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#6 Why and how we should mainstream social justice in the car-restrictive policy agenda

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The authors of this BSI Position Paper argue that social justice should be an integral part of the car-restrictive policy agenda through specific and explicit claims. In this context, they propose that the distribution of the benefits and burdens related to car-restrictive policies should not reproduce – let alone exacerbate – socio-economic inequalities. First, these policies should not simply make driving or parking a car more expensive without being adapted to the financial capacities of those who pay. Second, there should be measures to ensure a fairer distribution of the spatial benefits of car-restrictive policies. Third, the capacity to shape the car-restrictive agenda should not be dependent on socio-economic status. And finally, an efficient public transport network that is accessible and affordable should be the centrepiece to provide mobility for all.

Car-restrictive policies and social justice: a troubled blend?

In Brussels, as in many other cities, the role and space that is assigned to car-based mobility is the subject of heated contention.¹ The conflicts surrounding the pedestrianisation of the central boulevards or the implementation of Good Move low-traffic neighbourhoods are just the most recent examples in a longer history of political controversy and citizen mobilisation to either ensure or curtail car-based mobility.

It is remarkable that, in these debates, both advocates and opponents of car-restrictive measures often put forward arguments regarding social justice, which we could broadly define as a fair distribution of burdens and opportunities within society. Advocates typically emphasise that low-income households benefit the most from the public health impact of car-restrictive policies since they usually live in the more polluted parts of cities. In addition, poorer segments of the population are less likely to own a car and are therefore probably less affected by the restrictions. Opponents, on the other hand, claim that these social groups struggle the most to adopt alternative mobility solutions. At the root of these arguments lie conflicting views on the purposes of car travel, which purposes deserve priority and who is entitled to car access and to what degree. More generally, there seems to be no academic or societal agreement on the types of car dependency, which ones should be dealt with first, and how the (dis)advantages of a car-dominated mobility system should be distributed.

In an effort to bring together a wide variety of viewpoints in this contested debate, we organised a round table with academics, civil servants and civil society representatives in June 2023. The objective was to collect empirical evidence, identify gaps in academic knowledge and discuss the political tensions with respect to a mobility agenda that is both car-restrictive *and* socially just. Some of us also took part in a seminar on the question of how to reconcile mobility, ecological

transition and social equity (organised by Bruxelles Environnement and Bruxelles Mobilité)². This position paper builds on these discussions and aims to initiate a wider academic *and* political dialogue.

We focus on the wide range of policies at local or regional level that aim to discourage the purchase, ownership and use of cars, as well as limit their ubiquitous presence in the public space, which we refer to as the ‘car-restrictive’ policy agenda. The objective of this paper is not to evaluate car-restrictive policies individually or as a whole. Instead, we wish to further the debate by proposing a framework illustrating what a ‘just’ car-restrictive agenda should look like.

Mainstreaming social justice in a car-restrictive policy agenda

Our main argument is that social justice should be an integral part of the car-restrictive policy agenda, and that social justice claims must be made specific and explicit.

Our choice of the term ‘justice’, rather than ‘inclusion’ or ‘solidarity’, is a deliberate one. Justice implies moving beyond simply ‘being kind’ to people in precarious positions or striving for inclusiveness. Instead, it entails a full recognition of everybody’s right to the city. In addition, it is useful to distinguish between two concepts that are often used interchangeably: ‘inequality’ and ‘injustice’. If inequality is a *descriptive* term referring to a difference between individuals or groups, it is not inherently undesirable or unjust. The concept of justice, however, implies a *normative* claim about how reality should be: one could *justify* (quite literally) a condition of inequality or make a claim for injustice.³ As a corollary, in using the term ‘mainstreaming’ social justice, we refer to the integration of a justice perspective in all procedural stages and at all institutional levels of policy preparation and implementation. As an example, this means avoiding a scenario in which *post hoc* adverse social impacts of car-restrictive policy interventions are mitigated through compensation schemes. Instead, it requires putting social justice at the core of the car-restrictive policy agenda.

There are at least two reasons why mainstreaming social justice in the urban mobility agenda is necessary and urgent. The first reason is a pragmatic one: mainstreaming justice is critical in order to mobilise widespread support for the transition. If the urban mobility agenda neglects the basic principles of justice, a car-restrictive policy agenda would jeopardise our collective capacity to engage with the transition and could become the subject of heated social conflict and resistance. The second reason is political: we endorse the right to live in a just society and consider it as an unconditional political right rather than as something ‘nice to have’. And if we aim to pursue justice in our democratic societies, then we need to ensure an equitable distribution of benefits and burdens across social groups and public space. This is a precondition and a means to move towards truly just *and* sustainable societies.⁴

From the observation of inequality to a proposal for a ‘just’ car-restrictive agenda for Brussels

We shall not elaborate on the uneven accessibility and mobility landscapes in Brussels in this position paper. Several studies have examined these topics in the case of Brussels and include, for example, works on the unequal socio-spatial distribution of car ownership,⁵ ownership and use of company cars,⁶ forced car ownership and access to alternative solutions,⁷ and

environmental effects of car-based mobility.⁸ The first crucial step in going beyond the post-political idea that we are ‘all in the same boat’ is to make these inequalities clear. A thorough understanding of these inequalities is critical in order to have a complete picture of the urban mobility system and the academic backing to bring about citizen action. A failure to recognise these inequalities in turn leads to an incomplete or distorted picture of reality, a loss of the sense of urgency and a misspecification of the priorities.

However, it is not enough to foreground the inequalities that characterise our urban mobility landscapes. We need to make sense of these inequalities and evaluate them continuously within a framework of justice. Crucially, what could (and should) a ‘just’ car-restrictive agenda look like? It is obviously a formidable task to try to answer this question due to the sheer complexity of the socio-technical system that urban mobility is part of, and also due to the fact that it is a political endeavour rooted in a specific context and the democratic processes of dialogue, conflict and deliberation.

At the same time, we cannot simply refrain from making a number of proposals for what a ‘just’ car-restrictive agenda might look like. We hope that these proposals inspire a collective reflection on how to mainstream justice in the transition towards a less car-oriented society.

Our main proposal is that the distribution of the benefits and burdens related to car-restrictive policies should not reproduce – let alone exacerbate – socio-economic inequalities.

This statement is materialised in at least four ways.

First, car-restrictive policies should not simply make driving or parking a car more expensive without being adapted to the financial capacities of those who pay. Since car use and car ownership are closely correlated with income, increasing their cost will only accentuate this relationship. For those who benefit from company cars, it is also conceivable that employers would cover (part of) the financial burden, which also adds to the differentiated social impact of these market-based measures. Pay-per-drive policies (e.g. congestion charges, street parking fees, etc.) should not necessarily be excluded. In fact, by making the price tag explicit, these policies allow income adaptations to be made. For instance, the principle of social pricing in public transport could be applied to car travel. In addition to financial interventions, the social acceptability standards of car use are inherent in the notion of justice. This pertains to considerations about which individuals (and related purposes of car travel) are most entitled to use cars. These standards must be negotiated explicitly, both in terms of individual criteria (as in the case of persons in conditions of disability or work-related situations of car dependency) and collective benefit (for example, for medical, logistical or renovation functions that are, to a large extent, car dependent but are necessary activities).

Second, there should be measures to ensure a fairer distribution of the spatial benefits of car-restrictive policies, such as reduced pollution levels and more qualitative public space. After all, there is no justice when the upgrading of a neighbourhood results in increased property values, thereby displacing those households which cannot afford higher living costs. Obviously, the answer is not to refrain from improving public space and infrastructure in poorer neighbourhoods. Rather, car-restrictive policies and other sustainable mobility interventions

should go hand in hand with ambitious social and affordable housing policies. We also need to be more aware of the symbolic value conveyed by mobility policies and how it is perceived; interventions in public space should go beyond middle- and upper-class ‘imaginaries’ of what public space should look like, and they should not always benefit dominant consumerist or tourist uses of public space instead of productive, cultural or social functions.

Third, the capacity to shape the car-restrictive agenda should not be dependent on socio-economic status. The possibilities for the public to participate in policy making have increased over time, and for that matter, the Brussels Regional Mobility Plan has been an example of a relatively thorough participatory process within the Brussels context (though with margins for improvements). But this is visibly insufficient and the voice of many segments of the population too often remains unheard. More needs to be done to ensure more inclusive participation, for example by building stronger coalitions of social stakeholders to reach out to vulnerable populations, or by further diversifying representation within elected bodies.

Fourth, many European cities have observed that car-restrictive policies should be accompanied by measures to increase walking and cycling. Here we also see a drawback: by tilting the balance mainly towards individual alternatives to cars, we are once again placing the burden mainly on the shoulders of individuals and their resources. Using an electric cargo bicycle is easier for someone who lives in the outskirts with a garage and solar panels than for someone who rents a flat on the third floor in an old building in the city centre. As a corollary, the importance of a highly efficient public transport network that is easily accessible and affordable cannot be overemphasised, since this mobility system arguably has the greatest potential to provide mobility for all.

These recommendations should be considered with respect to a specific spatial and policy context. This requires zooming in, unravelling mechanisms, identifying triggers, and identifying the potential impacts on various groups. And moreover, what if we also zoomed out and looked not only at how to mainstream social justice in the sustainable mobility policy agenda, but also at how the sustainable mobility agenda could help achieve a more just society?

This position paper represents the personal views of the authors and signatories and not those of their institutions.

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