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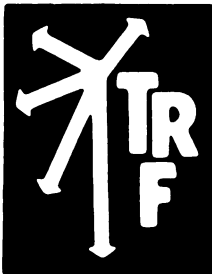
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Public Transport: Its Planning, Management and Operation, Third Edition

Peter White

London: UCL Press Limited, 1995

This book is the third edition of a transportation textbook that focuses on surface passenger transportation in Britain. Although the cover of this text mentions that domestic air (in Britain) is included, airline transportation is given scant attention. This textbook focuses on rail and bus service. And this book does read like a textbook. White describes the current organizational structure governing passenger transportation in Britain. The topics covered reflect those of most interest to a public agency running a rail or bus service: technology of bus and coach systems, urban railways and rapid transit systems, network planning, costing and cost allocation methods, etc. However his focus was most relevant when the book was first published in 1976 when public agencies were still expanding their role in the provision of passenger services. The third edition has not sufficiently evolved with the events of succeeding 20 years, especially with the major moves in Britain toward privatization and deregulation.

A major shortcoming of the book is its cursory treatment of the private automobile. The private automobile has a crucial role in passenger transportation. White's statistics note that automobiles comprise half the market,¹ yet White barely discusses them. How can any student of transportation policy understand bus or rail pricing and service options without fully comprehending the role the automobile now plays. The automobile is the primary substitute to rail and bus service. White makes passing references to the different modes environmental impacts yet doesn't analyze the comprehensive public policy picture that environmental fees might entail. In fact he dismisses road fees by saying "there is little willingness to introduce road pricing in major cities as a means of matching supply and demand."² White does mention that road users do not pay for the capital used in the road network.³ It would have been useful for White to discuss in detail how roads are paid for, especially what

options are available that might make rail or bus more attractive (by making car operation more expensive). Automobile fees could include environment use and road capital use components.

Another fault in the book is White's use of economic methodology. A good example is his discussion of price elasticity of demand for bus services. White discusses price elasticities of one or less (in absolute values) for bus services and notes that fare reductions generally cause revenues to fall. But this is what an economist would expect because these elasticities are associated with negative marginal revenues.⁴ But this begs a huge question: why not raise bus rates. The answer is economic welfare. One presumes that bus riders in Britain are basically low income individuals. That is a factor that bus operators need to consider and may be a reason for public subsidy. And public subsidy would not have to go to the bus operator, but could be distributed to low income consumers in the form of travel vouchers. Another example of White's poor use of economic theory is exhibited in his discussion of forecasting techniques. He omits an income variable in forecasting, an omission that is most glaring but consistent with his lack of attention to the role of the private automobile.⁵ Frankly, bus and rail ridership would tend to fall with income increases while automobile use rises.

Furthermore, he ignores economic efficiency concerns with the recommendation that income tax receipts fund public transportation. This funding mechanism White believes would allow lower income groups to get the transportation facilities they require. He really prefers that price not be the allocation mechanism of transportation resources. But not charging a price commensurate with the cost of the facilities used leads to overuse of the facilities or allocation by another mechanism. When roads have no price, rush-hour congestion occurs and road space is allocated to those willing to wait. Aside from the inefficiencies that occur when resources are not allocated according to price, it's doubtful that lower income groups would get more transportation service. When the political process allocates resources, the politically powerful groups are best served, and that's not necessarily the

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lower income groups. Consider how Washington's Metrorail connected affluent areas (if they wanted it—Georgetown opted out) before it built the Green Line through poorer areas of Northeast.

White offers some interesting ideas around the deployment and use of buses. He discusses busways: creation of bus only lanes and how these could generate the benefits of rail service (i.e., lower congestion from other modes) without the higher capital costs.⁶ Yet these might be better deployed in conjunction with a more efficient road pricing structure, which might also help pay for the creation and use of bus only lanes or high density vehicle lanes or priority lanes or other transportation facility.

Perhaps the most serious shortcoming in the book is White's failure to provide a broad and reasoned analysis of the Conservative government's deregulation and privatization policies. His section on government policy appears to be cobbled together and appended to the end of the text so that the book can stand as a third edition. He really treats Tory deregulation and privatization policies as if he wishes they would go away and perhaps he believes a Labour Party victory in the next general election will undo the Conservative public transport policies of the last 17 years. Yet he's missed a great opportunity. Consider that British rail privatization has created a company to just manage the rail infrastructure. Analyzing how that is designed to work might have lessons for managing roadways. Essentially the government manages the road infrastructure now

while the carriers are both private and public. Thus the infrastructure provider is also a monopolist in Britain's rail privatization and in the government's provision of roadways. There are interesting public policy questions arising from this monopoly. Yet White has passed by them.

A passenger transportation book in the 1990s cannot gloss over the major public policy trends of the past 20 years. It needs to comprehend the limits to government support of transportation schemes and adequately cover the roles of all modes, including the automobile. Including sound economic principles is also crucial to any public policy analysis. Unfortunately, White's book fails in these regards.

ENDNOTES

1. White, *Public Transport*, pp. 25-6.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 210.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 212.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 126-34.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 41-4.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 62-4.

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