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The publicness of public transport: The changing nature of public transport in Latin American cities

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ABSTRACT

Public transport can be 'public' in multiple ways and without specificity when one public aspect changes there is no way to consider the impacts of that change. Currently there is a process of transit formalization taking place in Latin American cities that is changing the publicness of their systems. This paper identifies four publicness types- public space, public goods, public ownership, and public concern- and discusses the implications of transit projects in Santiago, Bogotá, Quito, and Mexico City on all four. While the impacts are not heterogeneous, governments are recognizing transit as a public good and introducing public funding and public ownership of Bus Rapid Transit and other infrastructure. These changes have the potential to strengthen public transit's role as public space and are increasing transit as an issue of public concern, but there has been little formalization of public participation in the process. Public transit is now a three way relationship between private operators, government agencies, and the community, but most of the focus in this new arrangement has been on the contracts between the operators and government and less attention has been paid to the relationship with the public.

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1. Introduction

Fundamental for a city's development is [to have] an effective public transit system. For most of the population of cities, public transport is the only means to access employment, education and public services.

Metrobus, 2013 (translated from original Spanish).

[Our mission is] Meeting the mobility needs of people in the city of Santiago, offering wider integrated public transport system.

Transantiago, 2013 (translated from original Spanish).

Metrobus in Mexico City and Transantiago in Santiago, Chile, are two of the many mega-projects devised in the last decade in Latin American cities to improve and regulate public transportation. The operational and financial features of these transport interventions changes from one city to the other but, interestingly, they all present themselves – as in the above citations – as *public*. Public transport, however, is public in multiple and not entirely overlapping senses. It refers to a means of transportation that is shared and open to the public, usually by ticket purchase, as opposed to private modes. It also can refer to the ownership of a system, if it is owned by a public entity or even if the system is

operated by a private company if it is funded by public resources. It can identify public transport as a public good, something the public in general benefits from even if they do not use it directly. It can also refer to an issue that is open to political debate in the public sphere.

How researchers, decision-makers, or the public in general understand the public nature of public transport is not clearly delineated in most discussions of public transport. Nor is it clearly defined in urban policies that celebrate some forms of publicness while at the same time neglecting others, thus producing ambivalent discourses and practices. Without more specificity when one public aspect of transport changes there is no way to measure or consider the impacts or implications of that change.

This ambiguity is all the more relevant as there is a current trend in Latin American cities to formalize the existing informal mass transport sector. It is an attempt by governments to gain more regulatory control over transport and decrease negative externalities. Often this includes introduction of public funding, either for the construction of infrastructure for Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) or rail projects or introduction of operating subsidies. These new transport systems are also usually devised as private-public partnerships, with private firms participating in the operational and/or financial scheme.

The formalization of transit service is changing the relationship between transport operators, the public (users and the community at large), and the state. At stake are practical issues like how the

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public should be engaged in planning and decision-making around public transport projects and what should be the level and mechanisms for accountability over public funds.

In addition, there are more theoretical questions about to what extent different modalities of publicness are articulated, and how certain forms of publicness allow for wider citizen participation. If democracy is increasingly defined as the possibility of collectives and individuals to engage in technical issues (Callon et al., 2009; Jasanoff, 1990; Ezrahi, 1990), then the way public transport systems define and practice their publicness is critical for the prospects of a democratic city.

The aim of this paper is to assess how the formalization of public transport systems in South and Central America is changing their publicness. We are not defining whether these public transport systems are public or not. Public transit systems are complex enough to avoid simplistic either/or approaches, instead we are looking at how various aspects of publicness are changing and issues that arise from these changes.

In this regard, Latin America is a valuable case study. As with other parts of the Global South, there have been fluid regulatory regimes governing the mass transport sector. It varied from country to country, but in general in the late 20th century there was very little government regulation and investment. Despite a large percentage of the population of cities not owning cars, urban bus systems were informal, with dispersed ownership, and under-regulated. The exception is Brazil where attempts to stimulate the bus manufacturing sector led to incentives for concentration and regulation (Orrico Filho et al., 2007). This created a role for the state in contracting bus service, large companies, and an often unsatisfied public.

It also created the conditions for Brazil to pioneer the development of Bus Rapid Transit (BRT), a system of using segregated bus lanes and pre-boarding stations to get rail level capacity and service with lower capital costs and faster implementation time. The BRT model was further developed in Bogotá, Colombia and has spread around Latin America and the world. As we will discuss later BRT projects force transit formalization. However, different countries and cities around Latin America have implemented this formalization differently creating varying implications for the publicness of their transit systems.

The paper is organized in three sections. In the first section we explore the theoretical understandings of the multiple public natures of public transport. Four different conceptions of public will be briefly outlined: transit systems as public space, public goods, public ownership, and public concern. In the second section we describe how transit formalization and BRT projects are being implemented in South and Central America. In the third section we use an 'N of one plus some' (Mukhija, 2010) case study approach to show the impact of recent changes on all four aspects of publicness. The primary case is the integrated public transport system implemented in Santiago, Chile in 2007, called Transantiago. Transantiago was chosen as the main case because it was a full formalization of the system compared to the piece-meal approaches taking place in other cities. We use examples from Bogotá, Colombia; Mexico City, Mexico; and Quito, Ecuador to illustrate how the changes in terms of publicness have not been heterogeneous. Finally, we conclude with an argument for how a more nuanced consideration of the public aspects of transport should be applied given the changing nature of publicness.

2. Modalities of publicness

pub·lic /ˈpʌblɪk/. *Adjective*: **1.** Of or concerning the people as a whole. **2.** Done, perceived, or existing in open view. **3.** Of or provided by the state rather than an independent, commercial

company.

Oxford Dictionary, 2013.

The meaning of 'public' is as contested as the subject itself. Just as an adjective, its meaning is at least threefold, as indicated by the Oxford Dictionary. Within the planning scholarship the situation doesn't simplify: a myriad of definitions, concepts and theoretical assumptions on the issue co-exist. In this section we do not consolidate a comprehensive inventory of definitions. Rather, our objective is to speculate about the different ways *transport systems* can be public. When we talk about public transport, which theoretical forms can the concept of 'public' take? In this section we identify four possible answers.

2.1. Public transport as public space

One basic distinction between public and private transport is that public transport implies some level of shared space and that this space is open to whoever purchases a ticket¹. Does the sharing of space with strangers necessarily make that space 'public'? The debate over when space is public space often comes up in discussions about shopping malls and other privately owned physical spaces that are open to the public and take on characteristics of public gathering places. What makes a space 'public' is open to many interpretations.

Public space is discussed in multiple disciplines and there is a range of definitions (Varna and Tiesdell, 2010). One definition is in the legal sense. It can mean space that anyone has the right to be in due to state or public ownership of that space or a tradition of public access. Because public transport requires a ticket it does not fit the definition of universal access at the same level as parks or streets, but it is generally the case that anyone has the right to use it. The nature of this right and what constitute public space is very dependent on the country. Regardless of legal rights, public space can be considered the spatial dimension of the public sphere. One method of considering the publicness of space is its value and what is lost if publicness is diminished (Varna and Tiesdell, 2010).

Regardless of ownership of the physical place, public space plays a role in society as the spatial location for free exchange of ideas and for interactions between different segments of society. It is the site of public engagement and defines the nature of citizenship; "the interaction of difference helps to create the possibility for democratic transformation" (Mitchell, 2005).

One measure of society is how individuals negotiate interactions with strangers. Public space is often where these interactions take place. Carr et al. (1992) define public space as "the stage upon which the drama of communal life unfolds". They believe public space plays a role in guiding those interactions.

...in a well-designed and well-managed public space, the armor of daily life can be partially removed, allowing us to see others as whole people. Seeing people different from oneself responding to the same setting in similar ways creates a temporary bond (Carr et al., 1992).

Under this framework not only is public transport public space, but potentially it has the ability to strengthen (or weaken) social bonds. On public transport people share space with strangers, and unlike parks it is a confined space where all of the passengers have limited control over the situation. (It literally creates a 'we are all in it together' condition.) This can build a strong sense of collective experience or cause disharmony.

It is the very public nature of this transport that can make it the site of race (or difference based) conflict. Especially before the rise

¹ It is worth remembering that in various countries through-out history access to transport has been denied based on race and other characteristics.

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