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Research Article

Transportation justice and the limits to the right to mobility in Clayton County's transit struggles

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Marcus Mohall

Introduction

In recent years, transportation geographers and scholars from cognate disciplines have devoted significant attention to the idea of a "right to mobility." This broad notion is commonly defined as the right of individuals to be able to access transportation options which make possible a certain, basic level of mobility (Coggin and Pieterse, 2015; Kohn, 2016). For instance, Ersilia Verlinghieri and Federico Venturini suggest that this idea "can be considered as expressing the right to move in the urban space, to access places and opportunities" (Verlinghieri and Venturini, 2018, p. 127). The concept is closely tied to Henri Lefebvre's call for a "right to the city," the idea, in short, that people should be able to appropriate and collectively produce the cities in which they live. As Kafui Attoh (2017) posits, individuals can only exercise such a right if they are able to freely and easily *access* the city.

The notion of a right to mobility comprises a highly useful framework for grappling with what is often at stake in struggles over access to transportation: the very ability of urban residents to access and thus survive in the city. Moreover, it designates an important political goal to strive towards, given the extent to which the spatial organization of things such as housing and workplaces commonly requires individuals to be highly mobile. This is undoubtedly even more the case in the context of our contemporary age of inequality and climate emergency.

However, simply providing the possibility for *more* mobility — for example, by expanding public transportation systems — is by no means a universally appropriate approach for addressing many of the transportation-related issues urban residents tend to be confronted with (Kębłowski et al., 2019; Kipfer, 2013). While mobility is indeed often conducive to forms of freedom, it is also commonly an involuntary and burdensome activity, especially for marginalized and non-white urban residents. There is an evident risk to frame increasing the capacity for mobility as an all-out solution, not least given the prevalence of demands and expectations for individuals to be highly mobile, and the extent to which a high level of mobility is commonly framed in scholarly and other discussions about transportation as something universally desirable (Cass and Manderscheid, 2018; Sheller, 2018).

In this brief intervention, I seek to contribute some insights on this issue by means of an analysis of the struggle over public transportation in Clayton County, a majority Black county located south of the City of Atlanta (Georgia, USA). In March 2010, faced with a budget crisis following the Great Recession, Clayton County's leadership closed down C-TRAN, the county's small-scale transit system. After the last bus ran, thousands of riders were deprived of access to basic transportation options. As a result, many faced major issues in accessing jobs, healthcare, and all sorts of basic services. In response to the closing, however, a coalition of grassroots activists worked tirelessly to reestablish public transportation in the county. Four years later, their efforts paid off when Clayton joined the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA), the main transit agency in the metro area.

The transit struggles in Clayton offer a cogent example of the value of the right to mobility

as an analytical framework for understanding what transportation struggles commonly revolve around. At the same time, they also disclose some decisive limits to what the securing of a such a right can accomplish. The reestablishment and expansion of Clayton's transit infrastructure clearly constituted a significant improvement of racial and transportation justice. However, metro Atlanta's deeply racialized housing and labor markets, further compounded by a long history of urban planning practices geared towards automobility and sprawl, continue to put pressure on the county's residents to be excessively mobile. These complexities disclose the importance to critically scrutinize the extent to which improvements in transportation accessibility must be coupled with broader and more far-reaching social changes.

The politics of mobility in Clayton County

Home to close to 300,000 residents, Clayton County features a mix of urban, semi-urban, and largely rural areas. Up until the late 1980s, the county was almost entirely white. For a long time, the private car comprised the only viable transportation mode available to the residents.

In 1965, Clayton approved a referendum which initiated the process to build MARTA, a new, primarily rail-based transit system which would serve metro Atlanta's core counties. Six years later, however, the county rejected a key metro-wide referendum on whether to introduce a new sales tax which would make it possible to actually realize the proposed system. The referendum was turned down largely on racial grounds; white voters who supported racial segregation were concerned that MARTA would make the county too accessible from the majority Black city of Atlanta (Karner and Duckworth, 2019). While the MARTA system was eventually constructed in three of the metro area's core counties, Clayton continued to choose to prevent the agency's buses and trains from reaching the county.

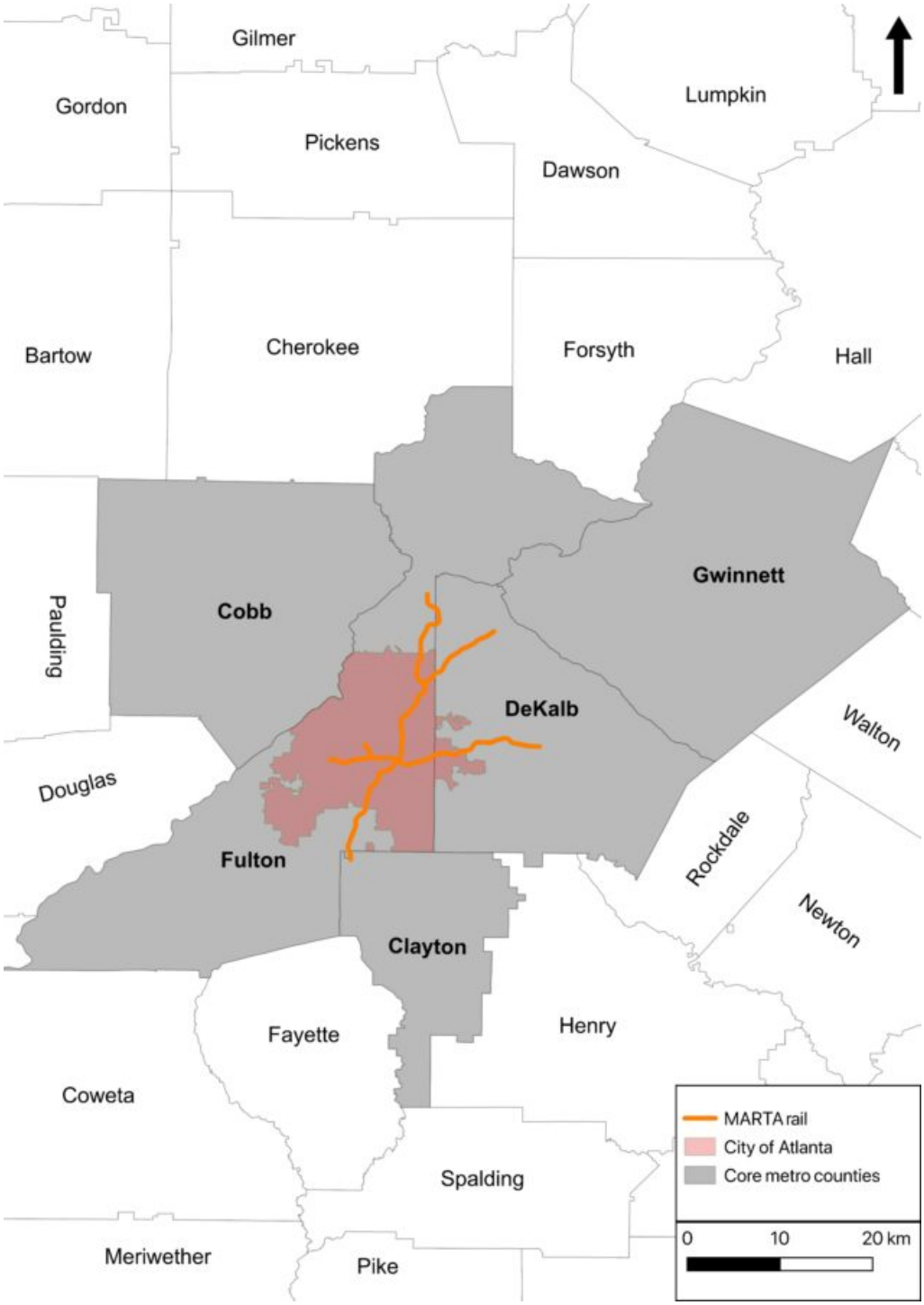

Figure 1. Map of metro Atlanta and the MARTA rail network. Source: Author

Over the ensuing decades, Clayton County's demographics were significantly transformed, in large part due to the "suburbanization of poverty" which has taken place in Atlanta and many other US cities (Neel, 2018). Between 1990 and 2000, the Black population increased from 24 to 52 percent. Ten years later, Black residents comprised 66 percent of the population. Over roughly the same time frame, the share of residents living in poverty increased from 9 to 21 percent (Bureau of the Census, 2012; Manson et al., 2019). As a result, Clayton became home to a large number of residents in need of public transportation. In July 2000, voters narrowly approved a referendum to create C-TRAN, a local bus-based transit system. The small system soon became highly popular.

A few years later, Clayton was hit hard by the Great Recession that followed in the wake of

the financial crisis of 2008. In March 2010, faced with a major budget crisis, the county's leadership closed down C-TRAN. The last bus ran on March 31, 2010. The day after, the county was essentially void of public transportation. Thousands of predominantly Black riders were deprived access to basic transportation options. The closing was nothing short of a disaster; the Atlanta chapter of the Amalgamated Transit Union tellingly described the situation in Clayton as a "national disgrace" and accused the State of Georgia of having created "a mobility crisis in a majority African-American community [...]" (2014, p. 4).

For many former riders, expensive taxi rides became one of the few viable transportation alternatives. Some had little choice but to rely on their feet, even when this required walking long distances on the unpaved and unlit sides of heavily trafficked roads. As a community activist at a meeting about transit equity which I attended in the spring of 2019 argued, those who had been forced to rely on their feet had been "walking along the side of the road in segregation."

The termination of C-TRAN did, however, not go unopposed. In response to the closing, a variety of groups such as community activists, racial justice organizations, and religious congregations worked together with the goal of reestablishing public transit in the county. Most joined forces with Friends of Clayton Transit (FOCT), a grassroots organization founded in conjunction with the closing. FOCT's main goal was to have Clayton join MARTA, since doing so would make it possible to create a more extensive transit network in comparison to the small number of routes C-TRAN had operated. The organization propagated the message that joining MARTA offered "an opportunity to bring hope and opportunities back to Clayton County" (Friends of Clayton Transit, 2014).

Four and a half years later, in November 2014, largely due to FOCT's extensive organizing efforts, a referendum on whether the county should join MARTA passed with a landslide; 73 percent voted in favor of the proposal. In March 2015, close to five years after the closing of C-TRAN, the first MARTA bus rolled into the county. The transit infrastructure was ultimately not only restored, but eventually also significantly expanded. Since their introduction, the services have been in high demand (Karner and Duckworth, 2019).

A question of freedom

For many of those who struggled to bring MARTA to Clayton County, public transportation constituted an infrastructure conducive to *freedom*. To begin with, the transit activists situated their work and the transportation conditions in in the county in relation to the enduring Black struggle for freedom and racial justice in Atlanta and beyond. For instance, they linked their efforts to the actions of Rosa Parks. Referencing Parks, Deborah Scott, a member of Georgia STAND-UP, one of the organizations which joined forces with FOCT, explained how the conditions in Clayton marked yet another example of how African Americans were "still trying to get on the bus" (Wong, 2014). A photo of Parks was also featured on the "WE MADE HISTORY in Clayton County" posters FOCT distributed in conjunction with the successful referendum.

Figure 2. A MARTA bus stop in Riverdale, Clayton County. Source: Author

Most importantly, however, the reestablishment of public transportation was construed as vital for putting an end to the situation where predominantly Black residents had to choose between walking in the mud or paying expensive cab fares simply to get to work or a medical appointment. That is, MARTA was considered to hold the potential to make possible a freedom *from* these conditions. Consider, for instance, how Roberta Abdul-Salaam, one of FOCT's founders, urged the county's residents to vote in favor of joining the transit agency:

> A 'yes' vote will provide thousands of Clayton citizens greater access to jobs that are more available and plentiful north of Atlanta. Voting 'yes' will provide our senior citizens the independence to come and go as they please, to visit friends, travel to medical appointments, go shopping, attend church and/or spend more time with family. Voting 'yes' will enable students without transportation to attend colleges and technical schools here in Clayton and anywhere in the metro Atlanta region.
>
> Abdul-Salaam, 2014

A similar sentiment was reflected in some of the comments spoken at a FOCT meeting I attended in March 2019. One of the speakers, a Black woman in her 40s, explained how the buses had made "such a life-changing difference" for many due to how they had improved access to things such as jobs, healthcare, and education, and largely (though not completely) ended the situation where people were relegated to "walking in the mud."

The understanding of transit these accounts reflect, then, clearly resonates with some of the core arguments that have been previously proffered about the role this infrastructure can play in allowing urban residents to secure something along the lines of a right to mobility. In Clayton, public transportation was indeed considered to hold the potential to allow people to "participate fully in society" instead of being relegated to "a life lived in isolation" (Attoh, 2019, p. 101, XIV).

Limits to the right to mobility

At the same time, the conditions in Clayton County also disclose the importance to

consider the implications of how the need for transportation tends to not *only* be grounded in a desire to be mobile for reasons associated with freedom. Critically, metro Atlanta's deeply racialized housing and labor markets make it necessary for many residents on the majority Black southside to take on long and burdensome commutes to find (low-wage) employment on the richer, majority white northside. In other words, the need for transit follows in large part from a need to be mobile simply to survive.

The transit struggles in Clayton County thus also lay bare an issue which is different from yet closely related to the lack of adequate transit options: a problem of excessive — or forced — mobility. Laura, a transit activist who played a key role in the efforts to bring MARTA to the county, noted the following with reference to these challenges:

> [...] a lot of what I hear in the community [...] is that the service could actually be a little bit more robust. If there was a way to not have to take two or three hours to get to your job, to have to change buses three or four times before you get there [...] And metro-wide, even in the City of Atlanta, that's a difficulty that riders face, in terms of: I've gotta leave home at, you know, 6 o'clock, to get to work by 9. So, those are some of the big hurdles that we still need to overcome. And I'm not sure what the answers are, other than more frequent routes [...]

In Clayton, access to transportation was crucial for making possible forms of mobility associated with freedom as well as with sheer survival. Notably, several of those who contributed to the efforts to have the county join MARTA stressed that their struggle was an unfinished one; Atlanta, they argued, continues to be a fundamentally unequal city, and the pressure many face to commute long distances simply to find work constitutes a key issue in this regard.

Accordingly, the politics of mobility in Clayton highlight how increasing the capacity for mobility can neither be an all-out solution to many of the kinds of accessibility-related issues urban residents face, nor a straightforward pathway to transportation justice, however loosely defined. To be sure, these aspects do not in any way diminish the transformative impact of the reestablishment of the county's transit infrastructure. Rather, what they draw attention to are some fundamental limitations to what merely expanding and improving public transportation can accomplish, and how the freedom this infrastructure *can* make possible must be dialectically situated in relation to the need for excessive or forced mobility.

Reshaping mobility, revolutionizing the city

Taken together, the Clayton County case offers an instructive example of the complexities associated with both interpreting and addressing issues centered around access to transportation. While achieving some degree of transportation justice certainly requires expanding and restructuring transportation infrastructures, such actions are often ultimately all too limited in scope. Indeed, as Wojciech Kębłowski and coauthors note, "providing individuals with better access to mobility is not the ultimate solution to solving systemic undersupply of jobs, affordable housing, or educational and leisure facilities." (Kębłowski et al., 2019, p. 30).

Instead, it is necessary to reshape *cities* in multiple and far-reaching ways, and, thus, by extension, to dismantle the processes of racial capitalism which contribute to the production of conditions such as those described in the sections above. Put more simply, the securing of something akin to a right to mobility must be coupled with a broader transformation of cities. As Stefan Kipfer suggests: "In a vision for a post-capitalist world, a combination of the first goal – 'the right to mobility' – with the second – the 'right to stay put' – may converge in a 'right to choose democratically among different mobilities.'" (2013, p. 10).

To conclude, it is notable how the politics of mobility in Atlanta well illustrate the validity of the argument offered by Mimi Sheller, among others, that interpretations of transportation justice must be broadened so as to consider a wider range of aspects and dimensions. Sheller calls for "[…] a multi-scalar and mobile approach that goes beyond mobility innovation and transport justice alone (usually conceived of as a question of simply getting from A to B within cities)" (2018, p. 6). To this end, she proposes the use and development of a framework centered around what she terms "mobility justice," which considers the linkages between several of the issues raised in this piece, such as housing markets, racialization processes, and automobility-oriented urban planning. The complexities of the transportation challenges outlined in the preceding sections clearly demonstrate the need for continued efforts in this regard.

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Authors

Marcus Mohall

Postdoc » Linköping University

Marcus Mohall holds a PhD in human geography from Uppsala University. He is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Thematic Studies at Linköping University. His research interests revolve around the political economy of (public) transportation infrastructures, housing, and urban planning and policy more broadly.