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Moving past the sustainable perspectives on transport: An attempt to mobilise critical urban transport studies with the right to the city

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary urban transport debate is increasingly versed in terms of "sustainable" development, placing social and environmental issues on the agenda. However, despite their heterogeneity, sustainable perspectives seldom engage with the explicitly political issues that shape the relationship between transport and urban development. In this paper, we propose to re-connect urban transport with political economic considerations, and thus to mobilise and strengthen "critical" perspectives on urban transport. We develop a framework for studying transport policies inspired by Henri Lefebvre's conceptualisation of "the right to the city". The framework is illustrated with the empirical example of a "pedestrianisation" project in Brussels, a salient case of a "sustainable" transport policy. We demonstrate how ostensibly progressive intentions in terms of challenging local mobility paradigms do not necessarily translate into participative and transformative practices. Instead, they often embrace the established policy-makers, leave local power relations largely unaltered, support elite entrepreneurial agendas, and obfuscate the socio-spatially uneven landscapes of contemporary cities. We thus highlight the urgency of re-politicising urban transport theory and practice by seeking and revealing political economic choices, contradictions and conflicts that underpin transport policies interwoven with urban development dynamics.

1. Introduction

In January 2014, the municipal authorities of the City of Brussels announced a plan to greatly extend the pedestrian zone in the historic inner-city. The plan involved closing off to motorised traffic a large part of Haussmannian boulevards that had functioned as major traffic artery cutting across Brussels' city centre. In its place, a new "comfort zone" was meant to be created, consisting of several squares linked together by a major car-free axis. This project, however, aspired to become much more than a major intervention in terms of mobility. Its proclaimed aim was to "get the city centre out of decline" by supporting a multi-faceted "revitalisation process" so that "Brussels, the Belgian and European capital, would finally enjoy a truly dynamic, pedestrian, attractive and friendly inner city, like many other international metropolises" (Ville de Bruxelles, 2014: 4). To give an impression of the ambition of this plan, the local mayor compared its scale to that of New York's Times Square (Colleyn, 2013).

In spite of these aspirational slogans, "*le pietonnier*," as it is often called by local media, has sparked a heated debate since its inception (Genard et al., 2016). On the one hand, the idea of turning the city centre into a vast pedestrian area had been forcefully praised by "*Pic Nic the Streets*", a citizen movement named after a local intellectual's call for challenging the dominance of car-oriented planning in Brussels (Van Parijs, 2012). The movement organised a series of unauthorised Sunday picnics on the boulevard to temporarily block car traffic and publicise the claim for a more "sustainable," "attractive" and "liveable" city centre "freed" from cars (Corijn, 2015; Hubert et al., 2017; Tessuto, 2016). Critics of the plan came from diverse groups of shopkeepers, residents, and other citizen organisations pointing at, *inter alia,* the planned transfer of car traffic towards dense neighbourhoods adjacent to *le pietonnier*, and anticipated detrimental impact on local business. They further argued that prospective effects on real estate values in the city centre are likely to put low-income residents under increasing threat of displacement (ARAU 2015a,b; Platform Pentagone, 2015).

Beyond this particular case, the policy of closing urban streets to motorised traffic has gained popularity across a variety of urban contexts. Urban "pedestrianisation" is widely promoted by scholars, planners and activists alike as a profoundly transformative tool. Creating new "attractive" and "liveable" public spaces in which walking and cycling is prioritised allegedly benefits a wide spectrum of social groups

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and urban neighbourhoods (Hass-Klau, 1993; Sandahl and Lindh, 1995), ushering an "urban revolution" (Sadik-Khan and Solomonow, 2016) that advocates "cities for people" (Gehl, 2010). However, the "success" of pedestrianisation as a strategy towards making cities "car-free" (Nieuwenhuijsen and Khreis, 2016) is assessed primarily in terms of its impact on local transport and economy, pedestrian and traffic flows, air quality, retail dynamics and commercial turnover (Boussauw, 2016; Parkhurst, 2003; Yim Yiu, 2011). We consider this narrow focus to be emblematic of the approach that considers transport as key contributor to "sustainable" urban development (Banister, 2008; Hickman et al., 2013; Low and Gleeson, 2003). "Sustainable" perspectives on transport, of which pedestrianisation is a salient example, continue to provide a dominant narrative in urban transport policy-making, resonating strongly among academics and practitioners. While they rightfully integrate a series of social and environmental questions into transport engineering and econometrics, their engagement with explicitly political issues that shape the relationship between transport and urban development remains insufficient (Kębłowski and Bassens, 2018). More particularly, as the contemporary transport debate remains largely de-politicised, it does not explicitly recognise how specific transport policies may support elite entrepreneurial agendas (Harvey, 1989) that hinge on uneven urban development (Enright, 2016; Henderson, 2004).

In our view, there is room for another strand of theorisations and approaches that can contribute to a better understanding of political economic dynamics underpinning transport. We refer to these approaches as "critical," as they relate to critical research in urban studies (Brenner, 2009), in their explicit focus on social, political, and economic relations, as well as on urban regimes and regulatory frameworks shape particular transport policies and practices (Addie, 2013; Aldred, 2012; Farmer, 2011). This involves exploring the uneven distribution of transport-related costs and benefits in economic, political or symbolic terms (Ahmed et al., 2008; Lucas, 2012; Pereira et al., 2017), identifying political economic choices that underpin "sustainable" tools such as pedestrianisation (Brenac et al., 2013; Özdemir and Selçuk, 2017). Moreover, it entails studying the process in which "sustainable" transport projects are conceived and implemented.

To date, however, such critical urban perspectives on transport remain fragmented. Their fuzziness and frailty are mirrored by the lack of a coherent "critical" political agenda in metropolitan areas (Kębłowski and Bassens, 2018). To strengthen and mobilise them, in the following two sections we present the various critiques on "sustainable" transport, and develop a framework for studying transport policies as part of urban political economy, inspired by Henri Lefebvre's (1996 [1968]) conceptualisation of the "right to the city" (RTTC). In the subsequent section, we translate the RTTC into an operational framework for studying urban transport and a heuristic inspiring a variety of explicitly political economic questions about diverse transport policies and practices such as pedestrianisation of Brussels' city centre, which serves here as an empirical vignette. Our focus on this particular case aims at illustrating how a project narrated as a key contribution to a more sustainable urban fabric perpetuates a debate in which a series of pressing political-economy issues are overlooked. We conclude the paper by re-emphasising the fundamental role of political economic dimensions in shaping contradictions of contemporary transport policies which, while seemingly limited to the field of mobility, invoke a variety of questions relating to urban development agendas writ large. Hence, we make a plea to place transport more firmly within the field of urban studies to analyse its connections to wider urban development dynamics.

2. Broadening the horizons of sustainable urban transport

The transport debate is increasingly versed in terms of sustainable development (Banister, 2008; Hickman et al., 2013; Low and Gleeson, 2003). The notion of sustainability is heterogeneous and embraces a spectrum of positions and claims. On the one hand, sustainable development has been interpreted as a tool for "ecological modernisation" (Barry, 2003) of late capitalism, in the belief that free market competition may inspire technological development to facilitate "green growth". On the other hand, sustainability has also been framed as a "radical ecocentric" strategy (Bailey and Wilson, 2009) that hinges on diverse social and behavioural incentives to transform the existing socio-economic structures, and to respond to pressing environmental challenges.

Despite these differences, the concept of sustainable development tends to allow for framing social and environmental underpinnings of urban policies—not least in the field of transport—as predominantly technical issues (Gössling and Cohen, 2014). For instance, it often portrays the process of transport agenda-setting as hinging on implementation of "rational" solutions and technological "practices" developed through matter-of-fact tasks and procedures—rather than as a question of facing inherently political choices regarding who benefits from urban development writ large. Sustainable perspectives on transport prioritise the focus on mobility patterns and "urban design", for instance to observe the capacity of particular transport solutions to limit car traffic and effectively make cities more "compact", "dense" and "liveable". However, they appear much less concerned with urban dynamics into which transport projects enter, and which they inevitably affect, nor with the inherently political process in which they are conceived and implemented (Reigner et al., 2013).

As a result, the embeddedness of sustainable transport policies in what David Harvey (1989) famously identified as entrepreneurial urban development agendas has not been fully recognised. Urban entrepreneurialism conceptualises transport policy and infrastructure not only as a framework for mobility, but also as key component of public-private land rent valorisation strategies, and a territorial asset in inter- and intra-urban competition (Gospodini, 2005; Koppenjan and Enserink, 2009). It further conforms to the logic of prioritizing supply-side interventions aimed at improving market conditions for investors, and the attempts of various urban actors to "re-brand" and "re-imagine" their cities by seeking "fast solutions" and "policies-that-work" (Marsden and Stead, 2011), of which pedestrianisation is an important example. The resultant standardisation of policy models and the ever-increasing mobility of transport policy "fixes" and "fads" is inversely related to the rather slow circulation of knowledge about potential socio-spatial costs they may generate (Brenac et al., 2013; Özdemir and Selçuk, 2017; Reigner et al., 2013).

While emphasising the centrality of environmental questions in transport, sustainable perspectives have contributed less to unearthing various forms of spatial and social splintering (Graham and Marvin, 2001) that sustainable policies may reproduce. Across urban contexts, investment in infrastructural "spatial fixes" (Harvey, 2001) linking "premium networked spaces" (Graham, 2000) is expected to facilitate improvements of connectivity between strategic nodes and corridors, and to generate "trickle-down" and "spillover" effects. However, the increasingly popular strategy of "transit-oriented development" may also facilitate real-estate speculation and gentrification (Grube-Cavers and Patterson, 2015; Jones and Ley, 2016; Lin and Chung, 2017; Sandoval, 2018). The focus on attracting affluent potential users of public transport systems rather than responding to the needs of their actual passengers (Taylor and Morris, 2015) has been shown to deepen rather than tackle socio-spatial segregation and inequality (Grengs, 2005). Sustainable transport scholars hence pay insufficient attention to the highly uneven character of systemic choices that urban inhabitants make between different modes of transport, destinations and lifestyles (Reigner et al., 2013). For instance, as will become clear in the remainder of the paper, the debate on policy tools such as "pedestrianisation" mainly focuses on their alleged contribution to a comprehensive increase of overall "life quality"—instead of scrutinising a hierarchisation of urban classes, behaviours and territories that such tools may incorporate, and the political mechanisms and choices that

underpin their implementation.

3. Towards a critical urban transport policy framework

As sustainable perspectives on transport do not necessarily query the political economic underpinnings of transport policy, we argue that they leave space for what we have identified as "critical" urban approaches (Kębłowski and Bassens, 2018). Critical thinking about transport relates to long-standing geographical interest in exploring the relation between infrastructural development and socio-spatial distribution of public services (Harvey, 1973; Smith, 1984; Soja, 2010). It further draws from research into transport-induced inclusion and exclusion (Hine, 2003; Kenyon et al., 2002; Lucas, 2012), accessibility (Farrington, 2007; Preston and Rajé, 2007) and inequality (Ahmed et al., 2008; Lucas, 2012; Pereira et al., 2017). Critical perspectives on transport have advanced these inquires by exploring how mobility is conditioned by power relations and norms, not least related to class, gender (Hanson and Pratt, 1988; Law, 1999; Uteng and Cresswell, 2008), race and ethnicity (Golub et al., 2013; Preston and McLafferty, 2016; Steinbach et al., 2011).

Urban scholars have further discussed how transport policies are developed as tools of divisive top-down metropolitan politics, uneven spatial development and urban regimes (Addie, 2013; Enright, 2016; Farmer, 2011), and are hence often mediated and resisted by bottom-up movements (Legacy, 2015; Mohl, 2004) and unions (Grengs, 2002). Although citizen participation may open up transport-related formal decision-making to a variety of grassroots actors (Batterbury, 2003), its relationship with transport policy remains weak (Legacy, 2015). Moreover, experiences of citizen involvement in transport policy-making have now proven to entail highly controversial practices in many different urban contexts, identified by some critical scholars as "thinly veiled attempts at securing legitimacy for and cooperation with policies already adopted that favour capitalist growth" (Silver et al., 2010: 454). This perspective is often followed by the proponents of sustainable transport (Epprecht et al., 2014; Isaksson and Richardson, 2009), for whom the primary goal of citizen participation is to build acceptability for "good" policy solutions, rather to facilitate a genuinely political debate in which a variety of transport scenarios could be considered.

A particularly influential addition to "critical" approaches to urban transport theory is the proposal to form the "new mobilities paradigm" (Sheller and Urry, 2006), elevating the importance of mobility and its central character in cities, and offering to study "the ways in which mobilities are both productive of such social relations and produced by them" (Cresswell, 2010: 21). However, it remains primarily interested in exploring "representations and meanings of mobility" (Cresswell, 2010: 19) as well as its sensations, experiences, practices and "micro-politics" (Bissell, 2016)—rather than engaged in profound explorations of political economy underpinnings of movement. Nonetheless, building on Urry's (2002) work on mobility-related inequalities, Kaufmann and his colleagues (2004) have conceptualised mobility as a form of capital that is unevenly distributed among social classes and individuals. Others have identified transport as a common good and major contributor to environmental justice (Gaffron, 2012), urban justice (Gössling, 2016) and transport justice (Martens, 2017).

However path-breaking these contributions to critical approaches to transport may be, in our view they have not yet provided a sufficiently comprehensive and systematic framework to assess how urban transport policies—particularly those advanced under the sustainable banner—are conceived and implemented (Kębłowski and Bassens, 2018). We argue that Henri Lefebvre's (1996 [1968]; 2003 [1970]) work may be fundamental in this regard, inspiring a coherent, theoretically robust and empirically applicable framework that allows to demonstrate and analyse how transport policies form part of urban political economy. We feel particularly inspired by Lefebvre's call for the right to the city (RTTC): a slogan formulated in the late 1960s as an expression of radical criticism of the then predominant Fordist-Keynesian mode of capitalist urbanisation, the prioritisation of exchange value over use value in the definition and conduct of urban policies, and the resultant commodification and fragmentation of urban life by car-oriented functionalist planning. For Lefebvre, the "urban" constitutes both a metaphor for contemporary capitalist relations, and a key arena in which these relations can be opposed by going "beyond the market, the law of exchange value, money and profit" (1996 [1968]: 124). The RTTC is thus a call for

> "[…] a transformed and renewed right to urban life [in which] the 'urban', place of encounter, priority of use value, inscription in space of a time [are] promoted to the rank of a supreme resource among all resources" (Lefebvre, 1996 [1968]: 158).

While we draw inspiration from recent interpretations of the RTTC—in particular the contributions that relate it to transport (Corsín Jiménez, 2014; Jouffe, 2010; Levy, 2013; Scott, 2013)—our intention is to stay close to Lefebvre's original writings. We thus hope to connect the fragmented critical approaches to transport with the tradition of critical urban studies, whose main tenet lies in the continuous strive to expose power-relations underpinning urban policy and practice and thereby "excavate possibilities for alternative, radically emancipatory forms of urbanism" (Brenner, 2009: 204). To achieve this, we build on Lefebvre's observation that one of key attributes of any "critical" urban theory or policy lies in foregrounding the use value of urban space to the detriment of exchange values (Kuymulu, 2013; Lefebvre, 2003 [1970]), transferring power over the appropriation and production of urban space out from the market's and state's hands, to those of the inhabitants—and thus re-politicising urban issues, including those concerning transport.

The point here, however, is not to advocate the RTTC as another addition to the list of existing liberal-democratic or civil rights to separate socio-economic aspects such as housing, natural resources, aesthetics, education, healthcare or, last but not least, to transport and mobility (Golub et al., 2013; Kuymulu, 2013; Sanchez and Brenman, 2010). Neither is it our ambition to engage in a debate about what the RTTC is (or is not), by whom it should be claimed (and by whom not) and how should it be put into practice (or not), or to transpose Lefebvre's theory onto banners calling for creating new "ideal-type" practices that would "realise" the right to the city. Rather, we approach Lefebvre's theory as a radical antidote that cuts through discursive veils surrounding material effects of transport agendas, and as a heuristic that allows to detect political-economic contradictions underpinning transport.

4. A RTTC-inspired framework for transport policy analysis

The framework we are proposing below refers to what we identify as four fundamental elements of the RTTC. We further combine them with insights from contemporary critical literature on citizen participation in urban planning as an integral component of Lefebvre's conceptualisation (see Table 1). The theoretical discussion about political-economic contradictions that the framework helps to detect is illustrated with a critical de-construction of the empirical example of the ongoing pedestrianisation project in Brussels' inner city (see Fig. 1).

As outlined in the introduction to this paper, the pedestranisation plan announced in January 2014 by the municipal authorities of the City of Brussels involved a homogenising representation of Brussels as the "Capital of Europe." However, beyond this narrative, one is confronted with a city marked by deep social inequalities and strong spatial segregation (Kesteloot, 2013). For a large part, Brussels' historic district (locally nicknamed "the Pentagon") and adjacent inner neighbourhoods are densely populated working-class areas, showing an intense and culturally diverse street life yet suffering from rampant territorial stigmatisation. The population of the Pentagon (53,000) faces high unemployment rates (up to 35%), and its average income levels lies

Table 1
A right to the city-inspired framework for critical analysis of transport policies and practices.

Right to the city	Transport policy
Participation: Enabling appropriation and production of urban space by inhabitants	• *Inclusive*: embracing diverse actors and responding to their diverse needs and capacities • *Reconciling* institutional/top-down and non-institutional/bottom-up/elements • *Deliberative*: providing space for conflict/dissensus and deliberation/consensus • *Interactive*: acknowledging the plurality of transport-related knowledge and offering all participants a mutual learning experience
Power: Revealing and challenging existing urban regimes	• *Redistributive*: transferring significant power towards city-dwellers; co-created by them, not only for them • *Political*: opposing de-politicised, consent-manufacturing techniques
Totality: Concerning all aspects of urban society and space	• *Beyond the right to mobility:* questioning the relationship between urbanised capitalism and transport, challenging the normative and uneven character of mobility • *Holistic and multi-scalar*: concerned with the whole urban society and territory, reaching beyond administrative boundaries, parochial spaces and interests
Utopia: Moving towards a possible world yet to come	• *Effective yet reflexive*: producing tangible results but avoiding the trap of providing ready-made policy solutions

15% below the BCR average. Serving as places of arrival for low-income immigrants since the mid-20th century, these neighbourhoods have been under increasing pressure of gentrification since the early 2000s. Upscale real estate developments are multiplying while rental values and housing prices are increasing rapidly. Moreover, diverse policy instruments are mobilised to raise the appeal of these neighbourhoods towards the middle class (Van Hamme et al., 2016). This puts low-rent yielding population groups and economic activities under increasing threat of displacement (De Laet, 2018). We argue that creating a new vast pedestrian zone in such context is all but a socially, economically or symbolically neutral planning intervention, which requires analysing how a "sustainable" transport project relates to its wider urban context. To illustrate the profoundly political dimension of this project, we have collected empirical material over the 2014–2018 period from diverse sources including policy documents from the City of Brussels, position papers from diverse association or citizen groups, press excerpts, reports from real estate actors, research papers and multiple on-site observations. This material has been compiled for the purpose of detecting and confronting the narratives of the *pietonnier*'s diverse stakeholders. In the remainder of the paper we discuss key insights from this empirical vignette with reference to each dimension of our RTTC-inspired framework.

4.1. Participation: enabling appropriation and production of urban space

The first element of the framework regards the question of participation that, given the centrality of users and use values of urban space in Lefebvre's work, is an undoubtedly key component in any possible operationalisation of his call. As opposed to utilizing citizen participation as political instrument for legitimacy-building and consensus-forcing, the concept of the RTTC provides a lens through which transport is assessed against it capacity to work towards the appropriation and production of urban space by its inhabitants. The notion of appropriation stretches far beyond the possibility for urban dwellers to physically occupy existing urban space (Mitchell, 2003). It denotes a fundamental change in terms of how urban space is produced (Lefebvre (2003 [1970]): a radical transition from "abstract space" dominated by its economic function and exchange values to "differential space" in which use values are the centrepiece (Lefebvre, 2009 [1966]). This entails scrutinising transport policies against their capacity to contribute to a strategy that Lefebvre calls *autogestion*. This term—which literally means "self-management" but perhaps is better translated as "workers' control" (Brenner and Elden, 2009)—describes citizen control of the city by and for its inhabitants, and the resultant radical decentralisation of spatial governance regarding the totality of urban issues, including those related to transport. This is perhaps the most apparent and common way of understanding the RTTC, reading it as a call for empowering inhabitants vis-à-vis the market and the state.

Tracing *autogestion* in transport involves asking fundamental questions about the process in which transport policies are conceived and decided about. This requires studying the inclusivity of the transport debate by scrutinising its potential to embrace diverse audiences, and to respond to their diverse capacities and needs. It further implies analysing the extent to which a participatory process regarding transport is interactive—by acknowledging the plurality of transport-related knowledge and expertise (acquired not only by transport "officials" but also its users and workers) as well as by providing a mutual learning experience that constitutes "a right, not just the means" (Pretty, 1995: 1252). In turn, the potential deliberative qualities of transport-related participation should be examined, as it may provide a possibility not only to build consensus, but also to formulate and voice potential conflict and dissent. We argue that thus directed analysis, despite its strong emphasis on investigating the potential of transport in terms of exercising self-organisation and relying on grassroots forces, should not exclude state institutions. Rather, the critical analytical framework we are proposing looks into the capacity of transport in terms of reconciling institutional ("top-down") and non-institutional ("bottom-up") elements, motivations and processes.

At first sight, one could argue that the project of extending the pedestrian zone in Brussels' centre has been deeply participative from its inception. After all, it emerged from civil disobedience (unauthorised, widely publicised, and regular occupation of the city's central boulevard) advocated by a citizen group (*Pic Nic the Street*), who have been instrumental in setting the policy agenda and triggering planning action that produced *le pietonnier* (Tessuto, 2016). Nonetheless, despite the alleged commitment of the authorities of the City of Brussels to citizen participation (see Fig. 2), the inclusion of local inhabitants in the planning process has been quite superficial, that is, limited to a street-level survey with passers-by, a handful of public meetings, and a series of workshops bringing together a limited number of citizens. The deeply un-deliberative and un-interactive character of these participatory moments has been exposed by many of their participants (Frenay and Frenay, 2016; ARAU, 2015a,b). They have denounced the predominantly informative character of the process, as its primary role was to provide city planners with a platform to communicate their objectives and ambitions to citizens. This was done without much latitude to discuss the various impacts of the project and *a fortiori* to consider alternative planning proposals. Local citizen associations notably argued for planning several small-scale car-free perimeters in diverse areas within the "Pentagon", to impede through traffic while ensuring transport accessibility for local inhabitants. Only secondary issues were left open to deliberation, most of them regarding the design and aesthetics of the "pedestrianised" public space. As participants were told by the representatives of the City of Brussels, "these meetings are not intended to deal with the main lines of the project" (Frenay and Frenay, 2016: 25). Rather than approach participation as an essential right, the local authorities appear to have utilised it as a means of fostering a form of individually-based adhesion to the project. By trying

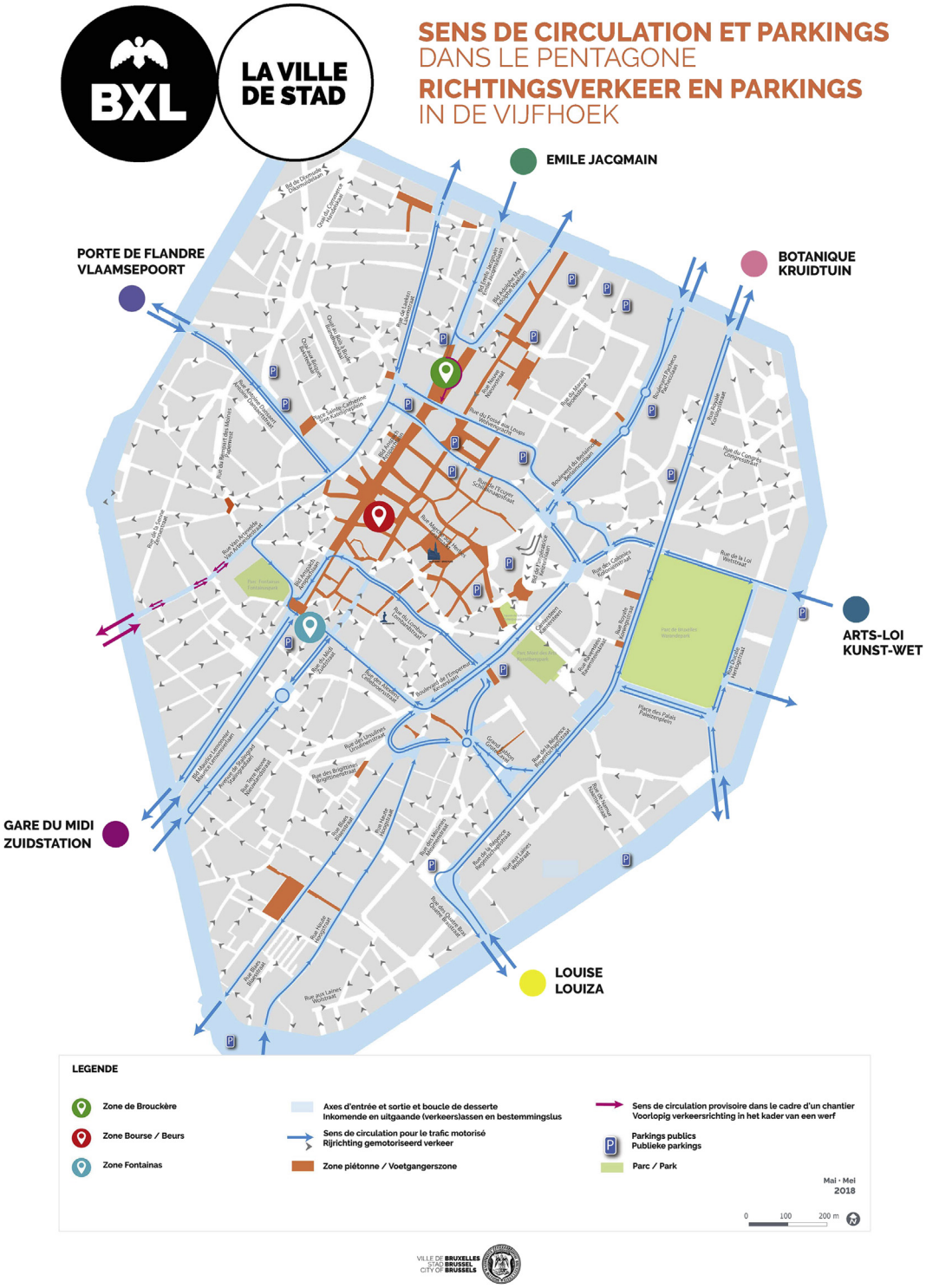

Fig. 1. The plan of extended pedestrian area in Brussels' historic inner city (in orange) shows that despite the City's alleged ambition to create a car-free "comfort zone", car accessibility remains high. The zone is surrounded by car traffic diverted from the central boulevard (in blue), and numerous parking lots (marked "P") can be found in its immediate vicinity. Source: Ville de Bruxelles, May 2018. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the Web version of this article.)

to circumvent and downplay the influence of existing bottom-up citizen organisations, they demonstrated that the top-down motivation behind *le pietonnier* had little to do with empowering local inhabitants to appropriate and produce urban space. This strategy, however, has not proven fully efficient. Several citizen organisations came together in a new platform—"Platform Pentagone"—to voice their disagreement through press conferences, street demonstrations and petitions, and to engage in legal recourse against the granting of planning permit. Therefore, despite being pushed out the window, the political character of urban mobility issues—and related issues of urban change—has repeatedly crept in through the back door.

Fig. 2. The marketing campaign surrounding the extension of pedestrian zone in Brussels city centre incorporates participatory slogans. It calls its users to "imagine tomorrow" (top-left) and "make the heart of Brussels beat, together" (bottom-right). Source: Authors.

4.2. Power: revealing and challenging its existing configurations

Inquiring into the potential of transport in terms of fostering appropriation of urban space through *autogestion* leads to further questions about how transport may enable inhabitants to reveal and consequently challenge the existing configurations of power. The second element of the RTTC-inspired framework thus refers to capacity of transport in terms of contributing to the process of taking power away from politics of elite urban regimes (Elkin, 1987; Stone, 1989) towards the politics of the inhabitants. Critical analysis thus assesses the extent to which participatory decision-making processes resist becoming reduced to "small-scale participatory efforts" involving citizens that are "friendly to innovation," (Sagaris, 2014: 75, 79) and thereby refuse to join the arsenal of de-politicised consent-manufacturing techniques that—as anticipated by Lefebvre—"fail to perceive that every space is a *product* [that] results from relationships of production that are taken control of by an active group" (Lefebvre, 2003 [1970]: 154).

Thus conceptualised approach is not obscured by blind belief in technological fixes and solutions to age-old political problems (Geels, 2012). Instead, the RTTC-inspired perspective clearly identifies the full potential of social and political innovations in terms of tackling various issues related to the uneven socio-spatial relations and power dynamics that shape urban transport. This means analysing transport policies and practices against their potential redistributive character in terms of decision-making, asking whether they are co-created *with* and *by*, and not only *for* inhabitants. In other words, from the perspective of the RTTC, enabling city-dwellers to engage in an inclusive, interactive and deliberative debate about transport is not enough as long as it does not lead up to transferring of significant power over transport agendas towards city-dwellers. The strategy of *autogestion* thus opens the fundamental question about the agency of passengers and employees of transport systems and mobility authorities, and the livelihoods of transport workers (Rekhviashvili and Sgibnev, 2018). Rather than being reduced to the role of customers or contractors, in the critical perspective all transport "participants" are approached as political actors. Their potential—or perhaps even a right—to act not only as co-discussants, but also as co-managers of transport policies, practices and infrastructures, constitutes a valid area of research and political action.

According to its local public promoters, the pedestrianisation of Brussels' city centre is a deeply political project. It allegedly represents a turning point in terms of redistribution of power over urban planning, away from car-oriented functionalism, towards a "people-oriented" city enabling inhabitants and visitors to "re-appropriate" its streets and squares— in the spirit of new urbanist guidelines developed *inter alia* by the Danish architect Jan Gehl, whom local policy-makers, journalists and academics cite as one of their main sources of inspiration (Hubert et al., 2017). According its proponents, *le pietonnier* is a sign that

> "a 20-year long debate about the development of the city centre has moved on. A city centre for its inhabitants, visitors and urban flâneurs. For the first time, it is up to the car users to adapt. […]The order of priorities has been reversed. […] The new pedestrian area is an urban development project bearing a large impact on collective imaginary. The governance of Brussels may have really taken a different course." (Corijn, 2015)

Yet, a close look at the project suggests that interpreting it as a herald of a new urban planning paradigm is merely an instance of wishful thinking. While pedestrianisation allegedly downplays the importance of car mobility in Brussels, it entails the creation of 1.600 parking spots in three new underground car parks located in immediate proximity to the new "comfort zones"—in addition to the existing 19.000 underground parking spots in the central city.

The political dimension of the project may actually lie elsewhere. Contra repeated claims by its proponents, we understand it as an attempt to significantly reinforce a long-standing gentrification strategy (De Boeck et al., 2017; Van Criekingen, 2013) devoted to upscale the commercial and residential profile of Brussels' central city—now still largely populated by low-income population groups often from immigrant origin—through the attraction of high rent-yielding functions such as upscale housing, franchise retail and new tourist equipment. As stated by the City of Brussels' Alderwoman for commerce, "the objective is to recreate a commercial promenade […] New brands which are not yet present in Brussels are coming. There is a real craze, you can feel it." (Attout, 2017). The City's current mayor openly claims that the aim of

the project is "to keep or bring the middle class to Brussels, […] to increase the tax base" (Attout, 2017). As his administration owns approximately 10.000 m^2 of retail space in the new "comfort zone", it is directly involved in commercial upscaling strategy by actively seeking renowned franchise retail occupants for its properties, and "play[ing] a pivotal role in bringing more diversity to the retail mix and reducing the low-end offer" (Attout, 2017). New upscale real estate development is enthusiastically welcomed by the City's authorities:

> "Today, something is happening that has not happened in [the historic centre of the city] for 20 years. […] The private sector is investing again. There are new shopping mall and housing projects to be built. Within two years, 1,000 new households will move into the city centre and bring in a new life" (Sorée, 2016).

This optimism is shared by several key real estate developers and consultants operating in the Brussels-Capital Region, who praise *le pietonnier* as a "courageous project" (Atenor, 2016) that follows "an excellent idea to boost tourist and commercial attractivity" of the area (Cushman & Wakefield, 2016) and anticipate its high impact on local investment potential (EY, 2016). Thus, the extension of the inner-city car-free "comfort zone" solidifies the dominance of the car outside *le pietonnier*. In this way, it upholds—rather than challenges—the long-standing configuration of power that advocates the broad entrepreneurial agenda in Brussels, and fails to transfer any authority over the production of transport policy towards city-dwellers.

4.3. Beyond the right to mobility: concerning all aspects of urban society and space

Surely, the challenge to existing power-relations determining transport policy must enable an effective transformation of mobility patterns. However, emphasising the political dimension of urban transport, and taking power over how its agendas and priorities are defined, demands placing it a wider urban context. Since Lefebvre applies the term "city" as "a synecdoche for society" (Marcuse, 2009: 244), seen through his lens, critical urban transport is not about transport alone, but also about its impact on "urban totality" (Marcuse, 2012: 35). Therefore, the third element of the framework we are proposing highlights the importance of going beyond questions and facts related to traffic and movement, to embrace how transport may affect all aspects of urban society and space.

This approach obliges researchers to acknowledge the fundamental relationship between the continuous transformation of urbanised capitalism and development of transport infrastructure. As mobility constitutes a form of unevenly distributed capital, it acts as an entry condition for accessing diverse urban functions, spaces and lifestyles. Critiquing capitalism thus involves questioning not only how transport is underpinned by capitalist relations, but also how it underpins and enables capitalism itself.

In this sense, the RTTC-inspired critical framework goes beyond the oft-formulated calls for "the right to mobility": a slogan that in our view obfuscates major political-economic as well as environmental consequences of movement. The postulate of providing equal or "just" access to transport—or its particular forms, modes and practices—appears equally controversial (Martens, 2017), as "the right to an accessible city diverts it into the neoliberal order" (Jouffe, 2010: 43), further justifying and reproducing uneven socio-spatial competition among evermore dispersed inhabitants and workers, intensified by the processes of commuting and urban sprawl. After all, 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.

In this way, RTTC stands in stark opposition to narratives about "sustainable" transport. It moves beyond the apparent challenge of obtaining more environmentally-friendly energy sources that could help to sustain current mobility levels (Geels, 2012), and or the task of reorganising mobility patterns and behaviours to facilitate modal shifts from one mode (e.g. private cars) to another (e.g. public transport or cycling). Instead, critical research inspired by RTTC breaks with portrayals of mobility as a "'natural' or […] 'god given" phenomenon (Levy, 2013: 8) to recognise the need to work towards radically reducing them across space and society. This foregrounds the necessity to provide urban inhabitants with the choice—or perhaps even a right—not to live in a perpetual motion (Garnier, 2014), a right to stay in place, a right *not* to move. This proposal to an extent resounds in Lefebvre's calls for the right to centrality (Lefebvre, 2003 [1970]; Lefebvre, 1996 [1968]) and proximity (Jouffe, 2010).

Embracing the totality of urban issues interacting with transport policy further requires considering the latter in a holistic and multi-scalar manner, looking into the (in)capacity of transport to reach beyond administrative boundaries, parochial spaces and interests. This entails highlighting the political dimension of the relationship between transport and climate change, even though the centrality and urgency of the latter Lefebvre perhaps did not fully foresee. Critical transport studies thus openly admit the catastrophic consequences of the finite character of carbon-based energy resources combined with "an open-ended drive for 'growth' and 'development'" (Atkinson, 2008: 81) in late capitalism, thereby analysing and conceptualising transport practices as potential seeds for a fundamental change of spatial and socio-economic relations in the post-carbon city.

The Brussels example shows that a vision of "urban totality" in transport is not achieved easily. According to the then Brussels' mayor, *le pietonnier*

> "is not simply a plan for mobility or pedestrianisation of the city centre. It aims to give a new heart to the city, combining dimensions of quality of life, retail, economy, culture, jobs … […] So the mobility debate is essential, but it cannot hinder our ambitions for the renewal of Brussels' central boulevards" (*Le Soir*, February 5, 2014).

However, despite the allegedly multi-purpose rationale underpinning the pedestrianisation project, its public promoters have consistently sought to separate its many inter-connected social and spatial dimensions. For instance, different planning procedures have been used to give mobility and public space refurbishment their respective legal foundations, while systematically refusing to launch comprehensive impact studies concerning the multiple facets of the project. This lack of holistic vision has been shared by the citizen movement *Pic Nic the Streets*, whose civil disobedience interventions triggered the pedestrianisation project (Tessuto, 2016). While their critiques have consistently centred upon the detrimental impact of urban traffic on air quality and noise—and by extension on quality of urban life—they have not questioned how such a large-scale intervention may affect transport accessibility for the urban poor in Brussels, a large proportion of which inhabits the city's central neighbourhoods. Pedestrianisation has not only limited mobility options for residents: it has failed to question the systemically normative and uneven character of mobility in Brussels. A significant share of local households does not have a car or a bicycle (35,2% and 40,9% respectively), and many residents are highly dependent on public transport, which outside the metro corridors suffers from low commercial speeds due to car congestion, high travel times and irregularities (Lebrun et al., 2013). By delimiting an exceptional space that is "liberated" from cars yet remains highly accessible by private vehicles, *le pietonnier* fits—rather than questions—a long-standing policy of BCR authorities: to continue providing car infrastructure as a proxy of economic development, and to address its domination in urban space by developing underground rather than surface public transport. This strategy dates back to the 1960s, when an urban regime of "metro elites" assembling politicians, real estate developers and engineers began to draw up plans for Brussels' metro (Lannoy and Tellier, 2010; Zitouni and Tellier, 2013). Its narrative about the necessity of developing high-capacity underground modes of mobility obfuscates the role of transport development in sustaining and

urbanising capitalism, and continues to offer a hegemonic perspective on transport policy and practice in Brussels (Kębłowski and Bassens, 2018).

This hegemony appears in no way questioned by the technocratic and top-down manner in which the pedestrianisation project was designed and approved. Furthermore, although the zone covered by the pedestrianisation plan lies at the centre of an urban region exceeding by far the municipal limits, the governance of the project has been held firmly in the hands of the City's authorities. This lack of a multi-scalar perspective led to a conflict with the regional public transport operator, who were eventually forced to reduce the service coverage in the city centre, further exacerbating the already uneven accessibility to public transport across regional territory (Lebrun et al., 2013).

4.4. An "urgent utopia" on the horizon: reaching beyond existing socio-spatial configurations

This is why critical perspectives on urban transport are prompted to provide a continuous reflection on transport policy as contributor to a long-term and utopian strategy that reaches beyond existing socio-spatial configurations and institutional frameworks. The fourth and final element of the framework attempts to capture an essential element of Lefebvre's philosophy—the conviction that any revolutionary movement attempting to alter urban power relations cannot define an end goal, or an optimal configuration of power, society or space. In this way, the critical perspective examines how transport policies may act as harbingers of an "urgent utopia" (Purcell, 2013, 2014), directly building on Lefebvre's recognition of urban society as a "virtual object" (Lefebvre, 2003 [1970]: 18). This process employs Lefebvre's progressive strategy of "transduction, […] cut[ting] a path that leads beyond the actual world already realised and toward a possible world yet to come" (Purcell, 2013: 21). Seeking such a world encourages the RTTC-inspired analysis to observe the potential of transport policies and practices in terms of advancing towards the "horizon" in a continuous and self-reflective manner, rather than acting as off-the-shelf replicable models of "fast" policy-making (Marsden and Stead, 2011). As noted by Brenner (2009: 201), "critical theory is […] not intended to serve as a formula for any particular course of social change; it is not a strategic map for social change; and it is not a 'how to'-style guidebook for social movements". The framework proposed above is therefore as much about assessing tangible results, as it is about investigating and delineating a process towards achieving them. It is not to be read as a checklist of unambiguous or objective parameters, as none of the concepts offered by Lefebvre—including the RTTC and *autogestion*—are meant to function as ready-made models.

Arguably, Lefebvrian transduction does require materialisation in particular urban spaces. Transport projects are thereby considered as "urban projects" that embody a *particular* vision of urban society whilst subduing others. Looking at the visualisations of the future pedestrian zone displayed by the Brussels' municipal authorities (see Fig. 3), one could interpret the project as championing a vision of a gentrified, middle-class city offering "attractive" environment for 24/7 shopping and leisure embracing residents and visitors alike. Such visions are all but new in Brussels (Decroly and Van Criekingen, 2009) and other Belgian cities (Loopmans, 2008), as they resonate with metropolitan strategies developed in urban contexts elsewhere (Uitermark and Duyvendak, 2008; Ward, 2007). In this particular urban utopia the labels of "sustainability", "liveability" and "attractivity" obfuscate existing socio-spatial inequalities and struggles, reducing political participation to consumption. Yet, the ways in which the newly-expanded pedestrian area has thus far been practiced and appropriated are more complicated: among its users are not only middle-class visitors and tourists, but also residents of nearby inner-city working-class neighbourhoods and the homeless (Marchal, 2017). This contradiction indicates that the project might not necessarily realise the initial expectations of its municipal proponents, who had originally conceived as a singular "fix" and ready-made recipe taken from urban managerial cookbooks, referring to Copenhagen, New York, and Strasbourg as inspiring "best practices." Instead, the ongoing public debate and fierce contestation by various social groups has perhaps transformed *le pietonnier* into a more open-ended project, whose horizon is yet to be identified.

Fig. 3. The expansion of the pedestrian zone in Brussels' centre appears to champion a vision of a middle-class city ultimately liberated from any kind of divisions, inequalities, or power struggles, and turned into an attractive shopping and leisure environment for residents and visitors alike. Source: Ville de Bruxelles, "Ensemble faisons battre le cœur de Bruxelles" ("Make the heart of Brussels beat, together"), press kit, March 2016.

5. Conclusion: the necessity of moving past the "sustainable" perspectives on transport

The main purpose of this paper was to provide a response to the limitations of the sustainable transport approaches in terms of addressing the fundamental political economic underpinnings of transport in urban contexts. In our attempt to re-politicise urban transport theory and practice, and hence to mobilise and strengthen critical urban transport studies, we have found a useful theoretical reference in Henri Lefebvre's conceptualisation of the "right to the city" (RTTC), a concept originally conceived to provide a tool for critically analysing urban practices. We have thus constructed an analytical and explicitly normative framework that by building on the RTTC helps to seek and reveal political-economic contradictions that shape transport policies and practices, showing how transport policies form part of urban political economy. However, rather than allowing to distinguish a pure, global and cross-contextual blueprint of critical transport, the framework highlights a multi-faceted and complex evolution that is locally situated. Instead of seeking de-politicised "fixes" and "recipes" from elsewhere, it is built around an analysis of how different positions and stakes *in situ* condition transport policies and practices. This approach may encourage researchers, activists and policy-makers to pose a variety of questions that are seldom on the transport agenda—about the modalities of citizen *participation* around transport policies and practices; about the *power* dynamics underpinning and affected by them; about their relation to the *totality* of aspects of urban society and space, and their capacity to contribute to an urban *utopia*.

To illustrate how the analytical framework works in practice, we have referred to a situated urban and transport planning intervention, namely the recent and still ongoing extension of Brussels' inner-city pedestrian zone. This intervention appears a salient case of an allegedly "sustainable" urban strategy underpinned by a series of political-economic contradictions consistently overlooked in most debates. Following the four elements of the framework, we have underlined how ostensibly progressive intentions in terms of challenging local mobility

and urban planning paradigms do not necessarily translate into participative and transformative practices. Instead, they often embrace the established policy-makers, and leave local power relations largely unaltered. Beyond mobility, this allows the allegedly "ambitious" and "innovative" transport policies such as pedestrianisation to increase the pressure on inner-city working-class neighbourhoods, and to turn a blind eye to the socio-spatially uneven landscapes of contemporary cities. The "sustainable" utopia thus brackets key social, economic and political questions from the debate about urban development agendas writ large. Turning to transport policy and practice, we make a plea for a critical urban reflection when programming, designing, and implementing transport policies. In our view, the fundamental entanglements between transport and key contemporary urban issues warrant two strategies. First, a move towards a much more holistic "expert" view supported by circuits of knowledge (Featherstone and Venn, 2006; Healey, 2013) that transgress policy silos and incorporate different types of knowledge relevant to urban transport policies, for instance related to geographies of retail housing and leisure. Second, we deem it crucial that such circuits of knowledge radically embrace citizen interests, often bypassed by existing policies, which in turn necessitates the institutionalisation of civic-public co-operation on equal terms, and the recognition of political-economic choices and conflicts that "sustainable" transport policies entail (Legacy, 2015; Sosa López and Montero, 2018).

Rejoining the academic debate proper, our analysis raises the necessity of moving past the limitations of the "sustainable" perspectives on mobility, developing a critical analysis of transport policies and thus re-embedding transport more firmly within urban studies. This exercise is far from complete, as a variety of transport policies promoted under the banners of "sustainability"—not least those proposing an "alternative" to car-based mobility as a "mainstream" mode of transport that is particularly harmful to urban society, space and environment—claim to make cities less socio-spatially uneven, and to open up transport policy-making to urban inhabitants. Allegedly "radical" programmes of reducing the capacity of arterial roads, implementing restrictive parking and congestion charging schemes, offering vehicle sharing platforms, promoting multimodality, and fostering a more transport-oriented urban development—these are just some of the many instances of "sustainable" transport practices and concepts that await critical scrutiny. Henri Lefebvre may well be an inspiring companion in this journey.

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