

## Book Review

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Bloom, Nicholas Dagen. *The Great American Transit Disaster: A Century of Austerity, Auto-Centric Planning, and White Flight*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023.

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In its title, *The Great American Transit Disaster: A Century of Austerity, Auto-Centric Planning, and White Flight*, Nicholas Dagen Bloom's new book conveys both its argument and its structure in clear and packed form. The diagnosis—that twentieth century American mass transit was, in fact, a disaster—is the foundational conclusion towards which Bloom builds his argument, contending that this end need not have happened, and that understanding the path to this result can inform different planning approaches in the present day. Bloom's subtitle outlines the tri-partite structure of his analysis, arguing that short-sighted municipal frugality, the sway of the automobile, and unchecked racism repeatedly aligned to create mass transit systems that could not support local economies and societies equitably, cost-effectively, and sustainably. In contrast to the oft-lamented and generalized explanation that the lure of the automobile compelled declining investment in mass transit in the twentieth century, Bloom's argument points to the repeated choices of transit policy makers as the clear agents for disinvestment and diminishing service for mass transit across the country. This perspective builds on existing scholarship about transit, urban change, and automobility through the Interstate era, and uses research in municipal, transit, and motor coach archives to craft a new understanding of patterns through the late twentieth century.

Bookended by a strong and methodical Introduction and Conclusion, the book is subdivided into four parts, with Part I establishing approaches before World War II; and Parts II–IV navigating distinct thematic approaches to transit between 1945 and 1980. Part I provides brief foundational introductions to the robust pre-WWII transit systems in Baltimore (Chapter 1), Chicago (Chapter 2), and Boston (Chapter 3), with Bloom positioning each case to outline a different municipal approach that he deconstructs in the following sections. Baltimore failed to regulate or strategically advocate for public transit improvements from its private transit company in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, leading to financial hardship and lackluster transit service as racial tensions, the automobile, and the Depression upset the area's physical and economic landscape. Chicago's intense over-regulation of transit drove their private transit company to the brink of financial peril, even as it maintained robust transit infrastructure across the city's dense built environment—albeit inequitably so across segregated neighborhoods. While transit began privately in Boston, in the late nineteenth century the city bought out its private transit company, improved transit infrastructure, and then leased the lines back to private companies to oversee daily operations. The state, recognizing the benefit of transit to the metropolitan region, eventually got involved to expand funding via taxation on the fourteen towns that connected to area transit services, putting Boston on more nimble footing for maintaining service even as automobile infrastructure grew alongside.

The rest of the book focuses on “The Postwar Transit Disaster, 1945 to 1980,” with Part II, “Unsubsidized Private Transit,” profiling Baltimore (Chapter 4) and Atlanta (Chapter 5). Bloom builds on Baltimore’s story from Chapter 1 as representative of other rustbelt cities in the postwar years. The private Baltimore Transit Company (BTC), in an era of changing industrial prospects and declining ridership, struggled to maintain service and profitability amidst tax increases from the city. The city council repeatedly called for public purchase of BTC as a way to wrest control of transit and remove the taxation burden from operational costs, but this did not actually happen until 1970. Even then, this shift came so late that transit infrastructure had deteriorated and its remaining framework could not align with mounting automobile use, declining urban population, and the restrictive single-family zoning that had scattered the audience and squandered the appetite for mass transit. In his profile of Atlanta, Bloom marvels at how the area’s growing postwar population did not translate to better development and sustenance of public transit. Atlanta’s plight again revolved around declining profits and high costs for the city’s private transit operator, Georgia Power Company (GP), and its dependence on riders in an increasingly segregated and dispersed setting. GP managed upgrades in the postwar years through their revenue stream, but this lulled officials into thinking that high-quality transit just happened without government involvement. As time wore on, GP struggled through strikes and fare hikes while the city expanded via annexation, displaced Black residents for downtown highway projects, and rezoned for low density such that existing public transit could only reach a small segment of the population. Bloom contends that even once regional control of transit arrived with the creation of MARTA in 1965, its limited purview, underfunding, and focus on new rail lines and buses (instead of limited access busways) was too late and misaligned with sprawling and segregated settlement patterns that made it more appealing for anyone who could drive in their personal automobile to do so. Bloom’s attention to debate over busways in the 1960s and 1970s—an unfulfilled prospect entangled with elitism, racism, and regional transit planning—is an especially interesting new contribution to understanding Atlanta’s case.

Part III, “Pay as You Go” Public Transit,” profiles how the initial promise of public ownership of transit systems in Chicago (Chapter 6) and Detroit (Chapter 7) still did not translate to transit-friendly planning or financing that could maintain strong service in the long term. In Chicago, the public ownership of the surface and elevated rail system via the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) allowed the agency the financial flexibility to replace streetcars with motor buses and maintain service through the 1950s even as ridership declined. As auto-centric planning took hold, CTA struggled and city leaders balked at further subsidizing transit operations. In this context, Bloom again highlights the missed opportunity for strategically planning for buses as part of mass transit instead of only as stopgap measures for larger systemic shortcomings. Only amidst fare increases and service cuts did city, state, regional, and federal leaders come to the rescue of CTA in the last quarter of the century. Despite this intervention, the increasingly suburban tenor of the area and CTA’s diffuse service of this region yielded residents and commuters less reliant on public transit than they could have been. Chapter 7 positions Detroit’s transit plight at the intersection of city policy, rampant racism, and the locally magnified impacts of the automobile. Despite city ownership since the 1920s, transit operation was hamstrung by a provision in Detroit’s charter that banned public subsidy of transit. The city shouldered the costs of service upgrades throughout the Depression and WWII even as a large percent of Detroit’s manufacturing businesses moved outside of the city. Simultaneously, unregulated sprawl redefined the landscape to be increasingly automobile friendly and segregated. This created a scattered, dwindling, and increasingly siloed ridership who faced continuous fare hikes and service cuts through the 1970s. Bloom shows how the city’s initial prohibition of subsidizing mass transit impeded agile responses to changing needs, leaving riders with insufficient and inequitably distributed options. Racism looms especially large in Detroit’s case, where zoning, housing covenants, and white suburban hostility to rapid transit

kept people from one another and from thinking broadly and equitably about a transit network to serve everyone.

The book's final section, "Public Transit that Worked Better," profiles Boston (Chapter 8) and San Francisco (Chapter 9) as outliers that maintained and even improved strong public transit in the postwar era. Bloom credits "timing, subsidies, density, and demographics" as the special recipe that yielded more positive transit outcomes in these locales. Picking up Boston's early story from Chapter 3, Bloom shows how public ownership segued into regional ownership (MBTA) in 1964, empowering comprehensive planning between different modes of mass transit over a wide metropolitan area and the prospects of state subsidies to bridge revenue shortfalls from fares alone. Continued density in communities surrounding Boston, investment in affordable housing, and citizen activism against destructive highway plans maintained public awareness of community cohesion and public transit as two of many important civic amenities. All told, this compelled modernization and extension of existing lines, and expansion of bus routes and intermodal connections, which have made Boston a more dynamic transit environment than many other cities. San Francisco's early and robust citizen activism echoed and magnified aspects of Boston's successes. Municipally owned transit began in San Francisco in 1909, and repeated voter support of transit upgrades allowed it to weather the Depression and subsequent economic downturns with fewer service cuts. In addition, San Francisco zoning codes notably permitted high density development along streetcar lines, which strengthened the allure of and access to transit. A third big distinction in San Francisco was citizen activism in the 1940s and 1950s that successfully defeated plans for seven major highways that would have destroyed large swaths of transit-accessible neighborhoods while shifting the area's transportation bias toward the car. This victory maintained existing urban fabric while reinforcing the utility of transit. Even as San Francisco still had segregated neighborhoods, economic twists and turns, and financial challenges, its transit remained more available to people of different races and classes across the board over the years, yielding sustained ridership overall. Bloom does not address how the endurance of these transit systems plays into any recent operational challenges in either city, nor does he discuss Boston and San Francisco's current statuses as especially expensive places to live, both of which would have been interesting to explore.

The backdrop for *The Great American Transit Disaster* is wistfulness about how transit *could* have played out in America, and methodical explanations as to why it did not. This creates a kind of fatalist tone for the book, understanding that, no matter the detail, the narrative still leads to the lackluster state of public transit in the present day. That said, Bloom aptly uses this clear destination to facilitate the book's tight organization, which is a strong asset. This structure also empowers the book's conclusion, which briefly extrapolates lessons from the case studies about how American transit might improve in the years ahead. Another strength is that the book extends the chronological reach of public transit scholarship into the late twentieth century, something that nicely complements existing work. As part of this, it newly documents bus service as a stopgap measure and repeated missed opportunity for strategic application in each case. Bloom's three-pronged argument for *why* transit was a disaster (or not, in the cases of Boston and San Francisco) rests on strong comparative evidence in each locale. This makes it a valuable and persuasive addition to urban and transit history, especially for advanced readers. The book's structure—using different cities to illuminate distinct approaches in separate eras—creates a circuit of information that buttresses Bloom's overall approach and potentially invites readers to apply his framework to other cities as parallels of the events outlined for each case. Simultaneously, this approach isolates discussions about the Atlanta, Detroit, and San Francisco cases such that they feel a bit more out of context, even for informed readers. The book will be more challenging for introductory audiences needing foundational knowledge about the urban and societal landscapes of each city—on which Bloom defers to previous scholarship. The book also could have provided more detailed maps and

diagrams to support understanding of each place and case, something not adequately fulfilled by the Social Explorer maps charting comparative changes in ridership over time. This notwithstanding, *The Great American Transit Disaster* provides a compelling new perspective that shows the shared circumstances and decision-making patterns that repeatedly thwarted public transit in America in the twentieth century, and invites an opportunity to adjust current decision-making with these lessons in mind.

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