

everyday is like sunday, silent and grey



Those of a certain vintage may, like me, have spent much too much time in their school sixth-form common room listening to the latest music. For us, indie songs gained most airplay, and, in particular, The Smiths and Morrissey. One single we all identified with was *Everyday is like Sunday*:

*'This is the coastal town
That they forgot to close down
[...]
Hide on the promenade
Etch a postcard:
'How I Dearly Wish I Was Not Here'
In the seaside town
That they forgot to bomb'*

Music/lyrics: Stephen Street/Steven Morrissey, 1988

Most of our urban areas and cities, at this time, were dull, unexciting, and sometimes intimidating. This was pre-urban renaissance in the UK, the late 1980s, where even the larger cities were unattractive places to be, and the flight to the suburbs was still going strong.

We didn't live in a coastal town, but our small town in South Yorkshire was also drab and dull, and our existence seemed bereft of excitement – unless we could beat the local rivals at football or cricket. Perhaps life could promise much more, and, for sure, we wanted to participate in something more exciting.

Thirty years on and surely we will have solved these problems in 2019? We could have invested in our urban fabric, built great transport systems, with public transport, walking and cycling networks – and created a range of cities and towns that people wish to live in. Let's consider Germany and France, where there has been massive investment over decades in sustainable transport systems, even in the smaller urban areas. In Germany, 44 cities have modern tramway systems, most of them upgrades to historic networks developed from the late 1890s and early 1900s. In France, 28 cities have tramways, mostly new projects built from the late 1980s onwards.

We will all be aware of excellent tramway case studies – in Berlin, Bordeaux, Freiburg, Grenoble, Karlsruhe, Kassel, Montpellier, Strasbourg, Tours, and many other places. These projects have supported the redevelopment of attractive historic city centres. Some later examples have even supported the regeneration of smaller urban areas with large social deprivation problems, such as in Saarbrücken and Valenciennes.

Now let's return to the UK. In 2019, London, the core cities and some historic market towns have been much improved, providing for a high quality of life that people aspire to. Many now wish to live in attractive cities with the many opportunities that they offer. The current problem is that they are now unaffordable to many. But there are wider urban contexts that remain firmly stuck in the 1970s and 1980s, including most of the smaller urban areas in northern England, where there are high levels of social deprivation and alienated populations, revolving around excruciating boredom. There are very limited public transport systems in these urban contexts – usually a struggling bus system and little else.

We investigated some of these problems in the Sintropher project,¹ considering how innovative public transport could be more effectively delivered in the so-called 'peripheral' areas. This was Professor Sir Peter Hall's last large research project, completed by myself and a team at University College London following his untimely death in 2014. As might be expected from Peter Hall, the framing of the project was very interesting. The more we stagger on in the Brexit saga, and as an unplanned 'hard' Brexit becomes more likely, the more prescient this project becomes.

Let me explain. The impacts of a decade of 'austerity' – i.e. under-investment in the public sector, alongside aggressive 'late capitalism' – have led to very uneven living standards across the UK. Income is now hugely inequitable in the UK relative to other industrialised and so-called developed countries. In 2018, the majority of households in the UK have disposable incomes below the mean income (£34,200). Households in the bottom 20% of the population have an average disposable income of £12,798, compared with the top 20% with £69,126. This also overlooks the share of income in the top 1% – which has been rising over



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The new tram line in Valenciennes – providing high-quality public transport connections to employment, education and leisure facilities, and assisting the regeneration of the region

time, reaching 13% in 2015. This is almost double the proportion for Belgium (7%) and higher than Australia (9%), Sweden (8%) and Norway (8%).

Wealth distribution is even more inequitable – in 2016, the richest 10% of households account for 44% of all wealth. The poorest 50% have only 9% of wealth. Spatially, the level of inequity is even more disastrous. In the UK, the South East has a median average total household wealth of £387,400, over twice the amount of wealth in households in the North West, at £165,200. In result, the UK has an income Gini coefficient of 0.35, the fifth-most unequal among the OECD countries – and not far behind the US.² Essentially, there has been no progress on income equity since 1985. It is not surprising that the disadvantaged populations are voting against this – and the low-income areas became important in the Brexit vote.

Sintropher examined how improved public transport in these low-income areas, particularly where there are large social deprivation problems, may help in supporting local economies. Transport is often an important contributor to social equity, providing the means to access activities and

participate in life. What transport systems are built, or not built, effects what employment, education and leisure activities can be reached.

In the majority of smaller towns in northern England, the public transport system on offer is very poor – with just a few unco-ordinated, low-quality buses, non-existent cycling facilities, and poor public realm. Probably the street environment is dominated by vehicles and very unattractive. This is regressive public policy at scale. Ask any transport planner and they will tell you it is almost impossible to extract funding for high-quality public transport in these contexts from the centralised funding system run by the Department for Transport. Suggested projects are met almost with disdain – there are few assumed ‘economic efficiency’ benefits to be recognised in the cost-benefit analysis that is required in the project appraisal process. This is a complex and unappreciated story: how the appraisal system is biased against investment in areas with high levels of social deprivation.³

Yet these are problem areas that we cannot simply eradicate or forget; they need some investment, some care and attention, and a solution to be found.

Valenciennes, located in the north east of France, provides an example of how public transport investment can help to regenerate an urban area. Here, a tramway system has been built largely for social equity reasons, improving the range of activities that can be reached by the local population. Certainly there is a weak economic efficiency case for tram investment, but that rationale is required only in the UK context. In France, projects are prioritised against local policy objectives, and these cover social, environmental and economic goals.

In Valenciennes, the closure of the textiles, coal and steel industries in the 1980s and earlier left a declining population, high levels of unemployment, under-used land, and neglected infrastructure. The original Valenciennes tram was built in 1881, but was closed in 1966 as local traditional industries declined and passenger demand decreased.

Economic activity has since been revived through growth in automobile production (a Toyota assembly line), the development of a cluster for the railway industry (including the European Railway Industry, Alstom, Bombardier, and other suppliers), and the University of Valenciennes. Population growth has returned and unemployment is lower than the national average. In 2016, the city of Valenciennes has 45,000 inhabitants, and the wider region of 82 municipalities has a population of 400,000.

‘The lessons from Sintropher can extend beyond tram-based systems – all of our struggling urban areas need investment in high-quality public transport options and high-quality walking and cycling networks’

The building of a new tramway, from 2006 onwards, has been used to support regeneration and new development, with the new routes acting as a spine between the university, the city centre, new employment activities, and the wider regional centres. Scheme promoters include SITURV (Syndicat Intercommunal des Transports Urbains de la Région de Valenciennes), the city municipality of Valenciennes, and the development agency Valenciennes Métropole. Following the planning of a new tram route in the 1990s, the first section (Line A) opened in 2006, with a length of 9.5 kilometres,

servicing the University of Valenciennes, the city centre, and suburban Anzin. An extension to Denain was opened in 2007 (Line B), and a new route between Anzin and Vieux-Condé (Line C) opened in 2014. The tram now has an overall length of 34 kilometres and was built for a total cost of 420 million euro.¹

Line C was part-funded by the Sintropher project, operating as a single-track bi-directional system with passing loops – the line runs with 15.5 kilometres of single-track and 2.5 kilometres of conventional double-track tramway. The single-track is innovative, minimising land-take in the urban street, and is also less expensive in terms of building and operation in a relatively low-demand corridor. Tram stops include real-time display and ticket purchase. The Citadis tram vehicles, manufactured by Alstom, with low floors and double doors, allow rapid boarding of passengers. Each tram, with five vehicles, can hold up to 295 passengers.

The route is integrated with the bus system, national rail stops, and park and ride. Priority is given to the tram at junctions; hence traffic is stopped while the tram passes. Concessions are given to various groups, including job seekers registered with the local unemployment agency, who are given a free monthly transit pass upon securing a new job.

The growth of trams in Valenciennes, and wider in France, has been funded by the local employment tax, the *versement transport*, which can be up to 1.75% of an employer’s payroll. This gives city authorities a large income stream that can be used for the development and operation of public transport.

The Sintropher project invested in these types of innovative tram-based projects in North West Europe, in Valenciennes, Kassel, Saarbrücken, and West Flanders, and to a limited extent in Blackpool. We hoped that investment could be widened in the UK; that similar tram and tram-train projects could be developed in the UK to support urban areas with social deprivation problems. For example, we hoped that the tram-train pilots could become permanent projects, with systems in Preston-Blackpool, Greater Manchester and the West Midlands and surrounding regions.⁴

The lessons from Sintropher can extend beyond tram-based systems – all of our struggling urban areas need investment in high-quality public transport options and high-quality walking and cycling networks. Blackpool, Brixham, Doncaster, Hastings, Southend, Wigan ... I can go on, for some time.

There are complex issues at play – there are large levels of inequity between urban areas but also within them. Blackpool is adjacent to Lytham,

Preston, Burnley, Accrington, and Manchester. There are very different life opportunities on offer in all of these places, and not surprisingly those with a lower quality of life are aware that others are more fortunate. They have been ignored and left behind in many ways, including with public transport investments. Transport networks and accessibility play one part in social equity – there are many contributory issues, including differential economies, poor levels of education and skill levels, and political representation. As a result, there is a very different level of participation in activities – and in life – and it is this that is very unfair.

The Brexit vote somehow came to be viewed by the electorate as an anti-establishment vote, and alongside xenophobia (Nigel Farage), free-market economics (Jacob Rees-Mogg) and some calculated career building (Boris Johnson), an unlikely coalition appeared and won. But the winning politicians, of course, will not tackle the social equity problem. We can be sure of this: these people have profited from the current social structures in life – they see nothing wrong. As Harvey⁵ reminds us, the capitalist effort is the concerted redistribution of the wealth to the elite. This is the agenda, and it does nothing for Blackpool or similar towns. Transport only plays a minor role in these debates, but, unless we take a different approach to public transport investment, there will be many areas that remain silent and grey.

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Notes

- 1 *Connecting European Regions Using Innovative Transport. Summary Report.* INTERREG IVB Sintropher Project. University College London, May 2017. <https://sintropher.eu/publications/sintropher-project-results-summary-report>
- 2 'The scale of economic inequality in the UK'. Webpage. The Equality Trust, 2019. www.equalitytrust.org.uk/scale-economic-inequality-uk
- 3 R Hickman: 'The gentle tyranny of CBA in transport appraisal'. In I Docherty and J Shaw (Eds): *Transport Matters*. Policy Press, 2019
- 4 I Hamiduddin and R Hickman: 'Planning for public transport: applying European good practice to UK regions?'. In J Ferm and J Tomaney (Eds): *Planning Practice: Critical Perspectives from the UK*. Routledge, 2018
- 5 D Harvey: *A Brief History of Neo-Liberalism*. Oxford University Press, 2005