THE POLITICS OF MOBILITY AND BUSINESS ELITES IN ATLANTA, GEORGIA

Jason Henderson
Department of Geography and Human Environmental Studies
San Francisco State University

Abstract: In this paper I examine how the politics of mobility is an important factor when considering the contentious nature of urban growth debates. By a politics of mobility I mean the political struggle over what type of transportation mode—be it automobile, transit, or walking—is developed in a city, and how urban space is configured to make various modes functional. More importantly, the politics of mobility is an extension of competing and contested ideologies and normative values about how the city should be configured and for whom. I provide a case study of Atlanta, Georgia’s business elites and their negotiation of the politics of mobility as they confronted a mobility crisis of congestion and air pollution. This paper provides a platform for further comparative research on urban growth debates in an era of increasing environmental and social problems stemming from transportation policy.

INTRODUCTION

Purpose

In this paper I examine how the politics of mobility is an important factor to consider when analyzing urban growth debates. By a politics of mobility I mean the political struggle over what type of transportation mode—be it automobile, transit, or walking—is developed in a city, and how urban space is configured to make various modes functional. The politics of mobility is more than simply a debate over how people and goods are moved around the city and how space is organized for that movement. It is an extension of ideologies and normative values about how the city should be configured and by whom. I use a case study of business elites in Atlanta, Georgia, who negotiated the politics of mobility and sought to insert a set of normative visions informed by emerging reconceptualizations of the relationship between mobility and capitalism.

Facing threats of worsening smog (caused mostly by automobiles and trucks) and rising congestion on roads, a coalition of Atlanta-based corporate, utility, and real estate interests sought to reshape transportation policy in Atlanta in a way that ensured Atlanta’s economic dominance in the Southeast. Yet by the time the coalition began to actively shape Atlanta’s transportation policy in a way that was meant to discourage excessive automobile dependency, the opposition of other competing factions of capitalists with different visions of mobility were apparent. The powerful coalition of business interests

1 Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jason Henderson, Department of Geography and Human Environmental Studies, HSS 279, San Francisco State University, 1600 Holloway Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94132; telephone: 415-405-2483; e-mail: jhenders@sfsu.edu
was unable to exert hegemonic control over Atlanta’s future mobility, and this case study reveals the complications and challenges of the politics of mobility.

This essay begins with a discussion of the reasons mobility matters when thinking about urban growth debates. I follow with a summary of the mobility crisis that emerged in Atlanta during the 1990s and outline the response of the business elite. Using the context of Atlanta’s business elites as an example, the third part of the paper discusses the relationship and tensions between capitalism and the politics of mobility. Lastly, I present a specific example of the debate over the Northern Arc, a proposed 59-mile bypass road on Atlanta’s north side, to explore how business elites negotiate the politics of mobility and to offer insight on other factions in this contentious political struggle over urban space. The paper informs scholars, advocates, and public policy-makers concerned with urban transportation and land-use debates. Although Atlanta has some unique characteristics, this case study provides an example for comparison with mobility debates in other metropolitan areas.

Methods

This paper stems from a dissertation on the politics of mobility in Atlanta that explored the idea that numerous factions in debates over transportation policy conceptualized mobility and urban space. The methods of the research included extensive archival research of transportation and land-use debates in Atlanta, participant observation in the transportation planning process in Atlanta and Georgia, and interviews with key stakeholders involved in Atlanta’s transportation debates. Space does not permit a discussion of how all factions in Atlanta’s growth debate interact with and contest a politics of mobility. The appendix briefly outlines the other identified factions, based on positions taken on mobility issues, that should also be considered when seeking to understand how Atlanta’s urban space is being contested and produced.

Why Mobility Matters

The politics of mobility is one of the most contentious aspects of urban growth debates (Hodge, 1990; Hanson, 1995; Wachs, 1995; Dunn, 1998). Yet Hanson (2000) lamented that urban and economic geographers have ignored the compelling role of mobility in contemporary social, environmental, and cultural analysis in geography, and that an understanding of transportation geography is marginalized. Some clarifications on the meaning of mobility (as used in this paper) are helpful for understanding why transportation geography is vital for a full grasp of the urbanization process and many contemporary urban growth debates.

Traditional understandings of mobility refer to the ability to move among places. Travel behavior and mobility literature has claimed that the organization of the built environment, or of urban space, is central to mobility (Ewing et al., 1994; Frank and Pivo, 1994; Cervero and Gorham, 1995, Handy, 1996; 1,000 Friends of Oregon, 1997). For example, the ability to walk as a form of mobility is contingent upon the adequacy of a pedestrian-built environment with sidewalks and crosswalks as well as a more compact, mixed-use urban configuration with housing, work, retail establishments, and schools
within walking distance. If there are no sidewalks, or if the street is a six-lane, high-speed traffic road with no safe crosswalk, pedestrian mobility is significantly impeded.

The latter impediment, the six-lane road, is important to highlight because it reveals that some forms of mobility are incongruent. A wide road with few pedestrian facilities such as crosswalks means that, in effect, car-based mobility is theoretically privileged because cars can speed through without slowing for pedestrians. However, the ability to have good mobility by car requires not just wide, fast roads, but also plentiful and convenient parking, and a low-density, dispersed development pattern that disperses automobiles enough to minimize congestion. Without any of those requirements, car-based mobility is obstructed (see Gordon and Richardson [1997a, 1997b] on the logic of urban dispersal and the automobile).

How space is configured matters when thinking about mobility, but it should be emphasized that one’s mobility is more than the consequence of the spatial separation of land uses or the mode used to overcome spatial distance. It is also a measure of the degree of spatial and temporal distance across space. A person may drive five miles to buy groceries in a typical American suburb, while in a dense, walkable urban core, a person may walk a few blocks for the same ends. The person driving may have covered more distance than the distance traveled by the pedestrian, yet both may have achieved their ends within a similar amount of time. The pedestrian may have taken five minutes to walk to nearby stores, while the driver made a five-minute trip on a four-lane highway. They achieved the same ends within a similar time budget, but through radically different distances and modes of transport, with differing infrastructure requirements and spatial configurations. Thus, we can say that mobility connects places in space and time, but in discrete ways, based upon the kind of mobility utilized.

But which person in the above example has the better mobility? The answer to that question depends on factors beyond simple transportation studies and extends into normative values and ideologies, or a systematic set of fundamental beliefs and principles that assert what mobility should be and for whom. Just as Lefebvre (1991) theorized that the character and nature of produced space reflects the dominant modes of production and social relations within a given society, we must give consideration to how mobility contains embedded social relations. As many geographers and urban scholars such as Harvey (1982, 1996) and Logan and Molotch (1987) have analyzed how the contestation of urban space is an extension of struggles over differing values and ideologies, we must consider this with the politics of mobility. It is necessary to ask who decided what types of mobility are appropriate, why certain normative visions of mobility are favored over others, and to whom these mobilities are available. In the remainder of this paper I use a case study of business elites in Atlanta seeking to define what vision of mobility is appropriate for Atlanta and how they negotiate the politics of mobility to achieve higher ends. First, it is useful to provide a context for why mobility became such a contentious issue in Atlanta during the 1990s.

THE MOBILITY CRISIS IN ATLANTA

The Poster Child of Sprawl

Between 1990 and 2000, metropolitan Atlanta was one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the U.S. Only Phoenix, Arizona grew at a faster rate, while only Los
Angeles, California added more people. The Atlanta metropolitan statistical area (MSA) grew from 2.9 million to 4.1 million, a rate of almost 40%. The region added as many people as live in all of metropolitan New Orleans (1.3 million; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001). Atlanta rose as a leading job growth center, and as a node in the global telecommunications and air travel network. Much of the growth was attributed to the relocation and expansion of national corporations to the region (Hartshorn and Fuji, 1995).

Figure 1 shows the geography of Atlanta’s sprawling pattern of development. In June 2003 the U.S. Census Bureau expanded the Atlanta Metropolitan Statistical Area to 28 counties and 4.5 million people (Hairston and Tamman, 2003). In geographical terms, the Atlanta MSA is larger than Connecticut. More telling though was that during the 1990s, with each 1% increase in population, the area of land consumed to accommodate that growth increased by between 10% and 20%. Satellite imagery taken by NASA shows 50 acres of trees were cleared daily in the metropolitan area in the late 1990s (Seabrook, 1999). Atlanta increased its population 60% between 1982 and 1997 yet increased its urbanized land area by 80%, revealing that households increasingly consumed more space per capita household unit. During this period, metropolitan Atlanta had the largest absolute increase in urbanized area of any in the U.S., with 571,000 acres or 892 square miles of new developed land (Fulton et. al., 2001). All of this new growth occurred outside of the central city, which steadily lost population over the 1980s and 1990s, until the late 1990s when the city of Atlanta experienced a slight rebound in population.

In terms of mobility, this pattern of development was the epitome of automobile dependent sprawl. In 1995, the average person in Atlanta drove, or was driven, 34 miles a day, 4 miles more than in 1990. This was 10 miles more than per capita driving in other sunbelt cities like Charlotte, Houston, and Denver, and between 15 to 24 miles greater than the average person in northern cities like Boston, Chicago, or New York (Howitt and Moore, 1999). The average person spent 53 hours, or 6 ½ work days, a year in congested conditions (which means they were not in free-flowing travel conditions). Only Los Angeles had a greater per capita amount of time wasted in traffic (TTI, 2001), and yet the average Angeleno drove 10 miles less per day than an Atlantan. In terms of wasted fuel, Atlanta was actually first in the nation at 84 gallons per person annually. As a region, Atlanta burned 239 million gallons of gasoline annually due to congestion, and congestion cost the average person $915 a year in lost time (TTI, 2001).

Another result of this auto-centric development was that Atlanta experienced significant increases in summer days with smog. Atlanta’s “smog” was ground-level-ozone, which the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) identified as particularly harmful to children, the elderly, and people with respiratory problems. The American Lung Association ranked Atlanta as having some of the worst air in the nation, and in 1999 Atlanta had 69 unhealthy “smog days” (Davis, 2001). In June 1996 the EPA informed Atlanta’s

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2 Ozone is not released into the air directly. It forms through chemical reactions with volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and nitrogen oxides (“NOx”). These are the fumes emitted from automobiles, trucks, and chemical or paint solvents. NOx also comes from powerplants, which meant that Atlanta-based Georgia Power, which owned almost all powerplants in the region, was sensitive to the EPA declaration of nonattainment. Atlanta has an ozone problem for three reasons. First, the natural setting is conducive to photochemical smog because air masses tend to stagnate over the region in the summer. Second, most of the electricity in the region comes from coal-fired powerplants, which emit NOx. Third, Atlanta has excessive automobile dependency coupled with both a large trucking industry and the nation’s busiest airport.
transportation planners that it was in a “conformity lapse,” and had 18 months to come up with a regional transportation plan to produce cleaner air or it would face suspension, and possible loss, of federal transportation funds. By January 1998, 18 months later, the political leadership of Atlanta had failed to achieve such a plan. Federal funds were indeed suspended, making this the first time in the 43-year history of the federal Clean Air Act (CAA) that transportation funds were withheld for any metropolitan area due to air pollution.

The withholding of transportation funds aggravated the emerging negative image of Atlanta as the national “poster child of sprawl,” prompting the Wall Street Journal to ask “Is traffic-clogged Atlanta the new Los Angeles?” (Jaffe, 1998). An avalanche of bad press from around the nation led to fears among business interests that Atlanta would be
considered too risky for investors. Real estate think tanks and trade journals added to the criticism. The Milken Institute, the Urban Land Institute, ERE Yarmouth, and Price-WaterHouse Coopers pointed to traffic and pollution as major barriers to Atlanta’s ability to attract future investment from firms looking for quality-of-life benefits (Dunphy, 1997; Goldberg, 1998a; Geewax, 1999; Wilbert, 2000a).

Atlanta lost a Harley-Davidson manufacturing plant to Kansas City, and the company cited air quality as a reason for the decision. The Wall Street Journal reported that housing prices in suburban Cobb County were stagnant with worsening traffic, and luxury apartment developer Post Properties said that some suburban developments it owned had not appreciated in five years (Jaffe, 1998). Hewlett Packard chose not to expand in the area because of congestion (Jaffe, 1998). This “mobility crisis” was a threat of regional devaluation that obviously alarmed Atlanta’s business elite.

The Response of Atlanta’s Business Elites

Reacting to this mobility crisis, a collection of large corporations based in metropolitan Atlanta, including a handful of Fortune 500 companies, real estate investment trusts, and one of the nation’s largest energy companies, rallied to restructure the transportation planning process and re-orient policy toward forms of mobility other than the private automobile. This coalition of capitalist business interests, with the Metropolitan Atlanta Chamber Of Commerce (MACOC) as its primary voice, articulated a series of transportation and land use projects and strategies that can be collectively viewed as a metro business coalition mobility vision for Atlanta.

The business interests vigorously endorsed telecommunications giant Bell South’s plan to concentrate development at a handful of north side MARTA (Metropolitan Atlanta Regional Transit Authority) rail stations, including Atlanta’s signature transit-oriented development at Lindbergh Station north of downtown Atlanta (MARTA, 2000; Wilbert, 2001). Radical (relative to the existing mobility infrastructure) new plans were drawn up by corporate sponsored “community improvement districts” that proposed transforming Atlanta’s auto-centric edge cities into walkable and bike-friendly town centers with mixes of housing, offices, and retail premised on “new urbanism” (Saporta, 2002; Frankston, 2003). New urbanism is an urban design concept focused on creating higher-density, mixed-use developments that enable walking, bicycling, and transit for practical everyday travel. It is closely related to “smart growth,” which describes a set of urban growth policies that incorporate new urban designs in order to accommodate economic and population growth in ways that minimize the land consumption of conventional low-density, automobile-dependent development. Smart growth policies include recentralization of development, urban infill, and concentrated development around existing transit lines. [For discussion of new urbanism see Katz (1994) and Duany et al. (2000); for a discussion of smart growth see Abbott (1997) and Chen (2000)].

Atlanta’s two largest auto-centric edge cities, Cumberland and Perimeter Center, each created self-taxing districts that used corporate property taxes to build sidewalks,
introduce shuttle buses, promote bicycling, construct landscaping, and study new rail transit proposals on Atlanta’s north side (Cumberland Community Improvement District, 2001; Wilbert, 2002). A massive new high-density mixed use development on an old steel mill became the signature smart growth project of the newly elected governor, who was strongly backed by Atlanta’s corporate elite, and he diligently expedited permitting and clearance through environmental review and engineering in unprecedented ways (Goldberg, 1998b; Soto, 1999). The project, called Atlantic Station, was marketed as transit-oriented despite it being isolated from MARTA and the rest of the city by freeways and industrial areas. The idea was to build transit, perhaps streetcars, to the site because despite being physically isolated, the land was in the middle of Atlanta’s urban core.

Meanwhile the governor and his appointees to the MARTA board of directors ensured that future MARTA rail expansion would lean toward Atlanta’s north side rather than toward Southeast Atlanta, where a coalition of African American interest groups and politicians sought rail transit extensions (Pendered, 1999). This and the concentration of new developments toward Atlanta’s north side revealed the power and influence of Atlanta’s metro business coalition in steering new smart growth projects into the part of the metropolitan area known as the “favored quarter”—a term referring to the region to Atlanta’s north which incorporates a high degree of executive housing, a demographics of mostly White, affluent families, and a favored location for corporate headquarters, branch offices, and upscale malls (Leinberger, 1997). Figure 2 shows the geography of Atlanta’s favored quarter.

Within a few years after the mobility crisis emerged, the MACOC enthusiastically led promotion of the concept of bus rapid transit (BRT), which included priority signalization at intersections and the use of special bus-only lanes, and supported expanding bus service to counties that historically resisted mass transit (Simmons, 2000; Frankston, 2002). This was to be achieved by investing millions of road-money dollars into an extensive high-occupant vehicle (HOV) lane program. Corporate interests also backed proposals for new streetcars in the center of Atlanta (Simmons, 2001a). These urban transit initiatives were consider essential for creating a pedestrianized, 24-hour city that enabled Atlanta to compete with New York or San Francisco for corporate headquarters (Tucker, 1999; Saporta, 2002). The vision was to intensify transit and both residential and office density in a spine from downtown Atlanta northwards into the main nodes of the favorite quarter (Wilbert, 2000b).

At the regional level, the metro business coalition became one of the strongest proponents of passenger rail. The MACOC and the downtown elite saw commuter rail as major boost to downtown land values if centered on a downtown rail station (Saporta, 2000). The MACOC cosigned with 16 other chambers of commerce across the state in a letter urging the state to quickly build commuter and intercity passenger rail across Georgia in June 2001. Meanwhile high-speed rail was considered necessary to project Atlanta’s dominance in the capitalist space-economy of the Southeast. Like the Atlanta airport, high-speed rail was conceptualized as essential for maintaining Atlanta’s dominance

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4 This system of high-speed trains, modeled on the French TGV or similar European electric trains, would service trips limited to within a 500- to 600-mile range of downtown Atlanta and act as a compliment to, or substitute for, shorter airline flights.
because building new roads, widening the existing roads, and building or expanding airports was seen as less and less desirable. HSR is considered by the MACOC and others as far less intrusive to the local built environment and natural environment while also seen as facilitating new types of compact, rail-oriented development (Saporta, 2001a).

To implement these visions and bypass political stalemates in Atlanta’s parochial planning process, a business financed Metropolitan Atlanta Transportation Initiative (MATI) was set-up as a pressure group and ran ads to influence public opinion and the Georgia legislature (Saporta, 1998). The MATI spawned the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA), pronounced “Greta,” which would receive enthusiastic national attention as the means for Atlanta (and perhaps other cities if they followed) to resolve the mobility crisis (Dittmar et al., 1999; Nelson, 2000).

GRTA had jurisdiction over counties declared to be in violation of smog standards by the EPA (13 of 28 as of 2003). All transportation plans for these counties required two-thirds approval from the GRTA Board. If GRTA rejected a plan it could either modify it or enact a substitute plan. GRTA could also veto large-scale developments if it decided the development would cause more smog or congestion. On the flip side, GRTA

Fig. 2. Atlanta’s “Favored Quarter.” Source: Leinberger, 1997.
could authorize a large development if it was adjacent to a major transit station, or in the case of Atlantic Station, if it was deemed as a potential smart growth project. These measures were seen by many as a radical departure from the previous planning regime of extreme local control and lack of regional coordination on transportation and land-use plans by county governments, as well as a direct challenge to the powerful Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT), which had resisted investment in anything but roads (Dittmar et al., 1999; Shipp, 1999a; Nelson, 2000).

In the Georgia legislature, where approval was needed to create GRTA, there was little public debate over GRTA (Baxter, 1999; Ehrenhalt, 1999). Instead, the creation of GRTA was a behind-the-scenes deal brokered by influential business elites, Georgia legislators, and the governor. In the end organizations as diverse as the Sierra Club, the MACOC, Auto Club South (the local chapter of the American Automobile Association) and even the highway-oriented GDOT remained silent or spoke in favor of forming GRTA (Goldberg, 1999). In early 1999, GRTA was welcomed by a wide coalition of business, neighborhood, environmental, and inner city social justice groups, if not as the magic bullet for resolving Atlanta’s problems of congestion and smog, then at least a much needed first step.

At first glance it would seem that Atlanta’s business community had undergone a strange epiphany and transformed into a group of radical anti-sprawl, regional thinking environmentalists. Many of the new transportation policies embraced by the reawakened business coalition were shared by environmentalists and inner-city urban advocates who had for years argued that more transit and urban revitalization were needed, coupled with more regional thinking about transportation (see, for example, Bullard, 2000; Chapman and Hager, 2000). Ironically, environmentalists, neighborhood advocates, and civil rights activists in Atlanta had frequently battled these same business interests over how downtown Atlanta and adjacent areas would be redeveloped and for whom (Stone, 1989).

Now, with a mobility crisis threatening the entire Atlanta region, the interests of the business elite seemed more in line with their traditional opponents than with the pro-expansionist ideology that dominated Atlanta’s previous 50 years of growth. To understand how an overwhelming number of Atlanta’s corporate elites began to view mobility through a lens akin to urban environmentalists, smart growth advocates, and even neighborhood groups and civil rights organizations, it is worth considering the underlying relationships between capitalism and mobility and how that relationship has changed in the last several decades.

CAPITALISTS AND THE POLITICS OF MOBILITY

Capitalist Mobility

In The Limits to Capital, David Harvey (1982) theorized that the capitalist mode of production actively produces and reproduces a geography that reflects its own needs, and that transportation is a major component of this production of space. Indeed, transportation is central to any understanding of the political economy of capitalism because it provides the conditions for capital accumulation and provides for the social reproduction of labor (Hodge, 1990). Thus, the accumulation of capital is bound with the cost, speed, and capacity of the transport system to accommodate the turnover time of capital.
Transportation is essential for production because it provides capitalists with the means to access raw materials, labor, and markets that are spatially separated from the production site. It is central to understanding the circulation of capital because capitalists seek spatial integration that links production localities together for exchange. Transportation minimizes the spatial barriers to the circulation of capital, allowing for smoother spatial integration and facilitating the “annihilation of space by time” (Harvey, 1983, p. 219). It is also constitutive of the physical framework for consumption provided in the wider built environment because it enables the consumer to access commodities. The transportation system, then, is an example of how “investment in the built environment entails the creation of a whole physical landscape for the purposes of production, circulation, exchange, and consumption” (Harvey, 1983, p. 202).

For Atlanta business elites facing the mobility crisis outlined in the previous section, another more immediate but inextricably related concern emerges out of the exchange value of property. Exchange value is the financial value of land when bought, sold, or rented (Logan and Molotch, 1987). The exchange value of a particular land parcel is inherently dependent on how accessible it is, and thus landed capitalist interests have an inherent interest in making that property accessible to the transportation system. Capitalist interests may seek to encourage the construction of roads or transit to enhance exchange values of land parcels in a downtown. They might also seek to have large airports or national highways built in their metropolitan area in order to increase the collective exchange value of the region. To make their respective parcels accessible, they must configure urban space in such a way to make the desired form of mobility possible.

For almost 80 years Atlanta had a growth coalition that was generally unified about the desired form of mobility. That desired form of mobility was full “automobility,” or the combined promotion of the motor vehicle (cars, trucks), the automobile industry, the highway and street networks and corollary services, plus the centering of society and everyday life around the car and its spaces (see Freund and Martin [1993] and Sheller and Urry [2000] for elaborations on automobility, and see Preston [1979] for the way Atlanta’s business elite and political economy began to center on automobility by the 1920s). Although corporate elites in big cities, including Atlanta, supported and even led efforts for rapid rail transit (see Whitt, 1982; Stone, 1989; Adler, 1991) it was generally accepted that automobiles would dominate virtually all urban travel.5

The ubiquity of the automobile was rooted in the underlying logic of capitalism and its relationship to “hard mobility.” Hard mobility is a form of movement centered on high-speed, energy-intensive and land-intensive infrastructure that moves large volumes of people and goods over great distances yet also decreases circulation times of capital. For decades American urban transportation planning goals were meant to increase hard mobility by constructing or widening highways and building airports to increase speeds and increase the distances over which production and consumption could occur. Higher

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5 When expensive heavy rail systems were built in the 1970s, such as the MARTA rail system, these were not explicit challenges to the ubiquity of automobiles and their spaces. MARTA rail was designed for rapid movement across greater spaces and to enhance downtown real estate values (and link downtown to the airport). It was designed to compliment, rather than replace, the automobile for urban trips. Land around train stations, with the exception of a few downtown stations adjacent to office towers, was set aside for automobile parking and station areas were not pedestrian friendly, nor did they have housing or commercial development that was transit-oriented.
speeds and the ability to cover greater distances in less time were considered “progress.” Development of the high-speed highway network helped “annihilate space by time” because automobiles enabled greater amounts of space to be accessed within less time. The greater speeds and spatial coverage meant that strategically located land parcels could in theory increase in value if the roads were built to them. Hence downtowns got radial freeways and traffic planning in the U.S. became *de facto* urban planning geared toward reducing the costs of the circulation of capital and increasing exchange values of property.

Moreover, there was a distinctive capitalist ideology of mobility (Freund and Martin, 1993, 1996). Improving the speed and access of automobiles was synonymous with improving mobility, economic growth, and social progress (Greene and Wegener, 1997). Before World War II, for example, the General Motors Futurama exhibit at the New York World’s Fair set a tone that coupled the U.S. economy with automobiles and their spatial needs (Caro, 1975). “Better” mobility was measured in terms of, and conflated with, higher speed and further distance, which were in turn conflated with economic growth. Therefore a person walking to a corner store in five minutes to get a gallon of milk was thought to have inferior mobility to someone who drove 5 miles in less than 10 minutes to get that same gallon of milk. As Lefebvre (1991) pointed out, the city was viewed by traffic planners as an abstract plane upon which capital circulated and friction of distance had to be overcome. Richard Sennet (1994) suggested that this abstraction of space has underlined urban problems throughout history but that today speed and individualism preside over all else in the spaces of cities.

Removal of “soft” mobilities—pedestrian and transit spaces—was necessary to create full automobility because these often stood in the way of higher-speed urban travel. Pedestrian spaces, for example, had to be minimized so that automobilists would not have to be burdened with frequent stops to allow pedestrians to cross streets. Atlanta’s streetcars were removed to provide more spaces for automobiles and to increase street speeds (streetcars were slower than cars and so considered impediments; Preston, 1979). Abundant parking requirements meant that commercial and office establishments would be spaced further apart, making transit less efficient. The result was a spatial organization and mobility regime incongruent with widespread transit, pedestrian and bicycling spaces. This spatial outcome, what Freund and Martin (1993) called “autospace” had more than a physical impact on cities, but also an ideological one that effectively naturalized the car and created an ambivalence toward problems of cars among much of the middle class (Sheller and Urry, 2000). Moreover, as the next section shows, it had the effect of creating powerful self-serving institutions that would prove formidable as the ubiquity of the automobile began to be questioned in places like Atlanta.

*The Politics of Mobility in Atlanta 1960–1998*

The focus on hard mobility in producing Atlanta’s urban space and the ubiquity of the automobile meant that Atlanta’s business elites only had to concern themselves with where roads were built, and not what type of transportation system was constructed. For capitalists there was no alternative normative vision of mobility other than automobility and a future of more technologically advanced automobiles. In essence mobility became depoliticized among Atlanta’s business elites. To be sure, this did not mean other factions
in growth debates were absent in contesting the dominant vision of speed and universal automobility. For example, Stone (1989) showed how neighborhood groups fought Atlanta’s business elites over the infamous Stone Mountain Freeway. But within the broad gamut of corporate, real estate, and utility interests that made up Atlanta’s business coalition, there was little internal disagreement about mobility, who it was for, or how space should be configured for it. For Atlanta’s capitalist elite, mobility was effectively about moving cars to and from the holdings of landed capitalists in order to enhance exchange values and to decrease the circulation of capital. The issue of where to locate roads was made less controversial, at least for Atlanta’s capitalist business elites, by the sheer number of roads being constructed in just about every part of metropolitan Atlanta.

Since automobiles were considered universal, Atlanta’s downtown business coalition effectively handed over transportation policy to the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT), which was basically a highway department despite its more inclusive title. This is a very important aspect of Atlanta’s growth politics (and arguably, many other metropolitan areas in the US) that has thus far received little attention from scholars. The significance in the power of GDOT is that, as Keating (2001) noted, Atlanta’s downtown declined relative to the metropolitan region just as GDOT emerged as the single-most influential power and influence over growth in metropolitan Atlanta.

The roots of this decline need to be considered in order to understand the setting that led to a mobility crisis and the subsequent change in ideas about mobility by many of Atlanta’s corporate business elites. Space does not permit a full handling of this decline, but in sum, Keating (2001) attributed the decline in power of the downtown elite to a combination of simultaneous spatial processes resulting from racism and White flight, suburbanization, and economic restructuring. White racism meant suburban dispersal of White residential areas but also a reluctance of Whites to shop in downtown Atlanta once public space had to be shared by Blacks and Whites (White, 1982; Keating, 2001). Economic restructuring and globalization meant many executives and white-collar workers were transferred often and were less tied to a particular place. Atlanta’s corporate executives became less rooted in the locality centered on downtown and the inner city. Many corporate offices floated in Atlanta’s northern suburbs rather than in any concentrated locality like downtown.

Concurrent with these social forces of racism and economic restructuring, GDOT was gradually, from the late 1960’s, politically captured by suburban development interests based in the counties circling Atlanta who allied with rural highway interests. These suburban development interests based in relatively independent county-units came to dominate the growth politics of metropolitan Atlanta from the late 1960’s onward (Hartshorne and Walcott, 2000). Each unit by itself was no match for downtown’s corporate interests, but they cemented their collective weight into a formidable coalition articulated through the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC), a regional planning body that had become stacked with suburban interests and complimented the power of GDOT in shaping Atlanta in the interests of suburban White counties (Goldberg, 1998c; Keating, 2001). The structure of the ARC has been compared by some to resemble the old county-unit system of Georgia which gave less populated areas disproportionate political representation compared to more populated areas.

Within state politics, suburban Atlanta interests tightened their grip on GDOT in the 1990s through Governor (now Senator) Zell Miller during the 1990s, a politician with
strong ties to pro-road developers that profited greatly from GDOT’s road building (Roughton, 1997; Pruitt, 1999; Ledford, 2000). The nexus of the GDOT-ARC-suburban development machine was centered in Gwinnett County, to the northeast of Atlanta, where the “Gwinnett Mafia,” a cabal of White, male real estate developers and their political allies gained considerable control over GDOT under Zel Miller’s leadership (Roughton, 1997, 1998; Shipp, 1999a). The centerpiece for this “auto-industrial complex” vision was the proposed Outer Perimeter highway, displayed in Figure 3, which was to be upward of 50 miles from downtown Atlanta.

The GDOT, and its allies on the ARC board and the wider auto-industrial complex, charted a vision of the Outer Perimeter that included creating a new autocentric city in Northeastern Gwinnett County, prompting the controversial chair of Gwinnett County to claim that one day this city would be to Atlanta as “Baltimore is to Washington” (Nurse, 2001). The Outer Perimeter, through intensive political struggle, was eventually reduced to a 59-mile Northern Arc. In the midst of the mobility crisis the Northern Arc became the symbol of the wider debate over how the Atlanta region should grow and what kind of mobility was appropriate for future growth. It also became the most prominent symbol of the fissure between two competing factions of capital that otherwise shared in a capitalist pro-growth ideology.
CONTESTING MOBILITIES: THE NORTHERN ARC DEBATE

The Northern Arc and Business Elites

Recall that on the heels of the mobility crisis Atlanta’s metro business coalition, a collection of nonlanded corporate interests including Fortune 500 companies, large real estate interests, and firms such as the major utility (Georgia Power, subsidiary of the Southern Company) and flagship newspaper (Atlanta Journal-Constitution) articulated a vision to recenter the urban capitalist accumulation process to a “vital center” of compact, higher-density growth between the existing downtown and north into the favored quarter. This was considered necessary to compete nationally and internationally for high-wage, high-skill workers who preferred levels of urbanity associated with New York, Chicago, or San Francisco—walkable 24-hour cities with plenty of urban amenities and a “café culture.” This recentralization would be made possible in part by development of a radial commuter rail network, extensions of the existing MARTA rail system, a regional express bus system, and, eventually, a high-speed rail network. The $2.4 billion proposed Northern Arc, which would effectively induce further low-density, auto-oriented patterns of development far beyond this vital center, contradicted much of this vision, and, moreover, channeled limited public funds away from this vision.

Yet there was a striking ambivalence within the metro business coalition toward the Northern Arc. While various members of the metro business coalition publicly championed commuter rail, MARTA extensions to the north side, high-speed rail, and retrofitting space for pedestrians and streetcars, there was a conspicuous silence at the MACOC about whether or not the region should commit to the Northern Arc project. The silence cannot be ignored, and it symbolized a lack of unified enthusiasm for the Northern Arc but also internal division over how to proceed. This inconsistency of aggressively promoting smart growth transportation projects while remaining silent on the Northern Arc reflected the internalized contradictions between the simultaneous demand by capitalists for hard mobility and new demands for soft mobility.

For example, the board of trustees for the Georgia Conservancy, an influential mainstream environmental organization based in Atlanta, included executives from Georgia Power, banks, and developers, and well-healed, politically-connected law firms. While these individuals did not speak out in public against the Northern Arc, nor as a unified voice through the MACOC, the Georgia Conservancy made opposition to the Northern Arc one of its main causes (Goldberg, 1996). Further, the Conservancy eventually joined in a litigation strategy to force GDOT and the ARC to change from an auto-centric mobility vision to a smart growth agenda that included soft mobilities like walking and biking (Goldberg, 1998d). This is not to suggest that the Georgia Conservancy was a stealth front for the business coalition, but rather to point out that the organization provided a venue for those capitalists opposed to the Northern Arc to exert pressure without getting directly associated with an anti-Northern Arc position. This enabled business elites to oppose a major centerpiece of the auto-industrial complex without creating an impression that ideologically aligned capitalists were really at odds.

Meanwhile, an enigma in the debate over the Northern Arc was Governor Roy Barnes, who was elected in 1998 with strong support from both the metro business coalition and the auto-industrial complex, and who was considered the “surrogate mayor of the Atlanta
Region” because of his promotion of regional thinking on issues such as transportation and water infrastructure (Saporta, 2001b, 2001c). Barnes became a contradictory public figurehead. He advocated smart growth policies, shared by the Georgia Conservancy and metro business coalition, while he aggressively championed the Northern Arc. Whether the governor was playing both sides, was genuinely torn, or believed Atlanta had room for smart growth and continued low-density sprawl is difficult to discern, but Barnes was widely known to be an astute political player (Ehrenhalt, 1999; Shipp, 1999b). Reflecting the Governor’s contradictory stance on mobility, one of the GRTA board’s (all 15 members were appointed by Barnes) first major actions was to simply rubber-stamp a controversial 25-year long-range regional transportation plan (RTP) that included funding of the Northern Arc. This, despite a handful GRTA board members first asking that the Northern Arc be removed from the plan (Atlanta Constitution, 2000). The approval of this plan by GRTA, even though some board members dissented, was seen as a major defeat by environmentalists and other activists who had high expectations for GRTA (Seabrook, 2000). It reflected a schism on the new board that mimicked the political divisions over appropriate forms of mobility for Atlanta’s future.

Further contradictions and tensions over the Northern Arc were exhibited by the MACOC and other business elites when they publicly supported a bonding scheme proposed in 2001 that accelerated a number of key transportation projects in Atlanta, including commuter rail and an extension of rail transit in the northwest sector of the favored quarter (Atlanta Constitution, 2001; Simmons, 2001b). Yet this bonding package also accelerated the schedule for building the Northern Arc. The metro business coalition was publicly silent about the road while praising the bonding scheme as a whole. Then, several months later, in a rare example of speaking out against the Arc, key CEOs from MACOC wrote formal letters to regional planners asking that the Northern Arc be delayed or excluded from the updated transportation plan the same plan approved previously by the GRTA (Hairston, 2001a, 2001b).

The confusion and inconsistency over where the newly aligned metro business coalition stood on the Northern Arc was furthered in the summer of 2002, when the Northern Arc became a significant partisan political issue in the re-election of Roy Barnes as Governor. While Atlanta’s metro business coalition was actively financing Barne’s re-election, the first-term Democratic Governor was defending his support of the Northern Arc from an emergent coalition of liberal (and mostly democratic-leaning) urban environmentalists and suburban republican homeowners activists who feared the Northern Arc would intrude on their new tranquil subdivisions. The mostly Republican homeowners formed the Northern Arc Task force, hired a politically connected former attorney general, and sued the GDOT and Governor Barnes for illegally using the bonding scheme to accelerate the Northern Arc (Hairston, 2002a). Moreover, they pledged to defeat Barnes in the 2002 election by voting for Republican candidate Sonny Purdue, who

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6The first board included three developers, two bankers, an attorney for developers, an oil company owner, and an owner of a construction equipment company, as well as three chamber of commerce employees, two of whom were associated with development interests. There was only one environmentalist appointed, and he came from the business-friendly Georgia Conservancy. A homeowners activist, an attorney, was appointed later.
promised that if elected he would cancel the proposed road (Atlanta Journal-Constitution, 2003; Stanford, 2003).

In an intensifying re-election campaign and under pressure from opponents of the Northern Arc, Roy Barnes suddenly announced he was dropping the Northern Arc from funding (Galloway and Frankston, 2002). This announcement occurred after accepting large campaign contributions from both key members of the auto-industrial complex who backed the road and the metro business coalition that was quietly opposed to the road. Nevertheless, in a stunning upset, Barnes was defeated in November 2002 and a large part of that defeat was the energized opposition to the Northern Arc. The metro business coalition promptly wrote checks to pay for newly elected Governor Sonny Purdue’s inauguration festivities at the Georgia Dome in January 2003 (Saltzer, 2003a, 2003b).

As of this writing the new governor has been largely silent about transportation issues but he has re-emphasized his vow to cancel the Northern Arc (Kaplan and Frankston, 2003). Yet there is some speculation that a small segment of the road, from Georgia 316 to Ga 400, might still be on the table (Stanford, 2003). Recall that this segment intersected I-85 just where the auto-industrial complex of Gwinnett County seeks to build “Atlanta’s Baltimore.” During the debates over the road, despite public opposition, GDOT quietly parceled the needed right-of-way for most of this segment. Hence the quest for building this road continues, and thus the debate over how Atlanta should grow will likely be manifest in this controversial road for years to come.

Discussion: Business Elites and Balancing “Hard” versus “Soft” Mobility

The Northern Arc debate shows us that divisions over mobility exist between factions of capitalist elites and that these divisions are played-out in the wider political arena, including the struggle over the state’s highest elected position. The Northern Arc was more than a struggle of suburban versus urban interests, but rather a struggle of competing conceptualizations of how space should be organized and around what types of mobilities space would be organized. The mobility crisis in Atlanta and the response of business elites reveals that capitalist interests have to mitigate and negotiate the contradictions and tensions over incongruent mobilities and how they impact exchange values. There is a tension between the drive of capitalism for “hard mobility,” or the energy intensive and speed-intensive highway and air system, and a parallel need for “soft mobility” such as walking and biking in compact built environments. The motivation of capitalist interests in Atlanta is to overcome the contradictions and tensions between hard and soft mobilities and control implementation of mobility strategies that make the metropolitan region globally competitive and thus securing increased exchange value of the region. That became the underlying motivation of the collection of business elites that rallied around Atlanta’s mobility crisis in the late 1990s. Yet translating their vision into reality has been made difficult by the continued political power of the auto-industrial

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7 To be sure, a greater source of energized opposition to Barnes was a group of rural and suburban middle-class Whites who were enraged at Barnes’ removal of a large Confederate Battle Flag from dominating the state flag. Many public school teachers were also angry at Barnes for placing the burden of education reform on them. Ironically, both the flag change and education reform, like the creation of GRTA, were initiatives of the corporate elite based in the MACOC.
complex, which, while sharing in an overall ideology of capitalist growth objectives, insists that the growth happens in a conventional automobile-dependent way with further dispersal—hence their vision of the Northern Arc.

This inner division of what might otherwise be a cohesive coalition of corporate and real estate executives, public policy-makers, and media elites what Logan and Molotch (1987) called an “urban growth machine” is immediate and not necessarily permanent. Yet it does show hat the politics of mobility is a factor in complicating the coalescence of a hegemonic growth machine. One of the main debates over growth machine theory concerns the degree of control growth machines have over producing urban space. Logan et al. (1997) suggested variations in the degree at which growth machines dominate localities. The power of growth machines is not absolute and the real world of politics is more dynamic than implied in the traditional growth machine model (Logan, et al., 1997). This is clearly the case with Atlanta’s business elites and their immediate contestation with the auto-industrial complex over Atlanta’s mobility future.

Yet we must also consider the struggles between factions of capital and labor, and between capitalist elites and other social movements such as labor, environmental, or civil rights movements (Cox and Mair, 1988; Herod, 1991). A handful of other factions were involved in Atlanta’s mobility debate, and their roles should not be discounted. For example, many environmentalist and intown neighborhood leaders allied with the downtown elite on transportation policy supporting many of the same goals of urban recentralization and investment in soft mobilities. These organizations were also much more outspoken against the Northern Arc (Hairston, 2002b). In fact, it was litigation by environmental organizations that stymied the auto-industrial complex at the onset of the mobility crisis in the late 1990s. This litigation involved arguments that GDOT and the ARC were ignoring EPA’s air quality regulations and not considering social equity when making transportation investment decisions. The coalition of environmental groups, among them the Sierra Club and Georgia Conservancy, joined with inner-city civil rights and environmental justice organizations to sue the GDOT and ARC, as well as the U.S. Department of Transportation, for failing to address air quality and its negative impacts on the inner city poor. Joining this loose alliance were civil rights activist and advocates for the inner city working poor who saw the auto-industrial complex as perpetuating White flight and shifting limited resources from the core to the periphery of the region (Goldberg, 1998d).

Meanwhile, other factions became very active in Atlanta’s mobility politics. Many libertarians, for example, despite being a numerically small political force in the region, became very vocal in defending automobility as a natural free-market outcome, and transit as a government boondoggle (Cox, 2001). They often criticized the large scale projects such as MARTA expansion and commuter rail that the metro business coalition supported. Joining in the opposition to transit expansion and urban recentralization were many county-elected officials on Atlanta’s periphery who held a racialized opposition to expanding transit or a strong anti-urban ethos that equated higher density with crime or immoral behavior (Johnston, 2002). These factions opposed GRTA, expanding transit, and other key components of the business coalition mobility vision. In short, the politics of mobility is much more complicated, nuanced, and interesting than the one I have presented. All of these factions in the mobility debate of Atlanta are important and must be considered. The appendix offers a brief glimpse at five other factions, in addition to the
metro business coalition and the auto-industrial complex, that are actively engaged in Atlanta’s mobility debates.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have attempted to contribute to an understanding of the production of urban space and contested by showing how the politics of mobility fits into urban growth debates. This politics of mobility is an inherently spatial struggle over how cities should grow and who benefits from growth. Conceptualizations about mobility are ideological and reflective of wider normative values and goals as much as they are about moving and configuring space for movement. I have also sought to inform urban scholars, advocates, and policy makers about some of the limits of capitalist urban growth coalitions and the reality of disparate factions among capitalists in mobility debates. In Atlanta, a coalition of business elites coalesced around the mobility crisis of the 1990s, a crisis that remains unresolved. These business elites failed to gain full hegemonic control of politics and institutions in order to produce space in their own image, but did shape the discourse about mobility in profound ways. Showing the weakness and limits of powerful capitalist factions in the politics of mobility should offer insights into how other agendas and positions, informed by different, noncapitalist values, may be empowered in affecting change. I hope to have sparked interest in the possibilities of other factions in growth debates achieving their goals. Further areas of research should include understanding the depth and breadth of other mobility visions and how their respective interest groups engage in the political process to shape urban space. Additionally a comparative framework can be established to inform other cities, especially in the rapidly growing South, of how the politics of mobility is unfolding.

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**APPENDIX**

*Five Additional Mobility Visions in Atlanta*

In addition to the coalition of business elites and the auto-industrial complex, five significant factions are active in Atlanta’s politics of mobility. This does not assume that there are only five other visions and that no other visions of mobility are present in the discourse over Atlanta’s urban growth. Rather, this list simply reflects the groups that have articulated a mobility vision and inserted themselves into Atlanta’s debate.

(1) **ETHICAL MOBILITY**: The ethical mobility vision posits that there is too much mobility. This vision equates excessive mobility as indicative of wider social and environmental problems related to a consumer society, and, as the name implies, the holders of this vision asserted that a new environmental and urban social ethic is needed. Adherent to this vision are generally compelled to become activists, and draw from environmental, social justice, and neighborhood organizations.

(2) **ACCESSIBLE MOBILITY**: The accessible mobility vision, held mainly by environmental justice and civil rights activists, holds that sprawl and automobile dependency are at the core of wider racist public policies that inhibited minority access to jobs and urban services. The vision is similar to the ethical mobility vision in that both support reconfiguring urban space to reduce automobile dependency. However, the underlying motivation is explicitly class and race-based. The vision is also articulated through concerns for elderly, children, and disabled residents.
NEW URBAN BOURGEOISIE MOBILITY: The new urban bourgeoisie mobility vision shares a critical view of automobile dependency with both the accessible and ethical factions. Held primarily by white-collar professionals, this vision is centered on a commodification of a compact and urbane quality of life. It includes “soft” mobility centered on gentrification, loft apartments and urban living, with excessive space dedicated to automobiles being considered distasteful. However, the degree at which this faction differs from the ethical and accessible factions is visible in high rates of car ownership and car-use despite holding a preference for higher-density spaces with fewer cars. Furthermore, this group is more likely to move to automobile-dependent areas if young children are involved.

CORNUCOPIAN AUTOMOBILITY: The cornucopian mobility vision does not have direct vested interests in automobility. Instead, the vision holds that consumer preference for low-density sprawl propels urban form when left to the free-market, with the outcome of a corollary preference for driving. I chose the name “cornucopia” to invoke the theories of libertarian economist Julian Simon, who argued that technology would allow unfettered economic growth without depleting resources or damaging the environment, but only if it was allowed to operate in a free-market manner. The libertarian-leaning contrast with the auto-industrial complex, which actively seeks government to create wealth. While the auto-industrial complex and cornucopia mobility visions share a desire for full automobility, they promote different means for achieving their shared vision.

SECESSIONIST AUTOMOBILITY: Secessionist automobility is as the name implies it is about seceding from urban problems and using the automobile to achieve this secession. There are three threads of secessionist automobility that are important to consider. What unites these three threads is the preference for automobility by default as a consequence of broader ideological and normative values about society.

Racialized Automobility: Race is a major theme of secessionist automobility. The racially charged rejection of mass transit in the 1960’s, 1970’s, and 1980’s led to a default spatial configuration that makes full automobility the default spatiotemporality of everyday life in 17 metro counties without bus or rail service.

Anti-Urban Secessionism: Complicating race is a strong culturally conservative vision of “small towns” and a rural utopia modeled on a mythical Jeffersonian vision of yeoman farmers. This vision holds a decidedly critical anti-urban, anti-density ethos. In this variation of secessionist automobility, the underlying motivation is not racial but, rather, a dislike of both sprawl and density, or a “not in my backyard” (NIMBY) attitude of escape. In metropolitan Atlanta thousands of households are located on one-acre lots in exurbia, yet desiring an easy 25-minute commute to work and urban amenities. The result is a strong NIMBY movement against new roads and new development but not a movement based on a critique of automobility itself.

Malthusian Automobility: Borrowing again from the literature on sustainable development, the Malthusians share a worldview that urban and environmental problems are mainly caused by too many people. These people seek to secede from the city in reaction to traffic, pollution, and noise, rather than confront urban traffic by reducing automobile use. Like the other two secessionist visions, the Malthusians seek to escape a problem traffic and sprawl, yet by default become extremely automobile dependent and contribute to the creation of low-density sprawl.