



The Spaces of Parking: Mapping the Politics of Mobility in San Francisco

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Abstract: Recently a “mobility turn” has entered critical geographic discourse. This mobility turn recognizes that mobility is at once physical movement and contains social meanings that are manifested in a politics of mobility. In this paper I contribute to this emerging line of inquiry by exploring how the politics of mobility is manifested in localized urban processes. Mobility, as with the broader localized urban process, is political and ideological, and this is particularly true with contemporary debates about automobiles and parking in cities. I explore parking as an example of the broader contestation of urban space, using a case study of San Francisco, California. There are three broad factions in San Francisco’s parking debates—progressives that advocate for less parking, neoliberals that advocate that market-based pricing determine the amount of parking, and neoconservatives that advocate for more parking. Throughout the paper, I provide thoughts on the relationship between parking, space, ideology, and the broader urban process.

Keywords: politics of mobility, neoliberalism, neoconservatives, progressive politics, urban process

Introduction

Mobility, or movement through space, is inherently geographical, and geographers have a tradition of analyzing mobility both within and between cities (Hanson and Giuliano 2004). Like place, mobility can be measured and modeled empirically. Also like place, mobility is imbued with meaning and power (Cresswell 2006b). Geographers recognize that mobility is a highly differentiated activity where many different people move in many different ways, and that this differentiation is political and ideological (Adey 2006; Cresswell 2006b). A new “mobility turn” in social sciences includes a politics of mobility in which movement becomes socially encoded and normative views of correct mobility are based on morals and ideology (Cresswell 2006a).

The politics of mobility is not just about contesting how people or goods move through space; the politics of mobility should also be understood in the context of how space is configured and organized to facilitate movement, and this in turn is determined by political power. Physically, different forms of mobility are spatially incongruent

and how these incongruities are negotiated or contested at the urban scale is the broad ambit of this paper.¹ Different forms of mobility, such as movement by car or movement by foot, need different built environments to be functional, and are only privileged when political power promotes one over the other. Automobiles need wide roads, ample parking, extensive infrastructure, and separated, low-density, dispersed land uses in order to ensure the automobile network is integrated and not overwhelmed with congestion (Gordon and Richardson 1997; Shoup 2005). And though contested, automobiles are also part of a system (at least in the United States) calculated to coerce individuals into driving, that subordinates all other modes of transport and ways of dwelling, that requires enormous state subsidy and regimentation of urban space for maximum throughput and speed, and requires a centralized state-backed capitalist oligopoly of oil, highway, automotive manufacturing and real estate control over transportation policy (Freund and Martin 1993; Urry 2004). By contrast, a non-automobile, pedestrian, bicycle and urban transit mobility requires narrower, calmer streets, wider sidewalks, ample crosswalks, and dense, mixed land uses (Duany et al 2000). As discussed later in this paper, different forms of political power promote this particular mobility regime.

In this paper I contribute further to why the politics of mobility matters to critical geography using a case study about parking policy in San Francisco, California. Parking is the terminal component, or “mooring”, of automobile transport and is just as vital to automobility as a train station is for rail, an airport gate is for airlines, or as docks are for shipping (Hannam et al 2006). Without parking, automobiles would be useless, but in cities parking consumes vast spaces that pre-empt other uses and make other mobilities incongruent.

Parking is a particularly contentious debate in San Francisco, where new policies aimed at reducing parking, and by default, automobile usage, have come up against a backlash political movement seeking to require more parking in the city. This was manifested in a contentious election over parking policy in November 2007, and this election will serve as the backdrop for this paper. Briefly, a ballot initiative was placed on the November 2007 ballot that would have allowed more parking to be built in San Francisco at a time when transportation, neighborhood, and environmental activists and planners were successfully reducing parking. While this initiative was defeated soundly, it does provide a lens into how San Francisco’s parking debate is not just about parking; it is also a debate about how the city should be configured and organized, and for whom. As local responses to global warming, energy consumption, and the social justice implications of automobiles proliferate, San Francisco provides a poignant example for scholars, activists and policymakers interested in how the challenges to the automobile and its spaces are unfolding.

The paper begins with an elaboration on why parking matters to critical geography and why San Francisco is an appropriate bellwether for challenging automobility. Next, employing archival research coupled with participant observation in San Francisco's planning and electoral process, I provide a map of the political landscape around parking in San Francisco. Specifically, I examine three competing ideologies—progressives, neoliberals and neoconservatives—and how each ideology contains a vision of parking policy that is articulated in the local political landscape. Political progressives, invoking environmental and social justice concerns about urban space, seek to use government to limit the overall amount of parking in the city. Neoliberals envision a parking regime shaped by pricing and markets, consistent with the broader agenda of privatization of space and market-based pricing of public access to space. Neoconservatives, conjuring rigid cultural arguments, essentialize automobile usage and insist that government require abundant parking throughout the city in order to accommodate the “love affair” with automobiles. Throughout the paper, I provide thoughts on the relationship between parking, space, ideology and the broader urban process.

Why Parking Matters

Debates about parking are part of a broader debate about the combined impact on the built environment of motor vehicles, the automobile industry, the highway and street networks, and corollary services, plus the centering of society and everyday life around the car and its spaces (Freund and Martin 1993; Newman and Kenworthy 1999; Urry 2004). The automobile is more than just a status symbol or a neutral technology that permits patterns of life that would happen anyway; it has entirely configured modern urban life in increasingly environmentally, socially and economically unsustainable patterns of dwelling, production and consumption (Sheller and Urry 2000).

Any reasonable transformation of cities based on ecological sustainability and social justice would surely require political contestation of automobility—and particularly parking. Hagman (2006) positions parking in the context of what he called the “promises of automobility.” Automobility promises instant gratification through speed and individual freedom to go wherever one wants, whenever one wants. But this unfettered mobility must also include the unfettered ability to stop wherever and whenever one wants—to park the car. Yet unlike televisions, cars are difficult to switch off, to dispose of. The car must be parked, and (at least in most of San Francisco) when parked, one must remember where one left the car, when the parking meter is running out, or when the car must be moved for street sweeping. Parking problems stop or hinder motorists from reaching their destination and

thus, for a motorist, a parking space is “one of the most precious and desirable objects of our time” (Hagman 2006:68).

Yet parking is one of the most under-taught and least understood aspects of urban geography and has little recognition in the critical geographic analysis of urban space despite it being an “infrastructural mooring” for the system of automobility. Most texts in regional science, transportation planning, and urban economics don’t even mention parking (Shoup 2005). Even though parking is an urban land use with a substantial geographic footprint and profound ecological and social justice implications, parking is not mentioned in key urban transport geography textbooks, such as *The Geography of Urban Transportation* by Hanson and Guliano (2004). Moreover, the critical geographic literature on gentrification and on the broader neoliberalization of cities, such as works by Harvey (1989, 2000), Smith (1996), and recently, Hackworth (2007), barely mentions the role that mobility and the politics of parking have on the urban process.

This is an unfortunate omission because parking consumes vast amounts of space. Individual parking spaces may seem small, but when access and egress to and from parking spaces are included, the typical parking space in North America ranges from 300 to 350 square feet (Litman 2004; Shoup 2005). The spaces of production and reproduction, such as individual offices and bedrooms, are often smaller than parking spaces. To provide some urgency as to why critical geographers should think about parking, if the world’s population of 6.1 billion had the same car ownership rate as the United States had in 2000, there would be 4.7 billion vehicles on the planet. Since the logic of automobility requires that each car have at least one space at home, and three more at other destinations, the world would need 19 billion parking spaces, or a parking lot the size of France (Shoup 2005). This does not include roads, gas stations and tire dumps.

Acknowledging the vast spaces consumed by parking will be crucial to urban futures, especially since China and other developing nations are attempting to replicate the United States, where parking is the arbiter of urban form (see Shoup 2005 for an eloquent sequential outline of how parking shapes cities). Confronting the spaces of parking will also mean challenging the assumption that good “mobility” means driving everywhere, for every thing, all of the time. Scholars outside of critical geography, as well as activists and policymakers, have begun this work with discourses on reconfiguring urban space into denser, transit-oriented and walkable built forms—a development pattern broadly labeled “smart growth” or “new urbanism” in the US, or “compact cities” in Europe. In London and Stockholm, congestion charging schemes that limit automobility and remove parking have been implemented to the disdain of motorists but to the delight of transit riders. In Paris, where automobility had for decades usurped other urban uses, car space has

recently been systematically removed to privilege bicycles and surface transit; and the city now offers publicly financed bicycle sharing (not coincidentally, both London and Paris have socialist mayors).

In the US the discussion of removing car space has been less welcomed. Even in New York City, where congestion charging in Manhattan is under consideration, removal of car space, and specifically, confronting parking policy, has not gained as much traction. With excessive parking requirements throughout US urban areas, truly sustainable infill development is all but discouraged. Small-scale retail in compact urban areas cannot be rebuilt as infill because so much space is required for parking. Flexible re-use of buildings becomes limited, and many older urban core structures are torn down to provide required parking. If parking is placed underground or in hidden garages, it adds considerably to the cost of housing and commercial space, accelerating gentrification.

In San Francisco, however, contesting car space, and particularly parking, is on the table, and how this unfolds make it an intriguing bellwether for other places. In 2005, environmental, housing, and neighborhood advocates, backed by planners, successfully reduced parking requirements for new residential and commercial buildings in downtown San Francisco, implementing what is arguably the most radical parking policy in the nation. Moreover, in some of San Francisco's inner neighborhoods near downtown, proposals to reduce parking in thousands of future residential infill projects have weaved through the planning process and are poised to be codified in the next few years (one neighborhood plan was codified in late 2007). None of this has come easy, and a political backlash has emerged that seeks to reverse this trend. In 2007 a ballot measure called "Parking for Neighborhoods" (Prop H) was put on the local election ballot that would have revoked the new reduced parking policies. Moreover, Prop H would have allowed bus stops and street trees to be removed in order to install garages, and would have allowed new mega-garages to be constructed in downtown and in various neighborhoods in the city. Significantly, Prop H would have positioned San Francisco as more of a bedroom community for Silicon Valley rather than as a vibrant city. While the politics of mobility is also the politics of parking, the politics of parking is the politics of urban redevelopment in San Francisco.

Parking also includes extensions of normative values and ideologies, or a systematic set of fundamental beliefs and principles that assert what mobility should be and for whom. Just as Lefebvre (1991) theorized that the character and nature of produced space reflects the dominant modes of production and social relations within a given society, we must give consideration to how mobility—and parking space—contains embedded social relations. Seeing mobility (and parking) as socially produced allows an exploration of how particular modes of mobility are

enabled, given license, encouraged, or facilitated (Cresswell 2006a). As many geographers and urban scholars such as Harvey (1982, 1996) and Logan and Molotch (1987) have analyzed how the contestation of urban space is an extension of struggles over differing values and ideologies, so too we must consider this with parking. It is necessary to ask who decided what type of parking policy is appropriate and to identify the wider social and cultural context within which the debate over parking occurs. What I provide in this paper is an empirically based mapping of how competing ideologies about parking and mobility are materialized in the built environment, and how these ideologies engage in a politics of mobility at the local scale.

In the following sections I outline three broad factions in San Francisco's parking debates. Progressives, who opposed Prop H, advocate for government regulation to limit and reduce parking. Neoliberals, who were publicly silent or divided on Prop H, but leaned against Prop H, advocate that market-based pricing determine the amount of parking in the city. And neoconservatives, who were supportive of Prop H, advocate that government require more parking.

The research was conducted between January 2004 (when parking came to the fore of local planning debates) and November 2007, and included extensive direct observation through attendance of neighborhood meetings, City Planning Commission Meetings, and San Francisco Board of Supervisors Meetings. Informal interviews were conducted with key stakeholders in San Francisco's parking debates, including activists and planners. Additionally, the author conducted participant observation in the campaign against Prop H between July 2007 and November 2007.

The Politics of Parking in San Francisco

Progressives and Parking

San Francisco is widely thought of as the progressive capital of the United States, a bastion for liberal political values centered on civil rights, tolerance, environmentalism and world peace (De Leon 1992; Walker 2007). As De Leon (1992) points out, there are three threads to San Francisco progressives. Political liberals support government redistributive programs and focus on access to jobs, housing and education, emphasizing the working poor and minorities. This faction is composed of gays, Latinos, African-Americans, renters, and lower-income workers. Local public policies such as rent control and laws requiring affordable housing to accompany most new development are manifestations of this faction's political prowess. Environmentalists, a second component of San Francisco's progressive community, believe in using government to limit or contain the impacts

of economic growth on the environment and quality of life. San Francisco's progressive environmental movement is steeped in urban-focused land use, transportation, open space and historic preservation issues.

Rounding out the "three lefts" are San Francisco's populists—turf-based neighborhood activists engaging in grass-roots struggles over control of public space. The populists dislike big government and big business (De Leon 1992) and also draw from gays, homeowners, as well as Latinos. Central to the populist thread is a disdain of the corporated downtown development interests, and a willingness to impose height limits and impact fees upon them.

Geographically, progressives are concentrated in San Francisco's inner-ring neighborhoods, straddling downtown from the Western Addition, Haight-Ashbury and Inner Sunset through the Mission and southwards to Potrero Hill and Bernal Heights. Progressives are decidedly unrepresented in the City's northern and western neighborhoods.

As a progressive city, San Francisco is in many ways a bellwether for the politics of mobility, at least in the United States. San Francisco stood out in the 1960s as the birthplace of the "freeway revolt" when, contrary to planning policies in most American cities, it canceled a criss-crossing matrix of freeways that would have divided and separated neighborhoods (Issel 1999). Instead the city established a "transit first" policy that promotes public transit, walking and bicycling. Decades later a second freeway revolt, forced by an earthquake, resulted in dueling ballot initiatives that resulted in further segments of freeway being removed (King 2004; San Francisco County Transportation Authority 2004). San Francisco is also the birthplace of the monthly "Critical Mass", whereby hundreds and sometimes thousands of bicyclists take over city streets unimpeded, blocking intersections and forcing motorists to wait for its passage. Its motto "we are not blocking traffic, we are traffic" poignantly criticizes the automobile-petroleum industrial complex, oil wars, global warming, and the excessive privatization of the public realm that has accompanied automobility (Blickstein and Hanson 2001; Carlsson 2002).

The city has a cadre of sustainable transportation organizations, planners, environmentalists and housing advocates pushing for the replacement of car space with proposals such as bus rapid transit (a cheaper version of light rail), traffic calming and greening of the streetscape, car-sharing instead of ownership, and eliminating requirements for parking in new developments. This advocacy is also rooted in the idea that too much mobility results in both environmental degradation and major social inequality at the local, national and global scale. Hence it includes visions of a compact, walkable city where all daily needs are met without having to travel great distances. Incrementally all of the ingredients for a progressive urban transport

system are becoming institutionalized in San Francisco, and the city is clearly at the cutting edge.

San Francisco's progressives have a nuanced understanding of parking and space. Excessive parking is a concern for progressives because it undermines the public realm and the operations of transit, while accelerating the privatization of urban space and generating more car traffic and more pollution. From a more critical social justice angle, progressives are concerned about parking space because it is understood to make the provision of affordable housing difficult. Progressives, therefore, believe that government regulations limiting parking are a necessary ingredient for making San Francisco a more socially just and ecologically sound city.

One of the key progressive concerns is the privatization of the commons that accompanies new off-street parking. Off-street parking requires curb cuts which, from an environmental perspective, also result in the loss of street trees and degrade the pedestrian environment. From a populist angle, private off-street parking reduces publicly accessible on-street parking because curb cuts and driveways take away those spaces. This is especially problematic in older, dense urban areas where progressives are concentrated. In San Francisco, with many small lot sizes of one to four housing units, it is estimated that roughly 7500–15,000 public on-street parking spaces would be lost if new parking were added to the large stock of pre-1920 buildings that currently do not have parking (San Francisco Planning Department 2007a).

The privatization of the commons also causes the loss of important neighborhood-serving commercial space such as small-scale walk-up shops. The San Francisco Planning Department estimates that about 1500 parcels in neighborhood commercial areas can be retrofit or redeveloped for small businesses, many with housing above. Yet if one parking space per new residential unit is required by law, and parking required for retail, roughly 30,000 linear feet of frontage for ground floor retail would be lost citywide, amounting to 1500 fewer small retail spaces (San Francisco Planning Department 2007a). To put it bluntly, neighborhoods like the iconic North Beach simply could not be built today because parking policies require each housing unit to have a parking space.

From a social justice perspective, progressives argue that the provision of parking both reduces the amount of available housing and reduces affordability. A traditional apartment building with 100 units would have to be two stories taller if each unit has a parking space, but since San Francisco, like most cities, has strong height and bulk limitations, the apartment building would likely have to remain low rise, and thus would have as much as 20–25% fewer housing units, thus reducing density (San Francisco Planning Department 2002). Parking reduces the number of permitted units on a site because required

parking and housing cannot be squeezed into the same site (Shoup 2005:152).

Meanwhile, the provision of a parking space adds as much as 20% to the cost of each housing unit (San Francisco Planning Department 2007a), or anywhere from \$20,000 to 100,000, depending on whether parking is above or below ground. For non-profit affordable housing, this means that the limited funding for affordable housing has to also be used for parking, and thus fewer affordable units get constructed. Parking also increases the cost of market-rate housing. Units without parking sell for about 10–15% less than units with parking. One study of the relationship between parking and housing costs concluded that 24% more households (16,600 households) could afford to buy single-family housing in San Francisco if there was no parking, and 20% more households (26,800 households) could buy a condo with no parking (Jia and Wachs 1998). For many progressives, including those who own and drive automobiles, it is understood that the cumulative affect of requiring parking is the suburbanization of the city. Moreover, parking is at the crux of broader conflicts over gentrification and defining who the city is for.

With a majority on the city's legislative body, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors (equivalent to a city council), progressives have been able to enact the most restrictive parking policies in the nation. In 2006 the Board of Supervisors adopted new standards that substantially reduce allowable parking for all new development in downtown San Francisco and in some adjacent neighborhoods. This is significant because thousands of new housing units are planned for downtown and adjacent areas of San Francisco in the coming decade. Traditional requirements of a minimum of one parking space per residential unit were eliminated. All new development in these areas in and around downtown San Francisco, including office and retail, can occur with no parking at all. If a development does have parking, it is limited by new maximums of one space per four housing units "by right", with strict conditional uses enabling three spaces for every four units.² Exceptions were made to allow up to one space per residential unit if the unit had two or more bedrooms, a provision reluctantly added to appeal to arguments that families with children would not live downtown without parking (this debatable argument will be taken up in subsequent sections of this paper). The new parking provisions also set restrictions on curb cuts downtown, and required that all parking provision be decoupled from the cost of housing.

In the meantime, progressive parking standards have been proposed for more inner neighborhoods in San Francisco. Due west of downtown straddling both sides of Market Street, the proposed Market and Octavia Better Neighborhoods Plan includes upwards of 6000 potential new housing units, and if the plan passes, housing can be built with no

parking if a developer chooses. Like the downtown rule, if a developer chooses to have parking, the by-right ratios are lower than one-to-one throughout much of the area. These proposed parking controls reflect the current pattern of 40% car-free households within the plan area, and seek to preserve that pattern (San Francisco Planning Department 2007a). Several additional inner neighborhoods have new planning processes underway that also include reductions in parking requirements.

The progressive parking policies outlined here show that parking is about more than technical differences over the number of spaces or street width. Parking is about values towards cities and urban space. Progressives, represented by a majority on the Board of Supervisors, have a vision of the city that privileges housing and public space over abundant parking, and progressives believe in a local government actively achieving that vision. But progressive values are not hegemonic in San Francisco, and like most advanced capitalist cities, progressive values often conflict with neoliberal and neoconservative values. As we shall see in the next sections, both of these ideologies have accompanying visions of mobility and parking that contest the progressive parking policies recently implemented in San Francisco.

Neoliberal Parking

San Francisco may be known as a progressive city, but at its core it is also a neoliberal city (Walker 1996, 2007). It is a significant global financial center and, together with Silicon Valley, was ground-zero for the 1990s internet boom. It is widely known as an incubator of capitalist enterprise and a city that celebrates unfettered individuality as a key ingredient for entrepreneurial wealth generation. It has also seen its share of commercialization and privatization of the landscape, from corporate naming rights of ballparks to charter schools. Like most capitalist cities, San Francisco also has capitalist land holders cognizant of the role mobility has in maintaining the exchange value of the city (Whitt 1982; see Henderson 2004, 2006 on how corporate elites navigate the politics of mobility elsewhere).

Not surprisingly, a neoliberal discourse about pricing mechanisms and urban space permeates debates about parking in San Francisco. For example, neoliberals generally support decoupling the price of parking from housing, and pricing on-street parking to reflect market-rate demand. Parking reform that emphasizes pricing is encouraged by San Francisco Planning and Urban Research (SPUR), a prominent civic organization and think tank made up of developers, attorneys, architects and planners. Interestingly, pricing is increasingly accepted in San Francisco's progressive transportation advocacy community, including Livable City and the San Francisco Bicycle Coalition, as a way of reducing automobility. This adaptation of neoliberalism reflects the

parallel trend in Bay Area conservation efforts, whereby private capital is frequently used to conserve open space rather than the traditional method of direct state intervention (Guthey et al 2003; Walker 2007). Like the open space land trusts, sustainable transport organizations have had to be innovative and work within the parameters of a neoliberal political economy in order to produce socially good outcomes.

In San Francisco's politics of mobility, the relationship between parking and neoliberal ideology is contradictory. On the one hand, it seems self-evident that neoliberals would want to deregulate parking by eliminating minimums and allow developers the flexibility to build as they see fit. In a dense, transit rich city, there are also substantial reasons to redevelop without being burdened with parking provisions. This enables more housing provision per land unit, and hypothetically more profit since parking by itself does not bring a high rate of return. Indeed, many in the development community accept the reduction of parking minimums—it implies less government. And in San Francisco's downtown, some profitable new developments have been constructed with little or no parking (although to be sure, there is market-rate parking available in garages nearby).

But neoliberal developers are less enthusiastic about more stringent rules, promoted by progressives, which cap the amount of parking that can be built. Many disdain government-imposed caps on allowable parking downtown and proposed caps for inner neighborhoods—that is, more government regulation. More significantly, some developers support allowing (not requiring) more parking, at least one space per residential unit, because adding parking to housing units can increase the overall sales value of the housing unit if the market is targeted at wealthier households, rather than to middle-class or lower-income housing. This is because for-profit developers do not absorb the cost of parking provision. Rather, developers add luxury items to housing units that include parking and inflate the price in order to get a higher return (Jia and Wachs 1998). This targets a more upscale “new urban bourgeoisie” demographic that upscales the housing market. This is the exact redevelopment trend in San Francisco, where few new rental units are constructed, but luxury condominiums are prolific.

Invoking Knox's (1991) analysis of the post-industrial urban built environment, San Francisco both attracts and breeds a potent class stratum of “new bourgeoisie” made up of professionals, such as public administrators, professors and executives in the private sector, and a “petit bourgeoisie” class fraction including junior executives and management, engineers, medical and social service personnel, and workers involved in cultural production and reproduction such as authors, editors, radio and television producers and presenters, and journalists. This stratum tends to work in many of the burgeoning “knowledge value” or “creative class” industries, such as new media,

graphic arts, advertising and software development (Florida 2005; Kotkin 1999). To be sure, political progressives are among this stratum, complicating the politics of parking because this subset demands parking, while the broader progressives agenda is to limit or reduce parking.

San Francisco realtors and developers recognize that this class stratum is centered not solely on occupational structure but, rather, on both occupational structure and patterns of consumption. From a real estate angle, the most pronounced of these patterns of consumption has been re-urbanization in the form of gentrification and historic preservation in older cities like San Francisco. Arts and music, bars, restaurants, a “café culture”, museums and other traditionally urban amenities are considered key to the lifestyle of this creative class.

Significantly, this segment of San Francisco’s population also has a profound mobility regime that it is centered on a lifestyle choice to live in a compact, walkable city, yet also own a car. The new urban bourgeoisie mobility regime includes urban loft living, remodeled older single detached homes in former streetcar suburbs, walkable new urbanist infill developments, and a more urbane lifestyle. Neoliberal developers know this and seek to provide it while also providing what Marshall (2000) called “hiding the driveway” and what others have called “parking-in-the-back new urbanism.” That is, the new urban bourgeoisie seeks to minimize the negative aesthetics and more extreme externalities of automobility, but not to significantly alter its primacy in everyday life.³ The epitome of this is perhaps best described as the “Silicon implants” who work in low-rise sprawling office parks in the suburbs, and solo-commute by car, but who also prefer to live in a more urbane San Francisco and particularly in the “live-work lofts” that proliferated during the 1990s. The daily reverse commute to Silicon Valley and other suburbs is clearly visible weekday mornings in the areas immediately adjacent to the southbound highway 101 on-ramps.

Poised to construct thousands of new housing units in downtown and in the inner neighborhoods surrounding downtown, neoliberal developers seek to provide parking for their clientele, the new urban bourgeoisie, in order to maximize profit. For example, the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce argues that if the city wants to attract residents to the downtown, it must require all new development to have more parking (San Francisco Board of Supervisors 2007b). This begs the question—who is the Chamber of Commerce trying to attract to the downtown?

Progressive parking policy, as outlined in the previous section, dampens profit. With that understanding, the downtown development interests in San Francisco protested and successfully diluted the new progressive parking standards outlined in the previous section. Influential developers, land owners, and the San Francisco Chamber of

Commerce lobbied the neoliberal Mayor, Gavin Newsome, to veto the stronger parking standards passed by the progressive majority on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors (the lobbying, behind the scenes, was revealed through a sunshine meeting request from a leftist/populist member of the Board of Supervisors who supported stronger parking regulations; *San Francisco Bay Guardian* 2006). The downtown parking issue became a high-profile public dispute between the neoliberal Mayor and the politically progressive majority on the Board of Supervisors (Goodyear 2006; Jones 2006; Lazarus et al 2006). After the mayor's veto, progressives and neoliberals negotiated a set of weaker parking standards.

To be sure, the downtown parking standards are, incrementally, a progressive change in parking policy compared with past parking policies. Transportation advocates point out that even the diluted standards are more progressive than those for the rest of the Bay Area, New York City, and even new developments in London (Radulovich 2007). The standards still replace parking minimums with parking maximums, meaning that developers can choose not to provide parking. Significantly the standards are below one parking space per housing unit (one parking space for every four housing units, and three parking spaces for every four housing units with conditions), and curb cuts and garages on key transit-oriented streets are restricted.

Nevertheless, the dilution of the downtown parking policies by neoliberal development interests seeking to accommodate the new urban bourgeoisie, reflects that mobility is a politically negotiated process as much as a technical one. This politically negotiated process reflects the tension between those who believe one can live in the city with less space for automobiles (progressives), and those who believe providing spaces for automobiles is necessary for increasing exchange values in downtown real estate (neoliberals). And yet even this negotiated settlement between progressives and neoliberals on parking has its detractors, and as shown in the next section, a considerable political backlash against any limits on parking remains a potent factor in San Francisco's politics of mobility.

Neoconservative Automobility

While progressives believe government should actively discourage parking and driving, and neoliberals theoretically believe the market should decide, neoconservatives in San Francisco believe government should proactively accommodate all motor vehicles. San Francisco is far from a bastion of the neoconservative ideologies associated with broader American politics. Only 12% of registered voters are Republican, and roughly 58,000 voted for George Bush in the 2004 election. Thus the term neoconservative is used with reservation and contingency.

Yet there is a neoconservative element in San Francisco politics, particularly in what Castells called “family land” on the city’s west side (DeLeon 1992:18). With increased affluence and demographic change, San Francisco might be becoming slightly more conservative, as observed by the city’s sole Republican Planning Commissioner, who advocates for more homeownership in the city: “. . . increasing home ownership is the key to the conservative future. When people buy their homes, they tend to vote more conservatively than renters, says Michael Antonini” (Cavanaugh 2005).

The neoconservative deployment here is of an ideology seeking, as Hackworth (2007) alludes, to preserve and promote a set of politically conservative social relations. This is readily apparent in the debates about parking, where using government to actively preserve automobility, as a set of social relations, is significant. A neoconservative position on parking in San Francisco seeks to preserve the status quo of car access to the downtown and throughout the city. It is steeped in the normative vision that “people still need cars” and is rooted in what I call the essentialization of automobility, or an inevitableness in discourses about automobiles and parking.

Neoconservatives tap into and manipulate what Sheller (2004) calls “automotive emotions”. That is, car consumption is about more than rational economic choice among a fully informed citizenry. It also has an emotional geography that occurs at different scales ranging from individual bodies, to the family setting of car use, to regional and national identity. Automotive emotions are the embedded dispositions of car users and emotions associated with car use. The individual feels the car through pleasure, fear, euphoria, pain and envy, and reflects particular emotions towards the material and social world.

Further, the idea of inevitability or a love affair of cars arises in part from the claim that the automobile embodies such values as individualism, freedom and democracy so dearly held in Western societies, especially the United States (Dunn 1998). A neoconservative automobility relies on cultural arguments and broad universalizations about the automobile. It differs from a neoliberal ideology in that neoliberals are ambivalent about the car. To neoliberals the car is simply an outcome of pricing and market forces, and parking just a means towards profit given the context. A neo-conservative ideology, on the other hand, frames the automobile in a culturally nationalist way (it’s American or Californian to drive), and steeps automobility and parking in a wider desire for order and hierarchy (cars first, pedestrians should wait at the curb, parking is freedom and order, lack of parking is chaos but also totalitarian). Neoconservative automobility insists the outcome of full automobility is simply natural and inevitable, with the belief that the automobile is morally superior and that real American values equate with automobility. Two lines of neoconservative rhetoric about

automobility stand out in San Francisco—automobiles are needed for families, and automobiles are essential for small businesses to survive.

Significantly, family values are deployed rhetorically in debates about parking in San Francisco. For example, Supervisor Alioto Piers, representing the relatively conservative Marina and Pacific Heights, argues that parking is an “important resource to families” and that as an advocate for families, she believes more parking is needed (San Francisco Board of Supervisors 2007a). She essentializes automobility, stating that families need cars to transport their children and run errands. Similarly, the Coalition for San Francisco Neighborhoods (CSFN), a collection of conservative, mostly west side neighborhood groups, states “families with children cannot function without a car” (CSFN, December 2005).

Implicit in this rhetoric are certain neoconservative conceptualizations of family and responsibility. The neoconservative politics of mobility addresses the day-to-day moralities involved with coordinating family life and social networks in an automobilized society. Using the “family car” is associated with care and love for family and friends (Sheller 2004). Indeed, it shows a moral commitment to family and care for others. Feelings of protection, security and safety are emphasized, providing parents with a sense of empowerment. This is especially evident with mothers who perceive they are afforded with liberation with access to a car (despite the chauffeuring and spatial expansion of domestic duties).

Private consumption of the home and by the family takes precedence over public consumption, what Harvey (1989), invoking McPherson (1962), described as “possessive individualism”. Private yards and private malls are preferred over public parks and civic spaces, and most importantly for the purpose of this paper, private automobiles preferred over public transport. Mitchell (2004) extends this to the “SUV model of citizenship” centered on privatized, unhindered, cocooned movement through public space, whereby people feel they have a right not to be burdened through interaction with anyone or anything they wish to avoid.

A common family values argument deployed in San Francisco is that the city’s public transit system is dysfunctional and unreliable, and that the city streets are unsafe for children to walk or bicycle. While these may be true to an extent, the neoconservative approach is that rather than fix these problems, an emphasis on personal responsibility towards one’s family results in the necessity of driving—and the need for parking. What is not part of the neoconservative argument is re-envisioning the city as one less dependent on automobiles, along the lines of the progressive vision. Instead, neoconservatives view the current urban form as a natural phenomenon born of American will and free markets. Hence Supervisor Alioto Pier’s claim that families need cars.

One needs only look at the morning weekday queues of cars in front of schools throughout San Francisco to see the role motoring has in child rearing. But this also translates into a lack of civic or social responsibility towards public space or notions of community—ie the transit system and the streets where bicycling and walking are perceived to be unsafe precisely because there is too much traffic! In San Francisco, as with broader contemporary American political rhetoric concerning “personal responsibility” towards one’s family can translate into lack of interest in collectively solving larger-scale problems such as congestion, pollution or inequality that stems from automobility. Instead, it is “responsible” to move the family through the city by car—to secede—and achieve daily needs atomistically. Meanwhile, automobility enables one to circumvent, if not secede from, the perceived evils of the city, such as homelessness.

A second neoconservative thread in San Francisco’s parking debates is promulgated by some small business owners in San Francisco’s neighborhood commercial districts. For example at a public hearing titled “Relationship between parking, neighborhood business, and families” (San Francisco Board of Supervisors 2007a) speakers representing themselves as merchants or merchant organizations argued that small businesses in San Francisco required more parking in order to survive. A prominent proponent of more parking is the Council of District Merchants, which claims to represent 20 business associations in San Francisco. Their argument is that, in a neoconservative “might makes right” tone, most people own cars and so the city should provide more parking. A representative of the Union Square Business Association states that “city dwellers need parking”.

Surprisingly, gay merchants in neighborhoods such as the Castro evoke neoconservative rhetoric when arguing for more parking. For example, at a working group meeting on envisioning the future of the Upper Market/Castro section of San Francisco, merchants and small business owners lamented the lack of parking and argued that businesses in the Castro area were suffering because of parking problems (San Francisco Planning Department 2007b). The director of the business group for Upper Market insisted on a parking garage somewhere in the area, to enable more motorized retail from beyond the neighborhood. The president of the merchants association also chimed in for more parking.

The urgency in the neoconservative politics of parking was articulated in a 2007 ballot measure mandating parking for all new development in San Francisco. The ballot measure, known as the “Parking for Neighborhoods Initiative” (PfN), and officially as Prop H, was backed by the San Francisco Council of District Merchants Associations, a coalition of small business owners, and the signature gathering campaign was funded by the billionaire founder of Gap Inc, Don

Fisher, and Webcor Construction CEO, Andy Ball. Don Fisher is widely known as a neoconservative in San Francisco, with strong opinions about parking, homelessness, and a deep hostility towards San Francisco's progressive politics. Webcor builds garages and the company's involvement reflects the neoliberal opposition to parking restrictions (although other developers opposed the ballot because it required parking, indicating the division and confusion of neoliberals).

Prop H was ballot-box planning that would have amended the San Francisco planning code to require more parking and nullify the recent gains made by progressives. The proposed initiative would have required significantly more parking for new offices, retail, and housing in downtown San Francisco and it abolished maximums and replaced them with required minimums. This meant developers must provide parking, whereas under the recently won changes in downtown, parking is an option but not required. The initiative would have frozen all remaining citywide parking to its current standards—pre-empting years of efforts by progressives, planners and neighborhood activists to reduce the impacts of parking in the inner ring neighborhoods. It would have also significantly eroded the quality of transit stops, bike lanes and neighborhood commercial streets throughout the city because it allowed the placement of garages and curb cuts to take priority over these other mobilities.

Obviously, progressives cringed at this initiative, but it was some neoliberals that also sought to thwart the initiative. Led by SPUR, neoliberals recognized that the exchange value of the city was at stake with this measure. While neoliberal developers might like the requirement for residential parking in new high-rise condominiums, a blanket approach that actually imposed more government regulation was ideologically threatening, as well as threatening to profits. The proposed increases in required parking would have actually dampened office and retail development in downtown San Francisco because the street capacity would not have been able to handle the increase in cars, thus creating a diseconomy for downtown San Francisco. Under current policies, over 2000 parking spaces could be added downtown in the next 20 years (but recall that right now developers can opt not to provide parking). The proposed initiative would have led to an increase of over 8000 spaces, bringing the total required parking downtown, for office only, to 12,000 new spaces. This would have translated into upwards of 12,000 more cars entering an already saturated street network downtown, as well as overwhelming the congested freeway and bridge network leading into downtown. The diseconomy would ultimately shunt more office and retail outwards, aggravating sprawl and decreasing the exchange value of downtown San Francisco. The proposed parking standards for residential development, which would increase parking by upwards of 300–400%, would have also decreased

the amount of housing that could be constructed downtown, further reducing exchange value and exacerbating regional sprawl. Again, the neoliberal stance on parking is that government should not impose a requirement or a cap on parking.

Recognizing this, a coalition of progressives and neoliberals organized in July and August 2007 to defeat the ballot initiative and this coalition was successful in November 2007 when Prop H was defeated by 67% of the voters (it should be noted that voter turnout was low—around 36%). Critical to progressives' success was a strategy of linking Prop H to global warming, the excesses of fossil fuel consumption exemplified by the Hummer SUV, and to the neoconservative ideology of George Bush, through a robo-call campaign, fliers and mailers. The linkage of the local to the global rallied rank-and-file environmentalists and other progressives. Yet also critical to the progressive victory was a linkage of Prop H to another ballot initiative, known as Prop A, which prescribed fixes to the city's ailing transit service. Notably, Prop A had language directly concerning transit worker relations with management, and drew the support of several prominent unions, including the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the local transit workers union. Thus an environment–labor alliance ultimately defeated Prop H (while simultaneously passing Prop A) (Jones and Redmund 2007). The end result, however, was and remains simply holding the line, and the campaign exhausted the coalition's financial resources (it spent nearly \$400,000 on both Prop A and H), while the neoconservative Don Fisher remains a billionaire poised to fund any future initiatives he desires.⁴

Conclusion

This paper contributes to critical geographers' interest in discourses about the urban process through an examination of parking and mobility. The politics of parking is not just a struggle over the heart and soul of San Francisco, but part of a local manifestation of a systematic global struggle over a more socially just and ecologically sustainable urban future. It exemplifies how the politics of mobility is not just about movement, but how cities are organized and configured—and for whom. It reflects the tension between those who believe one can live in the city without an automobile, and those who believe an automobile is essential to everyday life. Parking debates also reveal how ideas about mobility contain embedded social values such as those expressed by progressives, neoliberals and neoconservatives. Parking is also at the center of a broader politics of urban development.

The thrust of this paper has focused on mapping three ideologies—progressives, neoliberals and neoconservatives—and how adherents to these three ideologies interact to produce urban space through parking policy. The map is no doubt incomplete. There are others with a stake in parking policy but who are less vocal or engaged. Certainly the

“average” motorist who opts to not be politically engaged still has an affect on the politics of parking. The battle over Prop H occurred in an off-election year with roughly 36% voter turnout (the incumbent mayor was not significantly challenged, and no other high-profile issues were on the ballot). Many apolitical or disengaged motorists may have voted for Prop H if there was a high-profile electoral contest. Moreover, San Francisco’s large minority and immigrant communities—many working class Asians, Blacks, Latinos—are less involved in the local politics of mobility but nevertheless do have a stake in parking policies. What’s sure is that representatives of each ideology outlined above can and will seek to influence votes and public opinion.

One of the key barriers facing the implementation of progressive parking policies is that many progressives themselves may feel constrained under a stricter parking regime because it is quite difficult to envision how one might be able to easily get everything one needs without a car given that existing urban form is constructed along a metric that measures driving distance rather than bussing or walking distance. While progressives are working on a radical restructuring of urban form, and San Francisco is already a dense, compact city in parts, change will not happen quickly. To convince many people that parking is not necessary, people will have to be able to see it to believe (in) it. Many people, including some progressives, seek out classic cities during vacations (Paris, etc) for the walking and transit aspect but then are completely unable to envision a similar alternative in their own city.

San Francisco is poised to be the place to see to believe. What this case study illustrates is that progressive politics towards parking and San Francisco’s broader politics of mobility are really at the cutting edge relative to much of the United States. Throughout much of the United States, the spaces of the car are not challenged. Instead mobility debates are dominated by discourses over how to replace gasoline with ethanol, or how to reduce the negative environmental impacts of automobility with “green” cars (hybrids, hydrogen). Transit, walking and bicycling are increasingly popular in localized discourses from Atlanta to Seattle, but they are often promoted in ways that do not substantially challenge the physical space of the automobile. San Francisco provides a poignant example for scholars, activists and policy makers interested in how the challenges to the automobile have unfolded, and it provides an example for others to consider in order to put their own struggles in context. Lastly, this paper has sought to stimulate reflection among critical geographers on the role mobility has in the broader political economy of cities.

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Endnotes

¹ I have chosen the geographic scale of urban politics because US land use and transportation policy is localized. All zoning (including parking) is the bailiwick of local government, not state or federal governments (see Fulton and Shigley 2005). Like global warming and the broader contestation of neoliberalism, much of the dissent against automobility is fragmented and grounded locally in the United States. This militant particularism (Harvey 1996) does not preclude a more systematic national or global discourse about automobility, but rather shows how these discourses get deployed on the ground—successfully at the local scale.

² “By right” is planning language for the minimum allowed parking a developer can provide, while conditional uses refer to specific conditions imposed on the developer. For example, a developer may be required to pay a fee or plant trees as a condition for being allowed to increase the amount of parking.

³ The irony is that as this stratum consumes the city as a spectacle or lifestyle choice, the very *tout ensemble* of the city is withered away one garage at a time.

⁴ As of this writing, a full accounting of campaign expenditures was incomplete. In November 2007 the San Francisco Ethics Commission (2007) reported approximately \$400,000 was raised to pass Prop A and defeat Prop H.

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