gaining access to the corridor cities became a proxy for the varied publicness of the land-use decision-making process’ (p. 30). It is, in fact, precisely these challenges in ‘access’ that have led her to articulate a normative focus for the book: the need to empower the institutions for democratic decision-making on land use changes.

Throughout the chapters, there is a clear preoccupation with tracking the (more or less opaque) process through which decisions about land use change are made – and who has, or doesn’t have, a voice in it. Specifically, Balakrishnan is concerned with identifying the variable role that the Gram Sabha – a democratic assembly for discussing local matters, defined by the Indian constitution – played in each of the cases examined. While in the first two cases it is not even formed, the Gram Sabha becomes a key site of negotiations in Khed City. This happened, she argues, partly because of the need to perform cooperation to gain the electorate, but also partly because marginalised landowners were able to negotiate as collectives. The Gram Sabha became the place where the allocation of shares would be (publicly) discussed. However, she calls attention to some limits to the Gram Sabha: in this case, for example, important decisions about the boundaries of the new Special Economic Zone were made prior to the activation of the Gram Sabha, and outside public scrutiny. Yet, Balakrishnan holds on to the Gram Sabha’s potential to ‘reclaim the “public” nature of public infrastructure and the “city” in shareholder cities’ (p. 169). Thus, the book also offers an important contribution to a scholarship dedicated to thinking critically about the possibilities and limitations of democratic and grassroots participation in urban planning processes, in a moment where experiments, practices and mandates not unlike India’s abound around the world (the Brazilian federal mandate for participatory planning is one of many examples).

The book is obviously relevant to studies of land use change in India and, more broadly, in regions that are currently undergoing large-scale ‘urban’ transitions. But it extends far beyond this geographical reach. It should also be of interest to scholars working at the intersection of urban and agrarian dynamics in various contexts; to those trying to understand the mechanisms of land value production; to those examining the impact of liberalising reforms in land use change and the rise of new institutions of local governance; and, as I suggested before, to those discussing the challenges and promises of democratic participatory planning institutions. The more critical lesson, perhaps, is that this book reminds us of the importance of historicising, instead of generalising, if we want to reach a better understanding of the multifaceted process of creating ‘urban’ land.

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Paul Tranter and Rodney Tolley, *Slow Cities – Conquering our Speed Addiction for Health and Sustainability*, Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2020 (1st edn); 422 pp; ISBN 9780128153161, £97.99 (pbk)

**Reviewed by**: Paulo Anciães [Centre for Transport Studies, University College London, UK](https://www.cradletoashoppe.com)

This book explains a contradiction: how the increases in travel speed occurring since the beginning of the 20th Century have failed to save time for urban citizens. This
contradiction has long been identified in essays by Illich (1974) and Gorz (1973). Slow Cities is the first book-length development of the topic. It updates the discussion and frames it alongside a discussion of the negative impacts of fast speed on aspects other than time (e.g., economy, society, environment). The book is split into three parts:

**Part 1: Speed**

Part 1 demystifies the benefits of fast travel in cities. The ideas of Illich (1974) permeate most of the discussion. The first idea is that travel time gains only happen as long as they accrue a few people only. As more people move by car, congestion reduces speeds – this explains why car travel speeds in the central areas of many cities are not much higher than walking speeds. An even more powerful idea is that people need to spend time to earn the resources required to use a private car (i.e., fuel, wear and tear, parking costs). If we account for this time, then moving by car is effectively slower than moving by walking or cycling. A third idea is that speed leads to urban sprawl and low densities, increasing travel distances and time spent travelling. At the same time, it eliminates the possibility of walking (due to long distances and the risk and unpleasantness posed by motorised traffic).

Despite these perverse effects of speed, increasing travel speeds has usually been seen as a solution to many urban problems (and not as the problem itself). One explanation, described in clear detail in the first chapters of this book, is that the increases in speed allowed for private cars were accompanied by a ‘culture of speed’ that emphasises freedom (and blames collisions not on speed but on reckless drivers and pedestrians). Even today, manufacturers still market new cars based on their high speeds, above the legal speed limits in all cities. The culture of speed also affects the work of planners. For example, the appraisal of transport projects relies heavily on accounting for travel time savings (which are substantial when aggregating the values to all travellers, but marginal to each individual traveller).

**Part 2: Health**

Even if it did not ‘steal’ time, fast travel speeds would still be undesirable because of the negative health impacts. The authors use a broad concept of health, applied to individuals, neighbourhoods and communities, and including economic and environmental aspects. The hypothesis is that slowing transport could improve these three types of health.

It is now well known that motorised modes are linked to obesity, stress, traffic collisions, poor air quality and noise. In contrast, walking and cycling are physical activities, encourage social interaction and contribute to physical and mental health. The dominance of motorised modes also leads to urban sprawl, reducing accessibility of green spaces, health facilities and social networks. The role of travel speed in leading to these negative effects is not always very clear in the book. It seemed that in many cases, the cause was high levels of private motorised vehicle use (versus public transport or non-motorised modes), rather than fast speed as such.

The chapter on environmental impacts of motorised modes covers all the familiar topics: consumption of energy and raw materials, heat island effects, local pollution, loss of natural and agricultural land, habitat disruption, water pollution, waste and greenhouse gas emissions. It also covers some more neglected topics, such as the negative visual impacts of transport infrastructure designed for fast modes. Again, the impacts of traffic are amplified through its effects on urban sprawl. Efficiencies due to free-flow
speed (in terms of fuel consumption and pollution levels) are also neutralised by a related tendency to travel more and longer and to a higher modal share of cars.

The chapter on economic aspects presents evidence that walkable cities are linked to increased footfall and spending in shops, and attract residents, businesses and tourists. Fast travel modes require less public expenditure (on transport infrastructure and traffic control) and tend to lead to congestion, collisions and inactivity, all of which have economic costs.

Overall, the information provided in Part 2 is compelling and is a good synthesis of the growing research on interactions between transport, health and society. There are a few gaps, though. For example, barrier effects (the separation of neighbourhoods by transport infrastructure and traffic) are dealt with very briefly and only in the economics chapter, not in the human health one.

Part 3: Strategies

Slowing down travel speeds can therefore solve many urban problems. This would involve, at first, reducing the speed of (existing) motorised traffic through speed limits and traffic calming. The merits of the various policy options (and combinations of options) are compared in this part of the book. A gap in this comparison is the absence of information on the disadvantages of one of the most controversial policy options: shared spaces.

Speeds can also be slowed down by indirect measures: increasing densities; balancing the distribution of amenities across the city; reducing road and car parking space; improving walking and cycling; and restricting car travel. The various options to restrict road capacity for motorised vehicles are presented, from small interventions reallocating roadspace, to road removal, with much information coming from the comprehensive Global Street Design Guide (NACTO and GDCI, 2016). A final idea in this part of the book is the need for shifting behaviour, not only of citizens but also of planners and politicians, towards slower modes of transport.

Further thoughts

The ideas developed in this book are timely and consistent with an emerging paradigm where cities are designed for people (not for vehicles), with the aim of improving health, wellbeing, sustainability, liveability and accessibility (rather than just mobility). This paradigm is linked to other social movements favouring slow speeds (e.g., slow food, slow travel). The book also provides useful directions for rethinking cities in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis. In fact, many of the urban policies in response to the crisis (e.g., providing more space for pedestrians and outdoor cafés) have clearly shown the benefits of slow cities, with some temporary measures becoming permanent, given the positive response from the public.

The book is ambitious, as travel speed is interlinked with so many aspects of urban life. As such, it is inevitable that some topics are covered too quickly. For example, public transport is a component of slow cities, as it stimulates walking and cycling. This aspect is acknowledged but not developed in the book. There was scope for including it, removing some of the repetition in other chapters, especially those in Part 1. In fact, I found that a lot of the material in Part 1 was interchangeable: it could have been in any of the chapters.

On a more positive side, the book has an international perspective, including many examples from cities in countries with different income levels. Boxes show examples that support the ideas developed in the main text. Arguments are often illustrated with concrete examples even in the main text. It is also refreshing that the evidence compiled in
the book draws not only from academic studies and reports but from many newspaper articles and blog posts.

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Sara Fregonese, War and the City: Urban Geopolitics in Lebanon, London: I. B. Tauris, 2019; 256 pp. : ISBN: 9781780767147 (hbk), ISBN 9780755636549 (pbk), £95 (hbk), £28.99 (pbk)

Reviewed by: Jonas Hagmann, University of Geneva, Switzerland

In 1975–1976, Lebanon and the city of Beirut were consumed by devastating armed conflict. But whereas this empirical fact is uncontested, its historical causes and political meanings remain controversial. Sara Fregonese’s book War and the City focuses on the rationalisation of the conflict and asks: Do Western descriptions of the war live up to the realities observed in Beirut? By apprehending the sense-making practices of former local combatants, the book’s aim is to provide a ‘contrapuntal reading of the conflict’ that foregrounds Beirut’s ‘own urban knowledge(s)’.

This reading is developed one step at a time: The introduction details the book’s overarching rationale. It presents post-colonial and Foucauldian notions of marginalised knowledge(s) and makes the case for listening to the stories of those fighting in the streets of Beirut, hence the explanations of the conflict that – according to Fregonese – were suppressed by the truth-asserting descriptions of Western foreign ministries. Chapter one then develops the role of cities in security politics and analysis. The idea of ‘national security’ eclipsed much of their visibility in the past, Fregonese maintains, with the exception of colonial warfare, where cities featured as sites of resistance that ought to be pacified. Urbicidal practices contribute to its resurgence in security thinking today, however. Cities became locales for foundational cultural struggles, as the norms they supposedly express – cosmopolitanism, progress etc. – are now fiercely contested.

After the conceptual discussions, chapters two and three investigate empirically how such violent politics came about in Lebanon. Colonial cartographies were crucial here. Western traveller logs and maps had developed a gradually more forceful logical ordering of the region historically. They attached religious traits to individuals and associated population groups with territory, thus effectively producing the sects for which Lebanon is known today. After World War II, these categories were pitted increasingly strongly against each other, as they blended with the rise of pan-Arabism, the question of Israel and the advent of the Cold War. These developments asked more vehemently to ‘what side’ Lebanon belonged and offered competing options for which to advocate and fight.

Chapters four and five continue the historical itinerary. They explore how the aforementioned controversies gained salience in the 1960s and 1970s, and how they were explained by Washington, Paris and London. The city of Beirut grew rapidly and very unequally in this period as a result of Western export policies. All the while, inhabitants of the Palestinian camps became more activist and economically powerful. The resourceful Palestine Liberation Organisation grew into a veritable ‘state