples being described in the book, they all stopped happening. We did wonderful work, it was before the time we had all these wonderful GIS tools, it was cruder. Just think, today we can ask where are people, where can they get, how can we match so people can get there? It can be multimodal, it doesn't have to be people to places, it can be things to people. But it's completely gone.

To be honest, we do now have an Equality Act in the UK which we didn't have at that time,

you can raise the issue that if you take that bus away from me its socially excluding and its discriminating, but the local authorities say: we are sorry, but we can't afford it. There is no responsibility at higher level to step in to make something to change, so its empty politics.

I believe the local authorities still care about the agenda and they really want to be seen to have inclusive transport system, but they just don't have the money or the mandate, and it's just sad being under a neoliberal government. In the mess context of Brexit, we now see the fall out, increase in austerity, exclusion increase, disadvantage, deprivation, we go back and to get it back its much harder. The book still stands.

Now I'm thinking of doing a book on the Global South because I think the actual exclusion by urban planning where people are planned out of the city, formal settlements are cleared, it's a purposeful measure to do that, the way transport systems are being designed with some kind of colonial imperialistic discourse wrapped around it. Public transport still holds ideas of cost-benefit analysis, there is a colonial legacy left in Africa and India and other places. So do that again but not actually for academics but for politicians and practitioners to be able to think differently is needed – I guess.

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Further reading

Books

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Authors

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Dr Lucas is director of Research in the Department of Geography within the School of Environment, Education and Development (SEED) and leads the Transport and Mobilities research theme for the Manchester Urban Institute at the University of Manchester. She has more than 25 years of experience delivering social research into practice in transport, employing a variety of mixed methods approaches to issues of mobility, accessibility, and social justice. Karen is a world-leading expert on transport and social justice in the Global North and South and also researches issues of energy poverty and environmental justice in the UK context.



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Christina Lindkvist holds a PhD in human and economic geography and is an associate professor in Urban Studies at Malmö University.

Transport planning and mobility from a gender and social justice perspectives are among her main research topics. Christina is currently involved in projects on transport and infrastructure planning and transitions towards a fossil-free society. From 2010–2018 she was engaged in the management team of the Swedish National Knowledge Centre for Public Transport, K2. She is the co-editor of Integrating gender into transport planning – from one-to-many tracks (2019 together with Tanja Joelsson) and Kollektiva resor – utmaningar för social hållbar tillgänglighet (public transports – challenges for social sustainable accessibility, 2020 together with Malin Henriksson). Her latest articles are Justice in regional transport planning through the lens of Iris Marion Young, published in Planning (Vitranon & Lindkvist 2021) and Questioning mobility ideals–the value of proximity for residents in socially deprived urban areas in Sweden (2021 with Henriksson, Berg and Lucas). Find out more on the K2 website at www.k2centrum.se and the personal website at Malmö University <http://forskning.mah.se/id/tschsc>