

AK Verkehr Page 2019 – Germany out of control?

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Two issues need to be covered in this year's annual report from Germany: the activities of AK Verkehr, and the increasingly heated debate on German transport policy. We are going to start with the less controversial topic.

The annual AK Verkehr conference 2019 was organised as a joint meeting with the interdisciplinary young mobility/transport researchers' network Pegasus. As reported last year (Scheiner, 2018), the AK board invited Pegasus to join the conference, and was very happy that Pegasus agreed. The conference was held in Würzburg from 8-10 May, hosted by Alexandra Appel, Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg, who jointly organised the conference with Mathias Wilde (now at Hochschule Coburg) and Joachim Scheiner (TU Dortmund). Würzburg is an excellent location for a conference, being located in the Main valley, surrounded by vineyards, and having a beautiful city centre rebuilt from almost complete destruction in WWII. Make sure to visit if you get a chance.

The conference was stimulating, exciting and relaxed at the same time. It was well attended, with about 80 participants. The overarching theme was 'Mobility, accessibility and space – (self-) critical perspectives from research and practice'. It started with a 'critical urban walk' through the streets of Würzburg, followed by an evening get-together organised by Pegasus. The scientific programme included 24 presentations, nine poster presentations, two keynote lectures held by Christian Holz-Rau (TU Dortmund) and Weert Canzler (InnoZ, Berlin), and a panel discussion in which the two keynotes speakers were joined by Henrike Rau (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München), Matthias Winkler (Hamburger Verkehrsverbund) and Barbara Lenz (DLR, Berlin, moderator). The keynotes fit very well with the conference theme, by asking 'Is a roundabout a transport turnaround?' (Holz-Rau) and claiming 'The transport turnaround: a tough endeavour' (Canzler). Both presentations focused on the German Verkehrswende, i.e. the planned transport policy transition (or 'turnaround') that is supposed to complement the ongoing Energiewende – although with much less success so far (see below). The following panel discussion focused on concepts that may help support the transition to a more sustainable transport system, and on how research findings can be better targeted to policy makers.

Many of the other presentations and posters raised critical questions towards current transport research topics, methods, organisations, and policies – with a certain pessimism about the effectiveness of the policy measured currently favoured by experts and policy-makers (e.g. carbon pricing, multimodality and public transport improvements). As the general quality of the

presentations was high this year, the organising committee is planning to publish an edited book including a selection of contributions.

On the first full conference day, the scientific programme was followed by the AK members' meeting, which was also well attended with about 50 participants. There the historical decision was taken to rename the working group into 'AK Mobilität und Verkehr'. In German-speaking research, the term Verkehr (capturing transport as well as traffic) is associated with a more traditional approach to transport research, dominated by planning and engineering perspectives, while Mobilität is seen as more inclusive of social science perspectives. The meeting made it clear that many AK members define themselves more as mobility than as transport researchers nowadays. Younger members in particular felt that the term 'Verkehr' had something old-fashioned about it. Given the German penchant for in-depth conceptual and terminological discussion, the decision was discussed at length, and the ordering of terms in the group's name was adjusted to reflect the ontological priority of mobility over transport!

Another topic of discussion was the future cooperation with Pegasus, which will continue: the upcoming 2020 conference will again be a joint venture between the two networks. A relaunch of the AK Verkehr website is close to realisation and is overseen by Cordula Neiberger, RWTH Aachen. The web address has not been finalised yet, but you should be able to find us on Google in the next few months.

The upcoming Pegasus meeting will be held from 11 to 12 October 2019 in Dresden. The topic is 'Plan-Test-Check-Act: Connect 4 Mobility', and the call for papers is still open at the time of writing (until 14 July, see pegasus-netzwerk.de). The next AK Verkehr conference will be hosted by Martin Lanzendorf and his team in Frankfurt am Main in 2020. Watch out for the call.

And now for something completely different. At the AK meeting in Würzburg, widespread dissatisfaction with German transport policy among the participants led to the launch of a public initiative of researchers and practitioners to support and develop actions for sustainable transport. Many felt that the time is right to 'go public', as pro-sustainability and climate action movements are all over the news (e.g. Fridays for Future, which has seen large participation in Germany), and public concern over the environment is at an all-time-high. Last year's report noted that the German federal government cabinet included a new transport minister, Andreas Scheuer, member of the ultra-conservative Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU). In his first year or so in office, strong conflicts between the transport ministry and environmentalists have already emerged, due to the minister's lack of action towards (and sometimes outright resistance to) the regulation of the circulation of high-emissions vehicles that do not comply with Euro 6 standards. A result of the federal government's obstructionism is that local authorities are left alone to deal with their air quality problems (57 cities in Germany still do not comply with EU NO2 thresholds).

The conflict reached unprecedented heights this year. The ministry had appointed a national expert commission on the future of transport ('Nationale Plattform Zukunft der Mobilität'), tasked with making policy recommendations for more 'affordable, sustainable and climate-friendly mobility' (www.plattform-zukunft-mobilitaet.de). In January this year the board came up with suggestions that included a general speed limit of 130 km/h on motorways (which currently does not exist in Germany) and an increase to fuel taxes (which have been 'frozen' since 2003). Scheuer publicly reacted by stating that these recommendations went 'against common sense' and ought to be rejected. At the same time, he dismissed the debate around emission threshold values as 'masochistic', suggesting that the German government should rather adopt less stringent (!) air quality thresholds. A heated public debate emerged. Government spokesperson Steffen Seibert defended the minister by arguing that there are 'smarter measures' than speed limits for climate mitigation in the transport sector (Balser and Bauchmüller, 2019) – although the government is yet to come up with convincing proposals in this respect. Scheuer's handling of the debate gained him criticism from the liberal press – with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* for example branding him as 'a minister out of control' (Balser, 2019) (hence the title of this report).

While climate change mitigation has been part of German politics for three decades (the first Enquete Commission on the topic was appointed in 1987 by the Bundestag), it is sad to see that the debate has not progressed any further. Notably, the conflict between experts and elected politicians is symptomatic of growing tension between the two communities, which is perhaps most evident in a hard-to-decarbonise sector like transport.

Another worrying aspect is the prominence of ‘air pollution denial’ positions in the German public debate. In the last year, a small (but loud) minority of German pneumologists has cast doubt on the scientific validity of NO_x thresholds, which is against scientific consensus both in Germany and at the international level (WHO). Yet their views receive disproportionate attention by the media, creating a false sense of balance among the public, and receive support by politicians in and out of government. There is more than one parallel between these events and the denial tactics that held back climate change action for decades.

Overall, the climate is one where the ‘neutral’ positions of experts – including transport geographers – are increasingly seen as politicised if they challenge the transport policy status quo. We might have to get used to it...

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