Why sustainable transport policies will fail: EU climate policy in the light of transport taboos

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

There is widespread consensus that current climate policy for passenger transportation is insufficient to achieve significant emission reductions in line with global climate stabilization goals. This article consequently has a starting point in the notion of 'path dependency' (Schwanen et al., 2011) and an observed 'implementation gap' (Banister and Hickman, 2013), suggesting that significant mitigation policies for transport do not emerge in the European Union because of various interlinked 'transport taboos', i.e. barriers to the design, acceptance and implementation of such transport policies that remain unaddressed as they constitute political risk. The paper argues that without addressing transport taboos, such as highly unequal individual contributions to transport volumes and emissions, social inequality of planned market-based measures, the role of lobbyism, and the various social and psychological functions of mobility, it will remain difficult to achieve significant emission reductions in passenger transport. Yet, transport taboos remain largely ignored among EU policy makers because their discussion would violate 'order', i.e. harm specific interests within neoliberal governance structures and the societal foundations and structures of transport systems built on these.

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1. Introduction

Transport in the EU27 has grown considerably over the past decade. In the period 1995–2010, average annual growth in passenger transport was 1.3%, totalling 6424 trillion passenger kilometres (pkm) in 2010, or an average of 12,869 km travelled per person per year (EC, 2012). Notably, this figure does not include air and sea transport outside the EU27 and is a considerable underestimate of overall transport distances covered by EU citizens (e.g. Åkerman (2012) for Sweden). Transport accounts for 31.7% of final energy consumption in the EU 27, out of this 82.1% as a result of road transport and 13.6% as a result of intra-EU air transport. This corresponds to 29.9% of CO_2 emissions in the EU in 2009 (EC, 2012). Transport emissions increased by 36% in the period 1990–2007, while emissions from all other sectors decreased by 15% in the same period (EC, 2011).

Further growth in transport volumes and associated emissions is likely. Globally, the International Energy Agency (IEA, 2012) anticipates a doubling of the number of passenger cars between 2011 and 2035. Aviation industry projections foresee global traffic volume growth (revenue passenger kilometres) in the order of 4.7% (Airbus, 2012) to 5.0% (Boeing, 2012) per year, leading to a tripling of air travel between 2005 and 2050 (IEA, 2009, see also Owens et al., 2010). This will considerably increase transport's share in emissions, even in economies where overall transport volumes continue to grow at a more moderate rate. Clearly, such developments will make it difficult for the transport sector to stay within the limits of global climate policy objectives (e.g. Chèze et al., 2013).

The EU has implemented two legislative instruments to reach its climate mitigation targets. The first is a trade scheme (the EU Emission Trading Scheme, ETS), imposing caps on CO_2 emissions of large emitters (Directive 2009/29/EC). The second is legislation assigning targets for non-emissions trading sectors on a national level, covering transport, residential, services and some industry (Decision 406/2009/EC). Regarding the latter, emission reductions are to be achieved through various mechanisms, including, in urban areas, a phasing out of vehicles with internal combustion engines (ICEs), smaller road passenger vehicles, higher shares of

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collective transport, and urban mobility and infrastructure designs that facilitate walking and cycling (EC, 2011). Overall, the EC (2011) suggests that emissions from transport will decline, compared to 2008, by 60% by 2050, with an interim goal of −20% by 2030. The EC outlines, however, that "curbing mobility is not an option" (EC, 2011: 5), thereby putting legislation objectives and measures somewhat at odds with opinion that to achieve absolute emission reductions, energy-intense forms of mobility will have to decline (Anable et al., 2012; Banister, 2008, 2011; Chapman, 2007; Daly and Ó Gallachóir, 2011; Dubois et al., 2011; IEA, 2012, UNWTO-UNEP-WMO, 2008).

To achieve emission reductions in transport in the EU, a wide range of market-based, command-and-control and soft policy measures are theoretically available (e.g. Friman et al., 2012; OECD and UNEP, 2011; Sterner, 2007). However, while there is ample research on the effects of specific measures within these three categories, there exists, in the words of Banister and Hickman (2013: 292), a major 'implementation gap', defined as the way in which scientific knowledge is translated into policies. Various explanations have been provided for the existence of such a gap, including a societal and political focus on ecological modernization and neo-liberal governance, i.e. belief systems comprising elements of technological innovation, (limited) market-based measures, and (voluntary) behavioral change, ultimately resulting in 'path dependency' and social lock-in, i.e. a situation where (in)actions of the past condition future outcomes (Hall, 2013; Schwanen et al., 2011).

This paper takes a similar, yet different viewpoint, based on the observation that a series of aspects with key relevance for passenger transport volume growth appear to remain largely ignored in the EU policy agenda. The paper thus confirms Banister and Hickman's (2013) notion that available policy measures are not implemented because of various barriers (May, 2013; Stough and Rietveld, 1997; Rietveld and Stough, 2005), though developing an alternative concept for explanation, which we term 'transport taboos'. 'Taboo' is a word derived from the Polynesian 'tabu', denoting any sort of prohibition, i.e. something that is 'forbidden' (Radcliffe-Brown, 1939). An important sub-context is that someone who does touch an object that is tabu becomes tabu her/himself, with consequences: "he [sic] is regarded as being in a state of danger, and this is generally stated by saying that if he fails to observe the customary precautions he will be ill and perhaps die" (Radcliffe-Brown, 1939: 6). Taboos are consequently "issues banned as constituting a risk" (Merriam-Webster, 2013: no page), and refer in the context of this paper to the *political* risk of touching upon any of the issues outlined in the following sections: To touch a taboo constitutes a violation of norms, and implies a danger for the transgressor to become marginalised and to 'die' politically.

Anthropological research on taboos confirms that these are dangerous (Radcliffe-Brown, 1939; Douglas, 1966). This is because taboos represent 'order', and thus touching a taboo will create disorder, constituting a violation of norms and values: "the ideal order of society is guarded by dangers which threaten transgressors" (Douglas, 1966: 3). As Tetlock (2003) underlines, social or individual commitments to certain values are absolute, as these are sacred, and hence inviolable. Taboos are interlinked with sacred values, and thus represent issues that are virtually impossible to address, as this demands infringing on values closely linked to belief systems (cosmologies) and identities, causing cognitive dissonance as a result of disruption. When a taboo is actually violated, this will result in conflict with a given order, and result in 'moral outrage' (Tetlock et al., 2000), i.e. affective and behavioral reactions including "anger, contempt, and even disgust toward violators; and enthusiastic support for both norm enforcement (punishing violators) and metanorm enforcement (punishing those who shirk the burdensome chore of punishing deviants)" (Tetlock et al., 2000: 855).

Transport taboos are thus issues that constitute fundamental, yet ignored cognitive and affective barriers to the implementation of significant (climate) policy in transportation. Taboos are different from barriers of implementation, because they exist on a fundamentally different level than structural, economic, technical or behavioral barriers: they cannot be addressed politically without considerable danger to the integrity of the norm violator, either among peers – which can be powerful individuals or organizations -, or the broader public or community.

Like the Polynesian origin of the word tabu, taboos, and more specifically transport taboos, are explicitly geographical in nature. The degree to which an issue is taboo, or even not taboo at all, is contextually dependent. Indeed, the transport taboos presented in this paper are situated in place, with the political risk they constitute uneven, and varying across regions and nation-states. The geographical focus of this paper falls on those issues that may be seen as most taboo in EU climate policy, but examples also tease out national differences, highlighting pockets of both extreme resistance to particularly taboo issues in transport policy, and also where possible to places wherein the same types of issues have met less political resistance and been at least partially overcome through more sustainable transport solutions.

As an example of a notable transport taboo at the national scale, a paradox in German transport policy is that the country, one of the major proponents of far-reaching EU climate policy, maintains its 'no speed limits' policy, even though the importance of such limits for climate mitigation is well documented (Asensio et al., 2014; Hill et al., 2012). Moreover, various opinion polls in Germany have indicated broad public support in favor of speed limits (e.g. ARD, 2013; BUND, 2007; Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2010). Yet, none of the political parties have been willing to raise a discussion of this taboo issue, which would likely lead to moral outrage by car associations and producers, who are powerful agents in German public discourse on car driving. As an example of a situation where a transport taboo was actually addressed, i.e. the very low price for fuel in Germany at the end of the 1990s, this had considerable negative consequences for the 'transgressor', the Green party. Demanding that a liter of fuel cost 5 German marks (US$ 2.80) before the election in 1998, the party lost 0.6% of votes, declining from 7.3% in 1994 to 6.7% in 1998 (Bundeswahlleiter, 2013). Notably, the opposition expressed moral outrage at the proposition, and voiced contempt in their answering election campaign "Lass dich nicht anzapfen" ("don't let yourself be tapped").

Transport taboos exist, it is argued, because they constitute a risk to political decision makers, in the sense that their consideration would require transcending neoliberal forms of governance to initiate fundamental sociocultural change – in other words, a process creating disorder. The purpose of this paper is thus twofold. It introduces the concept of transport taboos as a new dimension to be considered in the discussion of progress in mobility governance, and underlines the need to more fully analyze transport taboos. At the same time, the paper emphasizes the need to confront and overcome taboos, with the ultimate goal to provide a platform for a renewed discussion of the failure of policymakers to adequately address transport climate mitigation policy. Clearly, not all stakeholders will ignore all taboos, and not all taboos will be equally relevant to achieve stated policy goals. Hence, the subsequent introduction of the concept of transport taboos is a starting point for further debate: it is acknowledged that various knowledge gaps remain, and that empirical work is needed to confirm and identify taboos. Future research on taboos would allow to better address and, ultimately, overcome these.

Based on primarily sociological perspectives – as well as insights derived from science & technology studies and transport geography – the following sections introduce and discuss a non-exhaustive list of transport taboos that may be considered key