

How the Debate over Public vs. Private Transportation Hurts Everyone

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A great deal of the discourse about cities in recent years has revolved around issues involving public vs. private. This has sometimes been a useful and illuminating conversation. Too often, however, the conversation descends almost immediately into a stand-off because of basic disagreements about the role of individuals, families, institutions and the government in today's society. These entrenched partisan positions make it difficult to negotiate usefully about an entire range of urban phenomena from acceptable behavior in public places to the rise of gated communities or from the gentrification of central city neighborhoods to the privatization of basic infrastructure.

In some ways this binary opposition of private vs. public has obscured a central fact about life in the mixed economic and political system in which we live. Our current notions about what is or should be public or private are relatively recent and based on assumptions that are constantly changing. It is also the case that the line between the two is much more blurred than the usual debates would suggest. After all, in Western democracies, most adult citizens are consumers in the market at the same time as they are voters and actors in the public sphere. Even with a given individual the interests are often contradictory and changing. It is not surprising, then, that debates based on the assumption of sharp distinction between public and private are often frustrating and unproductive, particularly in a fast changing world.

The battles between private and public transportation provide an excellent example of the way that doctrinaire notions impede progress toward useful solutions. Let's take an historical example. In many cities around the country in the early 20th century private rail companies ran streetcar lines under a franchise from local governments. In the 1910s, quite unexpectedly, there appeared a competitor to these municipally regulated monopolies. Owners of private automobiles started to offer rides to passengers, often along the same route as the streetcars. At first these so-called jitney drivers were only a nuisance for the rail operators, but in short order they became a major threat because they offered a more comfortable and cheaper ride and, because they were not obliged to follow fixed routes or make fixed stops, they were often considerably faster and more convenient for riders.

If the streetcar operators had been making a healthy profit they probably could simply have undercut the jitney operator in cost. However, many of these companies had been created in part to help make new areas of the city accessible and thereby help sales of real estate owned by company officers. When these real estate sales declined once the land adjacent to the rail lines was developed and certain lines proved unprofitable, they were often unable to discontinue those lines because of requirements by local governments to maintain service. That, in turn, gave them little incentive to keep their tracks in good repair or to provide enough vehicles to avoid overcrowding.

Faced with this inherent problem and potentially disastrous competition, the streetcar operators turned to local governments for help. They argued that the jitney service benefited from the fact that it was unregulated and that it was cherry-picking customers from the most profitable routes without the burden of providing service for the entire region. They further argued that the jitney drivers were unlicensed and potentially unsafe. In the end, most municipal governments around the country established regulations, ostensibly for public protection, that made most jitney service uneconomic. The number of jitneys declined precipitously and they no longer were able to compete directly with the railroad companies. Of course, the railroad companies' problems went deeper than the competition from jitneys. The episode was an important demonstration of the advantages to them offered by rubber wheeled vehicles on public right of way and they soon switched to buses. Even so, the inherent problems of making a profit on a highly regulated monopoly eventually led to the eventual demise of every one of the private surface lines and the assumption of their routes by public agencies.

Now, in this episode, was the defeat of the jitneys and victory of the streetcar monopolies a triumph of the public interests or a defeat? To answer that question you would have to start with another one: Where did private interest lie and where public interest? It would seem that answering that question, in turn, would entirely depend on which private interests and which public interests we are talking about in a situation where the very distinction between the two turns out to be quite blurred.

Let's fast forward to today. We may well be on the verge of a very similar episode. Today most American cities have public monopolies responsible for running public transit, which today is primarily buses and trains. A great many planners and scholars have been arguing strenuously for decades that the automobile has been a deleterious element in urban development, that the push for roads and parking has destroyed central cities, that the enhanced mobility has allowed middle class residents to flee city centers, taking their civic involvement and tax dollars with them, and that the growth of urban sprawl has destroyed farmland, greatly increased the demand for a limited supply of energy and has contributed to greenhouse gas emissions and global warming. Many of these individuals see this as the triumph of private interests over the collective public interest. They call for measures that would limit the use of private automobiles and boost ridership of public transportation. They would do this by redistributing money that now goes to roads and highways to public transportation systems. They also advocate for land use laws that would boost densities in order to make public transportation more efficient.

The irony in all this is that this dichotomy between small, private vehicles and large, collective public vehicles, may turn out to be an anomaly, an artifact of a particular moment of urban development between the middle of the 19th and the end of the 20th century. Many of the arguments put forward in this debate are already outmoded. For example, even today the private automobile has become so much more efficient that it uses less energy and emits less greenhouse gas per vehicle mile traveled than the transit bus which is the dominant mode of public transit in the country today. Of course, because the private automobile is generally much faster than public transportation, it has allowed citizens to travel longer distances. Nevertheless, that has not translated into low-density settlement being necessarily more energy intensive than high density settlement.

Furthermore, if we assume for a moment that the trend toward energy efficiency and alternative energy sources continues, we can easily imagine a future not far off when these issues will recede. At that point, the debate can move back to the fundamental issue of how to transport the most passengers in the most efficient, most comfortable and least expensive way.

It appears unlikely that the bus and the railroad train, two big box 19th century transportation solutions, are likely to increase their market share. Instead, an entire range of smaller, personal vehicles running on alternative fuels with built-in navigation devices could well allow for much faster and safer travel on existing infrastructure that will be able to handle an enormously increased amount of traffic. With the advent of shared vehicles and driverless vehicles, it is also possible that most urban dwellers won't need or want their own vehicles but will summon electronically an appropriately sized vehicle for the purpose at hand, eliminating a vast amount of parking. This would be a true public transportation system but the vehicles would look a lot more like automobiles than buses or trains. It is also likely that the system would be mostly privately owned and operated although with extensive public regulation.

Now, of course, there are enormous hurdles to achieving any of this. And there will be problems, probably problems as important as the ones that we face with our transportation options today.

However, this scenario, as with the jitney episode, does suggest three things. The first is that trying to rebuild our cities at the densities of 19th century industrial cities in order to make public transit work, is probably short-sighted and counter-productive. A second is that, as with the jitney episode, what is public and what is private is a very fluid and often even contradictory thing. The final thing is that debates of this kind often lead to sub-optimal solutions. Certainly to date the big debate between private and public transportation in cities has not helped a situation where neither the private nor the public entities has been able or willing to invest in the kind of infrastructure that the country needs to remain competitive and increase productivity.