

REVIEW: TRANSPORT AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN SCOTLAND

Christopher Harvie

Julian Hine and Fiona Mitchell, **Transport Disadvantage and Social Exclusion: Exclusionary Mechanisms in Transport in Urban Scotland**, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003, 162pp. hardback, £42.50, ISBN: 0754618471

In 1999, Paddy Bort and I invited Scotland's first transport minister, Sarah Boyack, to the annual Freudenstadt Colloquium on regionalism convened by Tübingen Landeskunde and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. It was the first time a Scottish minister had ever travelled to Europe, and the appointment of a young woman and committed environmentalist seemed a good augury that the new Scottish Executive took seriously the need for a significant switch of resources to public transport, and projects like the Waverley line and the return of trams to the cities.

In December 2003, the first tram reached Freudenstadt, and I was on it, along with Dieter Ludwig, the Brunel of European urban transport. The line runs from Karlsruhe, forty-five miles away and over 2000 feet below the 'capital' of the Black Forest, which has roughly the same population as the central Borders towns. In June 1999, the electrification of the Karlsruhe-Freudenstadt line had not even been raised, let alone discussed. By mid-2004 express trams will cover the distance in a single hour, making ten intermediate stops. This compares with the same time to cover Tweedbank to Edinburgh (35 miles, all of it on a former main line) in the case of the rebuilt Waverley route. Sadly this emphasises the fact that we are no longer the workshop of the world, and cannot do a Karlsruhe-style makeover on our own.

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We are good, however, at multiplying transport ministers. Sarah Boyack lasted until November 2001, when she was purged by Jack McConnell. There have since been three further Scottish transport ministers – Wendy Alexander, Iain Gray and Nicol Stephen. And, since 1997, there have been seven *British* ministers of transport, all but one of them Scots. At the end of this, not one metre of new Scottish rail track has been built, not a mile of track has been electrified. The main efforts of the Executive are currently devoted to spending half-a-billion *at least* on building four miles of urban motorway in Glasgow.

Hine and Mitchell's book was the result of one of the initiatives of the Boyack years. It studies the transportation situation in three Scottish urban communities – Leith, Coatbridge and Castlemilk – using data from the transport census of 1991 supplemented by questionnaires. Leith does not seem the most obvious of choices, as it is now coming up in the world, what with yuppy flats, the Scottish Executive and Ocean Terminal; Coatbridge is an Old Labour Jurassic Park; and Castlemilk is Billy Connolly's 'desert wi' windaes'. The book is of most use in the data it provides on life on the Scottish margin, the extent to which the car has come to be an effective qualification for citizenship because, with the exception of the old with their free travel, non-motoring families are faced with high fares and higher shopping bills. Car ownership in the lowest social quartile has scarcely changed over the last twenty years. The other aggravating factor is the post-1985 privatisation and deregulation of bus services, which has created a couple of world-wide Scottish enterprises in First Group and Stagecoach, while accelerating a 25% fall in bus use and – through the abolition of cross-subsidy – the deterioration of local transport networks.

This decline is not Europe-wide: a combination of co-ordination and concessionary fares for key groups has led to considerable increases in bus travel in France, Germany and Switzerland, but the remit of Hine and Mitchell to work within the restrictions of the 1985 Transport Act means they pay little attention to this, and many will dismiss their prop/sals for more sophisticated 'quality partnerships' and experiments with interchangeable tickets as simply tinkering with the problem. Or even oversimplifying it, as many problems in the minicab and minibus 'cowboy country' of the schemes have to do with pedestrian/passenger insecurity and recycled drugs cash, an issue that they do not touch at all.

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This is a depressing book – not just because you could probably fly Ryanair to Baden-Baden and ride the Karlsruhe trams for less than the nigh-fifty quid it costs. Hine and Mitchell trudge wearily round the central belt, adding to the tortuous prose of councillors and bus operators their own ineffable sociologese, and a flamboyant use of punctuation which would have Lynne Truss reaching for her shotgun. It was one of New Labour's fateful discoveries that inquiries and 'in depth analyses' were not a prelude to action but a means of postponing it while keeping a possible awkward squad harmlessly occupied. The authors make no mention of my own comparisons of Scots and European urban transport policy in **Deep-Fried Hillman Imp: Scotland's Transport** (Argyll, 2001) – well-received by the Greens and the SSP who made good gains in the last election. But then they do not mention spirited writing about marginal Scotland like Tommy Sheridan's **Imagine** (Rebel Inc, 1999) or Bob Holman's **Faith in the Poor** (Lion, 1999) either. But there *is* good material here which transcends its timid conclusions. If Hine and Mitchell translate it into English, we will be in their debt.

March 2004