ACTIVE TRAVEL STUDIES

Macmillan, A, Cresswell Riol, K and Wild, K. 2021. Stuck with the Car and All its Harms? A Public Health Approach to the Political Economy of the *Status Quo*. *Active Travel Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 1(1): 5,1–8. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16997/ats.1084

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Stuck with the Car and All its Harms? A Public Health Approach to the Political Economy of the *Status Quo*

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Despite the importance of a transition from car use to more active and public transport and an adequate knowledge base for taking action, the pace and scale of change globally has been inadequate to protect health, particularly from the effects of climate change. While the active transport research agenda has rightly broadened beyond behaviour change to include wider physical environments (infrastructure), in most jurisdictions this has not translated into major shifts in investment. We argue that the politics and macroeconomics of the *status quo* of automobility act as major barriers to mode shift and remain under-researched. Building on previous political economy and public health research and using Aotearoa New Zealand as a case study we tease out the mechanisms by which the politics and economics of the status quo affect what is experienced on the ground. From there, we suggest a research agenda that could be used to increase our understanding globally of the barriers to active travel transitions. We propose that the time is ripe for this action-focused research, but also for immediate action building on lessons learnt from public health's history with addressing barriers to healthy public policy, such as reducing tobacco harm.

Keywords: active travel; political economy; automobility; commercial interests; transport policy; public health

Introduction

The transport system is an important determinant of population health (Mindell, Rutter and Watkins 2011), and is a strong influence on health inequalities by income and ethnicity (Hosking, Ameratunga, Exeter et al. 2013; Randal, et al. 2020). It influences whether people can access health-promoting essentials, like employment, education, friends, family, healthy food and places of cultural and spiritual significance. The design of the system determines whether this access is just, affordable, timely, and safe from health harms to individuals and communities, such as air and climate pollution, lack of exercise, road traffic injury and social severance. The global contribution of private cars to the climate crisis makes it urgent that we now transition away, where possible, from their use for everyday travel, even accounting for gradual electrification (IPCC 2014). A major element in achieving such a transition is the strategic reallocation of existing transport resources towards public and active travel modes. However, we are witnessing an intractable failure to act with the urgency and scale of change required.

This concerted failure to act on ample evidence and urgent need is not unique to active travel. There are similar notable failures across our other most important public health issues, such as addressing unhealthy food and alcohol consumption. At the same time, however, the singular success of many countries in reducing tobacco harm has deepened public health knowledge about the root causes of inaction, as well as the ingredients that might be needed to overcome them. Increasingly, these barriers are understood to be a function of *political economy*, the political and macroeconomic ideologies which shape policy itself and the power of various actors in the policy process (Reich 2019).

Despite being a contested concept (see, for example, Dunn 2016; Chait 2017), *neoliberalism* remains the best available description for the political economic practices that are currently globally dominant. The most important philosophical tenets of neoliberalism include individualism, private property rights, privatisation of public goods (including health and transport), market-based competition and private wealth generation (Drolet, 2011, p2; Harvey 2005; Jones, Parker and ten Bos 2005). The successful uptake of neoliberalism has laid the foundations for an expansion of corporate power and influence over governance at all scales (Hathaway 2020; Perkins 2016). Because of its importance in shaping health outcomes, in public health this power shift has been articulated as the *commercial determinants of health*, the power and strategies of major corporate actors to undermine and block evidence-based public health policy (Kickbusch, Allen and France 2016).

These three concepts are highly relevant to active travel studies. They provoke us to shift our research gaze from the physical and social enablers of active travel to the hidden architectures behind the status quo. We therefore offer here a brief overview of transport political economy through a public health lens. We do so by drawing on both public health and transport political economy literatures and on our own knowledges of the transport system in Aotearoa New Zealand as an illuminating case study. Further, we propose an agenda for action research to improve the effectiveness evidence-based transport system change. In doing so, we position ourselves as critical feminists (AM, KW, KCR), sociological (KW and KCR) and public health (AM and KW) researchers with extensive experience in active travel studies (AM and KW), discourse analysis (KW, AM, KCR) and active travel advocacy (AM, KCR, KW).

A political economy of the *status quo*

Transport planning, like other public policy areas, is the site of struggles over power, values and resources. Mobilities researchers in particular have highlighted the ways that auto-centred transport planning is a self-perpetuating system of "automobility" that "locks-in" the social and economic systems of car use (Mattioli et al. 2020; Sheller and Urry 2006; Urry 2004). Those financially invested in automobility have ensured its continued societal dominance by shoring up political backing, maintaining a public narrative of automobile dependency, and discrediting and blocking alternatives (Walks 2014).

The paradigm of automobility has been aided and safeguarded by neoliberalism (Norcliffe, 2011; Walks, 2014), forming a "tight ideological symbiosis" between the values of both regimes (Walks 2014, p11). Automobility, with its emphasis on individualised mobility, speed and "efficiency", fits closely with neoliberal ideals of individualism, consumerism, personal choice, and economic growth (Low and O'Connor, 2013).

In the public health literature, the power of automobile-associated industries have been compared with that of the tobacco industry as commercial determinants of health (Douglas et al., 2011; Freudenberg, 2014; Mindell, 2001; Woodcock and Aldred, 2008). Both are argued to be harmful commodities, with parallels drawn in the way these industries undermine healthy public policy. As with smoking, the automobile industry markets the car as an aspirational product, positioning driving as a right that should be free from state interference (Paterson, 2007). This acts as a smokescreen for the structural pressures behind car dependence. Both industries share lobbying tactics, including discrediting evidence regarding the harms their products cause. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has been used by both industries to lobby for a weakening of regulations surrounding their activities (Collin et al., 2020). Douglas et al. (2011) argue that private automobiles are responsible for more harmful effects even than tobacco (especially through climate change). Therefore, despite there being some need for private motor vehicle use for equity outcomes within the current system, societal and political actions that learn from the experience of tobacco control are justified.

Curtis and Low (2012) in their analysis of the Australian transport policy context, suggest that the neoliberal-automobility symbiosis makes change difficult through two sets of effects: organisational effects (on institutions, processes and power) and discursive effects (narratives used by public actors to shape people's understanding of transport and justify decisions). It is these, they argue, that shape the lived experience of transport (e.g. rules, long lasting infrastructure and urban form) and build in inertia. In the next section we bring these ideas together to show how the political economy of neoliberalism and the attendant commercial influences affect discourses, institutions and decision-making in the transport system in Aotearoa New Zealand. We provide illustrative examples gleaned from our research, advocacy, and expert advisory roles.

The "invisible hand of the market" in New Zealand's transport system

Since the 1950s, land transport investment in Aotearoa New Zealand has been dominated by building new motorways and divestment from public transport infrastructure and services (Mees and Dodson, 2006). This has led to a cycle of urban sprawl, stimulating further motorway developments. As a result, Aotearoa New Zealand has one of the highest per capita car ownership rates in the world (820 cars per 1000 people in 2019; Ministry of Transport, 2019), and very low public transport patronage (2.5% trip legs in 2018), walking (12%) and cycling (1%; Ministry of Transport, 2020). Public transport was privatised in 1989, as part of Aotearoa's neoliberal reforms. This resulted in reductions in many less profitable services, poor coordination and regulation and a further rapid decline in patronage (Humphris, 2016; Ministry of Transport, 2011).

Simultaneously, the funding model for transport infrastructure was structured in accordance with tax edicts of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (Ministry of Transport, 2014). Since the 1950s, revenue from road user charges, fuel taxes and motor vehicle registration have been directly recycled (hypothecated) back into road-building. This funding model, re-enshrined in law in 1989, explicitly sets up a social contract between transport governance and its two largest sources of revenue (private motor vehicle owners and road freight companies), requiring that the money be spent "mainly" on roads, road-related services, and reducing traffic congestion (Ministry of Transport, 2016). However, rather than creating a free market as the "invisible hand" shaping the transport system as argued by Adam Smith, the fund sets up a system of public subsidies, strongly influenced by a small number of powerful commercial interests, as described later.

Active transport, on the other hand is funded through one-off investments directly from Treasury (such as the Urban Cycleways fund (Waka Kotahi NZ Transport Agency, 2014)) rather than by reallocating the transport fund. Funding in the combined activity class for walking and cycling within the National Land Transport Programme (NLTP; Waka Kotahi 2018) currently sits at 2% of the total (**Figure 1**) with an additional small amount of funding "hidden" within the road maintenance budget.

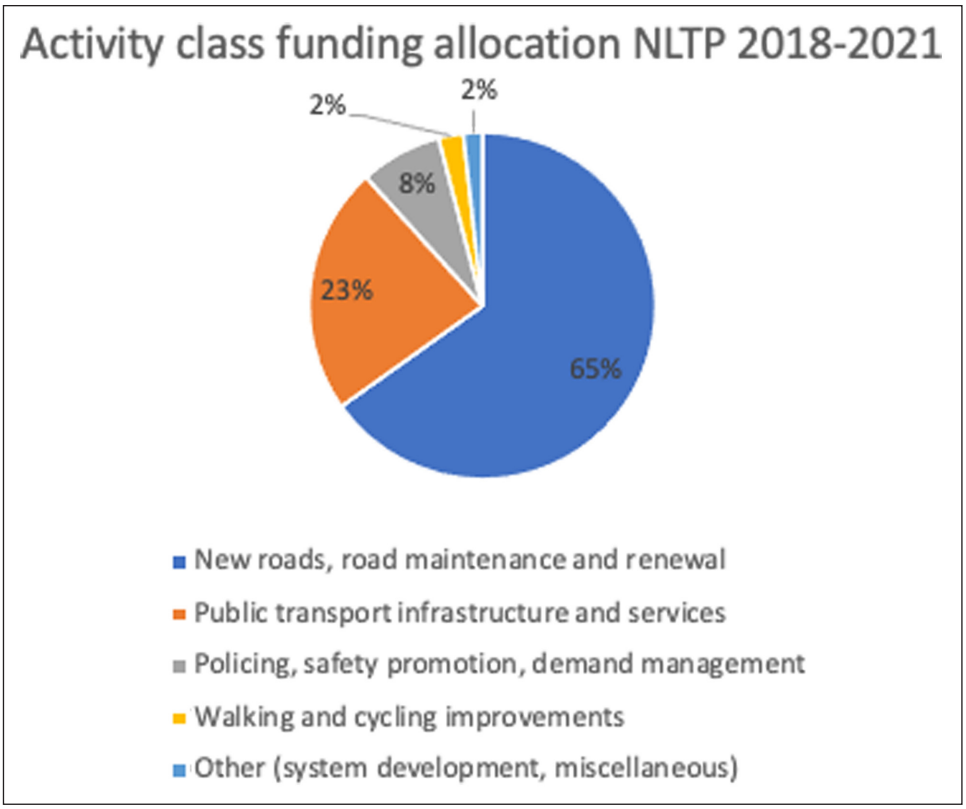

Figure 1 National Land Transport Programme (NLTP) 2018–2021 Activity Class Allocation (Waka Kotahi, 2018).

This overall pattern of allocation has been remarkably resilient to political shifts in the strategic goals and objectives for the transport system over the past two decades. Investment in new roads and road maintenance has stayed stable at between two thirds and four fifths of the total fund and walking and cycling investment at between 1 and 2%.

The yawning gulf between policy and delivery: organisational effects

The failure to implement even the meagre active travel commitments outlined in the NLTP is an important example of the organisational effects of the neoliberal funding system. Inertia within institutions set up for decades to deliver roads makes them unresponsive to changes in policy direction, leading to non-delivery and under-delivery of active transport projects. In its latest direction (for 2019–2021), the government directed $1.15b should be spent on state highway improvements and a minimum of $80m and $95m on walking and cycling. However, it has revealed it will overspend its highway budget by $479 million and spend only half its walking and cycling budget (Coughlan, 2020).

Much of this inertia can be explained by the skills and capacity of staff. Transport engineering, economic analysis, marketing, and "behaviour change" remain the key skills sought by local and national transport agencies. Transport engineering education remains dominated by technical aspects of road design and economic analysis, with active transport still a minor part of the curriculum. Even less expertise is available for the narrative building, innovation, and participatory planning that could grow public understanding and support for active travel investments.

Until very recently, transport funding decisions have relied on the monetary value of outcomes, particularly reducing motor vehicle journey times, supported in turn by forecast modelling of vehicle numbers, movements and journey times. While limited health benefits of active travel are now able to be considered in economic evaluations at the project level, reciprocal evaluation of health harms of new roads remain unaccounted (Waka Kotahi, 2020). Active travel infrastructure is considered on a local project basis, rather than at a network level, making it difficult to make a case for cumulative system benefits, and ensuring that each project is contested as a local "fight".

The role of commercial interests in transport policy: neoliberal decision-making

The nature of the hypothecated transport fund sets up a tight relationship between the motor vehicle and freight lobbies and transport policymakers. Consequently, organisations such as the Automobile Association and the Road Transport Forum NZ (the national united trucking lobby) have been effective at undermining evidence-informed public policy to improve active travel, including by directly blocking action on recommendations for safer cycling (Road Transport Forum NZ, 2014).

The Automobile Association, while on the surface a membership-based organisation, receives major funding from automobile insurance sales and a commercial relationship with British Petroleum (NZ Automobile Association Inc,

2019). It has been successful in gaining representation in the policy sphere as an "expert" on cycling, including on the National Cycling Safety Panel and the upcoming review of Auckland's Cycling Programme, despite a track record of using its corporate power to lobby against evidence-based road safety initiatives including lower speed limits and safe cycling facilities (e.g. via media statements, including in Niall, 2019a, 2019b; Truebridge, 2019). Commercial conflicts of interest in transport policymaking are dealt with poorly, with weak governmental guidance (Controller and Auditor-General, 2020; Duncan and Chapple 2021). This has allowed for examples such as a regional transport investment committee being chaired by the CEO of one of the country's largest freight and road construction conglomerates, without concerns being raised by the government, the media or the public.

"Economic" primacy, individual choice and "private goods": neoliberal transport discourse

The neoliberal basis for transport funding and policy in Aotearoa New Zealand, and resulting investment and infrastructure allocations, are reflected in and reinforced by the way transport, automobility, and active travel are talked about by policymakers, the media and citizens. Dominant themes include the primacy of limited forms of economic outcome (principally shorter freight journeys), individual freedoms and responsibilities, individual behaviour change and notions of user-pays.

While the current stated purposes of the national transport investment are safety and access (Ministry of Transport, 2018) this is not consistently reflected in regional transport plans. For example, the Otago Southland Regional Transport Plan (Otago Regional Council and Environment Southland Regional Council, 2018) remains staunchly focused on a "transport system that provides adequately for mobility, economic activity and productivity" (p57) and assumes that private cars and trucks will "continue to be the primary mode of transport in years to come" (p24). Improving road access for primary industry and tourism remain the stated regional priorities.

The discourse around our high and increasing road traffic fatalities is also illustrative. While the government recently adopted a "Vision Zero" for road traffic deaths (New Zealand Government, 2019), the resulting policies perpetuate a dominant discourse of traffic crashes as caused by the poor behaviour of a few individuals while the role of systemic change, especially in the form of mode shift, is downplayed. This discourse is reflected most starkly in the framing of cycling deaths by the media, coroners and in public commentary as being largely a result of the victim's own behaviour with a silence around local and national government accountability.

The role of motor vehicles and particularly large utility vehicles is entrenched through advertising and public discourse into the fabric of New Zealand culture, and through these means, embeds widely accepted mythologies which in turn become incorporated into policy. In a startling example, the independent Climate Change Commission's 2021 first draft advice on pathways to meet our climate change obligations justifies the continued support for large utility vehicles by conflating them with the natural environment: "Single- or double-cab utes … are an essential part of farming and rural landscapes" (He Pou a Rangi Climate Change Commission, 2021), a conclusion that could have been drawn directly from advertisements such as those for the Toyota Hilux (Toyota New Zealand, 2020). While such vehicles may be essential to current farming practice, they are aggressively advertised to urban dwellers. Eight of the top 10 new passenger vehicles sold in Aotearoa are either double-cab utes or Sports Utility Vehicles (SUVs), despite this market shift being the second largest contributor to increases in global climate pollution (International Energy Agency, 2019), and their role in rising pedestrian road deaths (Hu and Cicchino, 2018).

Political economy of transport and health: a research agenda

The above case study suggests some fruitful paths for active travel research. We propose four useful lines of enquiry based on insights from both public health (the commercial determinants of health) and research on the political economy of transport.

Comparative histories of national transport systems including their funding models, institutional structures and the types of expertise valued within transport agencies would improve our understanding of how these factors affect the potential for change (e.g. De Jong, 2008; Kenworthy, Laube and Newman, 2009; Dodson et al., 2011; Beria, Giove and Miele, 2012). This would provide the context for closer comparative analysis of contemporary transportation policies, for example assessing them against established sustainable transport policy criteria.

Deeper critical discourse analyses, using methods such as Bacchi's "What is the problem represented to be?" (Bacchi, 2009), should examine how transport investment is represented in public discourse, and the effects this has on policies, mode legitimacy and on people (e.g., Bond, Scheffels and Monteagut, 2018; Jensen, Hazelton and Wellman, 2020). More specific discourse analysis could be used to examine media representations of transport issues and groups (e.g. Zheltukhina, 2020) and to understand the implicit assumptions about the status quo being made during processes of change.

Detailed examinations of the effect of commercial interests on transport decision-making at national and local levels are needed (e.g. Padam, 1998; Ward, 2001; Imran and Pearce, 2015). Documentary analysis and interviews have been useful previously to expose these tactics publicly for tobacco, alcohol and climate change (e.g. Oreskes and Conway, 2011; Barry and King-Jones, 2014; McCambridge, Mialon and Hawkings, 2018). Such studies can be effective at reducing the social license of harmful industries to be seen as legitimate stakeholders in the public policy process. Reporting on case studies of successful resistance would be equally useful.

Quantitative analyses could elucidate hidden subsidies, such as Ministerial meeting apportionment to different interest groups; relative real investments at national and local scales and advertising expenditures and exposures to advertising. While much quantitative attention has been given to modelling population health co-benefits of increases in active travel (e.g. Mizdrak et al., 2019), further quantitative modelling of the negative effects of ongoing investment in new roads could help to account for these harms in comparative cost benefit analyses (e.g. Wang et al., 2018; Polak et al., 2019; Gössling, Nicolosi and Litman, 2021).

Conclusions

We have employed a public health lens and drawn on existing political economy literatures to tell an expert story of how country level neoliberal transport policy and funding shapes organisational structures and public discourse about transport and the role of harmful commercial interests in blocking the urgent transport transition towards active travel needed for climate, health and social equity. In exposing these processes, we hope to provoke a shift in our collective research gaze from what might encourage active travel to what sustains the status quo.

In addition to timely, well-designed research on this topic, some actions can be taken immediately based on what we already know from public health experience with tobacco. In particular, active travel advocates should press for the exclusion of harmful commercial interests from the policy table and take up recent suggestions urging the regulation of advertising for highly polluting vehicles (Timperley, 2021).

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: Macmillan, A, Cresswell Riol, K and Wild, K. 2021. Stuck with the Car and All its Harms? A Public Health Approach to the Political Economy of the *Status Quo*. *Active Travel Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 1(5): 1–8. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16997/ats.1084

Submitted: 21 May 2021 **Accepted:** 24 May 2021 **Published:** 15 August 2021

Active Travel Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by University of Westminster Press.

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