
Of the various sectors of urban history, the field of transportation is the most well-developed of those concerned with the interaction between technology and the city. The literature includes studies of both public and private transit, of streetcars and automobiles, of social, economic, and demographic impacts, and of public policy initiatives and responses. Most of these studies, however, have been of individual cities and have therefore lacked the richness and perspective supplied by comparative studies. Now Charles W. Cheape, assistant professor of history at Dartmouth College, has produced a comparative study of urban public transit development and policy in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia from 1880 to 1912 that greatly advances our knowledge concerning the process by which cities made decisions regarding urban transit innovations and their implementation.

Cheape’s work is especially useful not only because of its comparative perspective but also because of his grasp of the development of business history, the process of public policy formation, and the complexities of urban transit technology. He clearly shows how growing urban populations and expanding city boundaries demanded new motive technology which in turn created a need for large systems with coordinated schedules, crosstown lines, free transfers, and more elaborate organizational structures. The process of innovation in regard to new policies and technologies, however, varied from city to city and was determined by a configuration of local factors including variable growth rates, municipal and state politics, urban leadership, and legal and traditional factors. The result was a process of innovation and change which produced a subway first in Boston, the smallest city under consideration, mechanization last in New York, which had the greatest growth, and slow movement towards rapid transit in Philadelphia, which had a tradition of preferring private to municipal control.

Each case study is divided into two sections, one dealing with the mechanization of surface lines and the second with the implementation of rapid transit. In the three cities, mechanization of surface lines was not accomplished without consolidation of numerous horsecar lines.
As Cheape notes, "the source of radical change in street railway development came from men whose business experience began outside the industry" (p. 162). Because the various forms of public transport — horsecars, cablecars, electric streetcars, elevated railroads, and subways — all utilized the streets, they required public franchises. Since the new mechanized systems had also brought consolidation, they called into question public policies that had granted perpetual charters and had relied on regulation by competition. Public policy in each city therefore went through evolutionary stages often marked by the creation of new transit bodies and involving the public through referendums on different routes and technologies. Eventually, public demands for rapid transit service that private enterprise could not meet resulted in a larger role for municipal government in its provision than could have been anticipated at the beginning of the streetcar revolution. Cheape observes that "In all three cities policy alterations represented genuine efforts by merchants, other businessmen, and reformers to improve transit and to impose tighter controls over private enterprise in public service" (p. 211). In addition, he finds greater concern by the public for preserving environmental amenities from the negative impacts of transit innovation than has been previously recognized.

While this study supplies a detail and understanding of transit policy and implementation greater than that previously available, it is unfortunate that the author limited his cases to cities that did construct rapid transit before the First World War. In Pittsburgh, for instance, in spite of numerous plans (and even a successful bond issue) throughout the twentieth century, rapid transit was never constructed. Projects first being implemented today promise to provide a downtown subway for light-rail vehicles similar to the Boston solution that began operation in 1898. A critical question for transit history and policy in Pittsburgh is what type of factors blocked the development of rapid transit in this city and what difference this has made in urban development. A comparative study between a city that did implement transit and one that did not would take us a step beyond the riches that Cheape already provides.

*Department of Social Science*  
*Carnegie-Mellon University*  
*Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*  

Joel A. Tarr