7 Towards a climate-friendly turn?

Gender, culture and performativity in Danish transport policy¹

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Introduction

Transport has become an explicit part of climate policy and CO₂ reductions, and in 2019 the Danish Government set up an ambitious target of reducing CO₂ emissions by 70% by 2030. Currently, we see transport policy and electric cars as vital components of broader environmental and climate policy agendas. A fresh example of how cars are still being prioritised in this new climate policy agenda can be seen in a recent report from the government-appointed Climate Council. In Denmark, transport has been explicitly moulded into the broader agenda of climate policy; yet with the potentials of electric cars still being considered as the sole avenue of transport change, in tandem with pressure from big energy suppliers and wind power companies (Cyklistforbundet, 2020; Klimarådet, 2020.² All in all, it is hard to see how the targets of 70% CO₂ reductions will be met. In Denmark, major political parties – from social democrats to liberals to conservatives – support the development and modernisation of ‘climate-friendly’, yet still car-centric, transport solutions (Venstre, 2016; Socialdemokratiet, 2019). Furthermore, many studies and surveys demonstrate that both non-motorised mobility, as well as gender and other social categories, are still by and large missing from the tone-setting agendas, councils, strategies and surveys (Christensen and Breengaard, 2019; TINNGO, <https://www.tinngo.eu/>).

This chapter will focus on how transport policy, perceived by many as a dull subject, is dramatically conveyed by the media. It includes the representation of certain roles and performances of a group of central agents, which are acting and enacting certain policies and preferences according to gendered norms of appropriateness (Krook and Mackay, 2011). They seem to connect to and reproduce an unquestioned matrix of soft and strong, climate-friendly or unfriendly transport practices and values. The omission of gender and other socio-cultural practices appear as impediments to change and climate-friendly initiatives.

As for the structure, we begin the chapter with a short prelude to feminist approaches to transport studies, ending with the introduction of useful concepts related to the cultural and performative turn of transport policy studies. In the next section, we present a mapping of the entangled gendered and social codes of transport policy – addressing the general relevance of gender representation,

the question of substantial gender policy interests and gender mainstreaming as a tool of limited success. In the final section, we conduct an empirical case study of communicative events connected to the first female Minister of Traffic in Denmark, Sonja Mikkelsen. She was a warm supporter of public transit and the analysis reveals that gender, power and environment/climate issues are hot topics that cut across policy at all levels, including language, bodies, food, festivals, etc. In the last section, we reflect on the usefulness of gendering the cultural and performative turn in policy analysis.

Theoretical and methodological departures

The gendered dimensions of transport and car culture is a vital but also neglected field, which is lagging behind more sustained scholarly and political equality concerns about equal opportunities in family life, workplace, health and education. Geographer Susan Hanson has pointed to significant gaps both in existing feminist studies and in mainstream transport research and has called for refined analysis in either field (Hanson, 2010). According to Hanson, feminist analysis has focused too heavily on gender and has underplayed the specificities of mobility and transport. Feminist research, she argues, based on qualitative analysis has mainly focused on how mobility shapes gender but lacks perspectives on how gender shapes mobility. Several studies along these lines have pointed to transport and mobility as producing gender stereotypes, indicating women and femininity as synonymous with immobility and aligned with home and domesticity. It is claimed that this is an enduring feature that surfaces in everyday practices as well as in multiple cultural and political forms (Edensor, 2004; Cresswell, 2006; Transgen, 2007). The neglect of the institutional gendered dimensions of transport policy-making comes to hide the unequal distribution of resources, for example, in prioritising of cars rather than public transportation and non-motorised transport, and hampers the recognition of different kinds of mobility. It is vital, therefore, to study the gendered and cross-political character of such cultures and hegemonies. As well as throwing light on how gendered norms have been shaped and nurtured within these institutional and hegemonic structures.

In the field of feminist transport research, new trends are underway, addressing both issues of equal access and transport justice as well as methodological challenges in transport studies. Caren Lévy, a UK transport researcher, for example, appeals for broader and more complex ideas of transport and social identities and for what she calls the ‘deep integration’ of social identities in all areas of transport (Lévy, 2013). The social identities of transport ‘users’, she argues, are deeply imbedded in social relations and urban practices, ranging from the everyday lives of people to urban policies and planning. Even in studies of multiple identities of urban residents, such categories are often referred to the margins as the ‘social and distributional’ aspects of transport. Transport, Lévy contends, is not an isolated and delimited field, but one which has critical implications for how diverse citizens – men and women, girls and boys, young and old and non-binary persons – are able to exercise and use ‘travel choices’ both as individuals and collectively.

As we will show later, it seems as if these more structural perspectives on transport use are only gaining very fragile grounds in and around Europe.

In this chapter, we widen such perspectives and apply them to transport policy research. In doing so, we connect to recent approaches in the field, which can be clustered under the ‘cultural turn’ in policy studies and, furthermore, we connect such perspectives with central concepts of gender and diversity developed in feminist studies.

Several scholars have pointed to the need for taking policy studies beyond established theories and methods, such as overcoming dualism between structure and individuality, and replacing ontologies of substance with more dynamic and processual ontologies, as well as rethinking power as productive and as acting in many fields. Also, methodological break-ups have been urged for, from the focus on text and talk to the inclusion of wider mundane materialised and embodied experiences and affects (Lissandrello, 2015, 2016; Adler-Nissen, 2016). In order to assist the analysis, we use the notion of transport policy as a performative act. More specifically, we would like to connect to the distinct ideas of gender performativity, which at its initial stage was developed by the American philosopher Judith Butler. According to Butler, gender can be seen as a particular type of process; a ‘set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame’. The subject is not free to choose which gender it is going to enact. Yet, the subject is already determined within a cultural regulatory frame and has, therefore, only access to a limited number of choices. The idea of choice has been compared with a wardrobe, which consists of a limited selection of outfits, depending on gender as well as class, ethnicity, geography, etc. (Salih, 2002, p. 63). Following this feminist approach, acts can – from a broader perspective – be understood as ‘shared experience and collective actions’ (Butler, 1988, p. 525 cited in Lissandrello, 2015). Translated into the field of transport policy, this means that there are nuanced and individual ways of executing policy. The acts of policy-making are performed by gendered individuals, who act in accordance with certain cultural, political and social apparatuses. Therefore, this is not a fully individual matter.³

The idea of performativity relates to core ideas in feminist institutionalism, which has to do with how power is reproduced through acts of normalization and the ways in which institutions are reproduced through a certain logic of ‘appropriateness’ (Kronsell, 2015; Magnúsdóttir and Kronsell, this volume). It is a certain logic that makes the inclusion and analytical reflection of gender less appropriate in policy-making and institutions. While at the same time, it makes certain masculinity norms and stereotypical gender notions the most accepted and hegemonic. We conclude the chapter with reflections on the potentials of institutional opportunities and challenges for opening up new windows of climate-friendly transport politics for all.

In terms of methods, we apply a critical discourse analysis in a broad and open-ended approach. Following Norman Fairclough, the approach suggests that the world is constituted by both discourse and other social practices. (Fairclough, 1995; Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 1999). Along this line, studies of communicative events take centre stage in forms of representations, such as text,

talk, images and other forms of social practices, such as meals and networking styles. This provides a methodology that complies with the analytical requirements of the broader and more complicated ideas, agendas and practices related to governance and public sensibilities today. We have combined qualitative and quantitative methodologies of data analysis. We have combined language with other cultural expressions including cultures of meetings and transport as part of broader lifestyles and preferences. In this manner, our methodology is characterised by a widening of analytical attention and tools in the representation which turns out to be highly relevant in transport and climate policy-making.

More precisely, this chapter builds on screenings of the Danish Infomedia's online archive (<https://infomedia.org/>). We have conducted searches on a range of person-related keywords connected to ministers and central civil servants, such as 'Sonja Mikkelsen transport minister' (123 hits), 'Sonja Mikkelsen Traffic Minister' (4063 hits), 'Ole Zacchi, head of traffic department' (235 hits), 'Jørgen Halck, head of traffic department' (27 hits).⁴ In order to widen the scope of media data we also searched topical keywords such as alternative transport, congestion ring, climate panel, etc. From this voluminous material we identified approximately 100 articles which we used as key data for the qualitative study. A smaller selection of them will be referred to explicitly in the analysis, while the others repeated or confirmed the claims and trends in these articles. The material was extended with an online interview with Sonja Mikkelsen in spring 2020 where the media information was supplemented and sustained. Throughout the chapter, we have enhanced this material with general reports on transport and research as well as public lists of ministerial appointments and scholarly articles.

Gendered representations in transport policy – Do women in transport policy make a difference?

A feature running as a distinctive undercurrent in transport policy is that it is a 'male' policy area and has remained so even in recent decades. Transport and mobility count as an old policy area in Denmark as well as throughout Europe. The first Danish minister for traffic was appointed as early as 1900. Environmental policy came about in the 1970s, following growing mobilisations and concerns and gained its own ministry in 1971. Climate has had a ministry of its own since 2007, following rising concerns and political attention. The issue of gender representation and women's participation is important for discussions of inclusive climate-friendly transport strategies. From a gender representational perspective, transport from the very beginning has figured as a manifest policy area conducted by men as argued in the introduction to this volume (Magnusdottir and Kronsell, this volume). This somehow differs from environment and climate, which seem more open and have already presented more female ministers than the area of transport has over the last 120 years.⁵

Gender representation and the question of fairness in elected assemblages is a longstanding issue in feminist theory as well as in political practices. Anne Phillips in her path-breaking study *The Politics of Presence* challenged the dominant idea

Figure 7.1 Number of articles about Westh and Mikkelsen during their time in office

of representation as only concerning ideas and not the people representing ideas (Phillips, 1998). We see the presence of diversity and gender as a participatory democratic dimension, which is currently aligned with the strategy of gender mainstreaming. Gender mainstreaming requires equal participation of women as well as the integration of other social groups in political and public life. Gender mainstreaming emphasises broad and mobilizing strategies, such as networking, dialogue, social mobilization and the involvement of NGOs in all stages of policy-making. The focus on equal representation responds to a deeper democratic deficit and the problem of gender imbalances in policy-making, which poses particular problems and gaps in transport policy. Since people tend to spot their own needs while not necessarily recognizing or knowing about the needs of other people, a lack of a wider representation in the various transport councils and ministries might easily end with the omission and ignorance of the diversity of travel patterns and needs (Christensen and Breengaard, 2019). Even though gender has been addressed in the EU since the mid-1980s, the gendered imbalances are still striking in current European transport councils and committees as demonstrated in the present EU project TiNNGO, focused on a game changer in European transport policy and practice. In the recent TiNNGO mapping of national parliamentary committees across the EU countries UK, Portugal, Romania, Germany, Spain, Sweden, France and Denmark, the proportion of women in 2019 varies between 7% and 40%. Similar mapping of transport ministers in the same countries shows that since 1945 only 23 out of a total of 245 ministers were women (Christensen and Breengaard, 2019). One explanation, provided by Sonja Mikkelsen, refers to the government transport committee as particular

powerful e, which aligns more with masculine performance and, therefore, is hard for women to access (Mikkelsen, 2004). A related explanation circles around gender-specific interests where transport traditionally counts as unattractive and as a 'male field'. This view was shared by Ritt Bjerregaard, another powerful social democratic politician, who in 1992 declined the offer to become minister for transport; an offer which she regarded as less than attractive and as an embarrassment (Carlsen, 2018).

The low prestige of the position as transport minister is also seen in the fact that many of them only stay in office for short periods. Denmark provides a good example, with no less than 46 transport ministers since 1945. The constant flow of new transport ministers should not conceal the fact that the ministry handles huge budgets, projects and agencies. In reality, transport policy is conducted by a less visible, but powerful group of civil servants, who in alliance with politicians and other agents, represent various interest groups and private enterprises, most of whom are explicitly or implicitly in line with the dominant car regime. As we will show in the case study, this situation has allowed for the development of a particular culture and masculine style, which has not been gainful for the inclusion of diverse groups or for new and fresh climate-friendly politics.

Such figures and assumptions about transport as a low-key resort and male-dominated sector have been confirmed by a recent network study of the power elite in Denmark (Larsen, 2015). Transport, it is shown, does not figure as a prestigious or particularly visible area in Danish societal and policy context. According to the extended mapping and network analysis of the Danish elite, the minister for transport figures at the margins of the elite network. Moreover, the network study shows that not only is the field of transport and infrastructure marked by an extremely high proportion of men, but it also stands out even in general male dominance in the elite in which only two out of the 100 most powerful persons are women (Larsen, 2015, pp. 62–63). From a sectorial perspective, transport, infrastructure and their related fields also proliferate as some of the most gender-divided sectors. In the topical elite network analysis, women make up under 10% of the subjects in the sectors of roads (7%), car sales (8%), shipping (9%), travel (9%) and cars (10%). In contrast, women dominated in the 'soft' areas of public institutions, such as health care, education, humanities and in terms of transport as cyclists. Following Bourdieu's interpretation of hard and soft subjects and of left and right wings of the state, this hardline gender division also places men in a favourite position related to the 'right hand' of the state, which is tied to the general patterns of dominance in the political field (Bourdieu, 2017, quoted in Larsen, 2015, p. 65).

The question is if and how such imbalances affect substantial policy and here specifically on the enhancements of sustainable and climate-friendly transport policy-making. In contrast to Sweden, available data is scarce and fragmented and points in several directions (Kronsell et al., 2015). In parallel with Swedish studies of transport policy, a fresh Danish analysis from 2019 shows how gender affects political priorities and representations in Danish municipalities. It turns out that there are clear gender differences – e.g. that women across party

lines support more resources to childcare, healthcare and people with disabilities (Hermansen, 2019). What is more, female politicians in municipal councils favour collective transport higher than their male fellows, while policy areas such as 'roads' and 'environment' show a lower level of interest among women. While the study does not provide any explanations of this phenomena, we might assume that it relates to women's generally higher dependency on public transit as well as their transport responsibilities for children and elderly relatives. It is also shown in the study, that women only have a particular impact on their favourite policy issues in municipalities where they make up both a critical mass and where they are in powerful positions – for example, as mayors (Hermansen, 2019).

At the national level, the manifested gender gaps in transport are not only something of the past but seem to continue. In a recent list of appointments to councils and institutions associated with the ministry of transport, there have only been minor changes in gender representation. A count in 1998–1999 showed that approximately 10% of all 300 appointments were women (Mikkelsen, 2004, pp. 72–73). While a count in 2020 showed approximately 20% or 32 women out of a total of 154 members appointed to all committees affiliated to the transport and housing ministry. This conveys the message of enduring male dominance (Mikkelsen, 2004, pp. 72–73; Trafikministeriet, 2020).⁶

The strategy of gender mainstreaming has been the answer to address such imbalances both at European and global levels. Gender mainstreaming has been developed as an institutional method and consists of a range of tools to identify imbalances and inequalities in processes where gender, so far, has been invisible or regarded as not important.⁷ The strategy helps to uncover how resources are used, how some groups benefit more from efforts than others, or how approaches can hide gendered imbalances. Besides, gender mainstreaming has been suggested as a tool for mobilisation and participation and for addressing gender and diversity in new and forward-looking ways (Squires, 2005; Christensen and Breengaard, 2011). So far, however, it does not seem as if gender mainstreaming and associated knowledge production has had any substantial impact on integrating gender and diversity in Danish or European transport planning and policy (Transgen, 2007; Christensen and Breengaard, 2019; Magnúsdóttir and Kronsell, this volume). Again, this refers to the reluctance in institutions and policy-making to further alternative priorities of non-motorised mobility and to go beyond the norms of addressing other than genderless (male) car drivers in the political priorities and institutions.

In the following section, we will explore how these complex configurations of gender and transport policy-making have unfolded in Denmark by examining a range of communicative events related to gender and the enhancement of more climate-friendly transport practices. A particular focus of attention is Sonja Mikkelsen's arrival and time as the first female traffic minister in Denmark. Her time as minister embodied the contested intersections of female gender- and climate-friendly politics. While the time she held office turned out to be very turbulent, it also marked a soft paradigmatic shift in transport policy in Denmark.

In general, Danish transport policy does not figure as a well-researched or comprehensive theme in policy or historical studies (Toft et al., 2000). This means that we had to collect evidence and establish both the context and the specificities and interpretations of the cases in question.

Sonja Mikkelsen: ‘The first lady minister’

Sonja Mikkelsen was appointed as minister for traffic in Denmark during the social democratic–social liberal government transformation in 1998. Her appointment was subject to keen media interest. Not only was she the first female minister for traffic, she was also a social pattern breaker with a background in a working-class family from the rural area of Thy in Jutland, known for its scenic beauty and remoteness from the ‘capital culture’ in Copenhagen. At the time of appointment, her hometown and constituency were Aarhus in Jutland and she left behind a husband and two young children to work in Copenhagen – something that, at the time, was unusual for a female minister (Mikkelsen, 2020). By her time of appointment in 1998, she was already an experienced politician, and had spent around 14 years in parliament and as a former member of the parliamentary research and traffic committees. Besides this, Sonja Mikkelsen was known as a left-winged and determined social democrat, a warm supporter of public transit. She had voted against one of the big transport compromises, as well as her own party line, when highways in Northern Jutland were exchanged for support to the Great Belt Bridge by some of the politicians from Jutland.

The Ministry of Traffic routinely figured among the low-prestige institutions – also in terms of media attention. Yet Sonja Mikkelsen’s entrance was followed with a keen interest in the print media. ‘Highway hater’ was an informal quote from one of the nervous civil servants, at her inaugural reception. Other informal claims were circulated such as: ‘She is a solid left winged social democrat, she hates highways, anyway in Northern Jutland’ and ‘She seems to be guided by higher (political) powers – she needs to moderate that’ (Rehling, 1998). The press immediately noticed the masculine atmosphere of the reception and the well-known fact that the transport sector was dominated by men:

Surrounded by men, men and men and men again, the first female transport minister was welcomed in the ministry ... among the guests were the chiefs of the DSB (Danish State Railways, the Rail Council, Post Denmark, the Road Directory, the Traffic Council, the State Car inspection and A/S Great Belt ... all males.

(Ritzau, 1998)

The head of the traffic department in 1998 was experienced and influential. He was known as both ‘colourful’ and powerful as well as as ‘cheeky as a butcher’s dog’. When he left his position in 2000, he was called ‘the oldest male baboon’ in parliamentary circles (Dahlin, 2000; Politikken, 2000). He was unusually

outspoken as a civil servant and was, as chief head of the department, said to have seriously outmaneuvered a number of both fellow civil servants and ministers. A style which was also demonstrated in the appointment of Sonja Mikkelsen where he welcomed her as minister in gendered and patronising terms:

You are the first lady [*sic*] as minister in the long history of the ministry. We are looking forward to seeing if you prioritise other values. We know that you have the courage and dare to express your opinions opinion unreserved. This can make us all sweat. Please remember that you are member of a government.

(Rehling, 1998)

He also reminded Sonja Mikkelsen that the Ministry of Traffic was an empire that included 20 councils and ten companies, counting also the recently established Øresund company 'and often you will read in the newspapers what happen in them' (Rehling, 1998).

The Department of the Traffic ministry was known as a particular world of its own. The ministry and various governments had for decades granted their chief heads of department a level of autonomy which was unseen in other ministerial departments. Chief heads of departments or permanent secretaries, according to Danish democratic administrative rules, are routinely held under parliamentary and committee control. In this particular ministry, however, they seemed to have established their own rules and value regimes.⁸

On this occasion, the Head of the Traffic Department in the said goodbye to the tenth minister and hello to the eleventh minister.

The Ministers forgo, but the ministry survives', was a standing joke in the ministry and he was in the routine of welcoming and saying goodbye to ministers. He himself had been the head of the department in the traffic ministry since 1993 after 11 years as head of the department in the ministry of housing.

(Kjær, 1999; Nielsen, 1999; Politiken, 1999a)

An early goal of his as head of the department was to 'become master in my own house' which was an easy task due to the ministry he was serving in, which was seen by many as weak. Another reason for the weakness of the ministry was its role as a 'swing door' to more attractive political posts and resorts (Politiken, 1999a). He was a self-proclaimed social democrat but differed from Sonja Mikkelsen in his commitment to the conservative car-loving segment. In spite of growing attention from the social-liberal and conservative governments during the 1980s and 1990s to CO₂ emissions and environmental problems caused by private cars, in 1996 he bluntly claimed: 'We love private car-drivers in the Traffic Ministry. We regard cars as the best friends of humans. One cannot work in the ministry of traffic and be opposed to (car) traffic' (Det Fri Aktuelt, 1996, here quoted from Politiken, 1999a).

The central position of private car-driving was a clear indication that in 1996 traffic policy and the atmosphere of the Ministry of Traffic was still closely equated with cars. This horizon was, however, challenged during Sonja Mikkelsen's two-year reign as a minister. Sonja Mikkelsen was described as a 'warm supporter of public transit' and her clear aim as minister was to strengthen public transit and to give access and provide mobility for groups without cars in order to protect the environment (Toft et al., 2000).

Disruption of privileges

Many people find transport policy a dull subject. In general, the Danish population has only a vague feeling of who holds the power when it comes to transport and daily mobility. According to the media representations in Denmark, the power of transport politics around the year 2000 seems to have been identical with the parliamentary transport committee, a group of middle-aged or older white men. They were criticised for primarily feeding their own interests as well as the interests of a rather unspecified 'car lobby' consisting of various interest organisations in the field.⁹

The traffic committee/members in question, in the media bluntly nicknamed as a mafia and as 'ronkedors' ('old male elephants'), consisted of a small group of male politicians with a long track of first-hand knowledge of major traffic policies in the 1980s and 1990s. They were not only used to special treatment but also special catering when they routinely attended their Friday meetings in the ministry. Meetings were – according to media accounts – held with high coated open sandwiches and accompanied by beer and 'at least one shot of aquavit' (Lautrup-Larsen, 2017), an 'old boys' network', which the new minister, Sonja Mikkelsen, thought she could put an end to. When she invited the committee to the first meeting in the ministry, the menu had changed to carrot sticks and cauliflower florets with dip. Sonja Mikkelsen later recalled the conflicts with the committee, saying that:

They acted as a couple of fools, and in my experience, they never have fostered their own ideas. I think they became very offended when they found out that I removed their sand box and that I did not want to continue their food club.

(Aarhus Stiftstidende, 2005)

There were several occasions where the head of department and the department did not provide adequate professional support for Traffic Minister Mikkelsen, which explains one of the reasons why she as minister ended up in one political storm after another. Several members of the parliamentary traffic committee criticised the ministry and the department for lack of damage control as well as lack of adequate briefing (Abild, 1999b). Mikkelsen recalls it as a relief when in 2000 the head of department was catapulted into a new position as head of a new research institute for transport. The idea of the new research institute was, ironically, enough to galvanise and qualify the knowledge basis of transport policy in

Denmark, something which up until this point he found no need for as head of the department (Mikkelsen, 2020).

The particular institutional landscape, which Mikkelsen entered as a minister, was both epitomised and disrupted during her two years as transport minister. Her presence from day one was perceived as a disturbance of the traditional order, both because she embodied a difference to the dominant image of the minister as male and due to her broader take on traffic politics and support of social concerns and public transit. By the late 1990s, the main actors in the landscape consisted of a strong triangle of males in the parliamentary traffic committees, a strong and independent group of civil servants in the ministry, and those in transport councils, according to Mikkelsen, were all car driving, middle-aged or older men, who did not understand the importance or significance of public transit (Mikkelsen, 2004, 2020). The media, headed by an influential press, eagerly covered every conflict and contributed to the image construction of Mikkelsen as a muddler.

Traffic policy and endless conflicts

Traffic policy was, when Mikkelsen became minister, far from being conducted as transparent policy processes, based on qualified knowledge. Traffic policy-making, as demonstrated, was to a great extent part of a special culture of informal meetings and particular close ties between some ministers and members of the parliamentary policy committee. Policy decisions seem to have taken place at the informal weekly meetings between tone-setting liberal and conservative politicians and various members of the 'blue block' and shifting ministers. Those informal arrangements made policy discussions at the parliamentary level a kind of political window dressing, since decisions and agreements had been horse-traded beforehand. What is more, Danish transport policy lacked a coherent strategy based on knowledge and research. A tradition, which differed from the other Nordic countries where transport policy was guided by major political and long-term strategies (Sørensen and Gudmonsson, 2010). In the Danish context, transport policies, therefore, were marked by random and short-sighted projects and decisions. One case in point here was the Great Belt Bridge against new highways in Northern Jutland and other compromises, which contributed to the general mistrust and disillusion about transport policy.¹⁰

Sonja Mikkelsen arrived with the whole package of antidotes to this male-dominated Maverick-like culture. Not only in terms of policy but also in terms of lifestyle – a contrast which was immediately represented and pinpointed in the media as entertainment. The situation in the ministry – and her contrast with it – made her time as a minister very turbulent. In the media, she was nicknamed 'muddling Sonja' and with a range of other degrading labels.

The day-to-day political initiatives and compromises turned out to be troublesome during Mikkelsen's time as minister. It seemed as if one scandal and conflict followed after the other. Often, these scandals were related to the difficult transition of the public transport units from state-run to more independent companies, but they also related to internal competition and disagreements

between powerful public stakeholders and the government. For example, DSB, the Danish state railway department, time and again played a counterproductive role. Besides this, Mikkelsen broke the routine of compromising with liberal and conservative representatives in the traffic committee and started to include the left-wing parties – to the extraordinary regret of the blue representatives.

Among the most attended media events, was the ‘tunnel case’, which was connected to the construction of a tunnel between the new Copenhagen Metro and the old S-trains at Nørreport Station, one of the busiest stations in Copenhagen with 60,000 daily commuters. The metro was constructed and run by a new company, independent of the old national rail company, DSB. Not only did the price double during the construction process from 5 billion to 10 billion DKK, but DSB opposed the tunnel and positioned the new metro and the old S-train systems as simply incompatible. The issue was subjected to tense media attention and lengthy and humiliating accounts of the minister as powerless and unable to solve such a simple case. In the end, however, the conflict was overturned by Mikkelsen as the minister in charge and the two rail systems were connected by a tunnel, an intervention she recalls as one of her successful results (Mikkelsen, 28.4.20). Another spectacular case concerned Combis – a reconstructed bus company and a successor to the old state-run busses by DSB. When Combis, in 1999, ended with a large deficit and fear of bankruptcy, Mikkelsen ‘rescued’ the company with a 300 million DKK grant without the consent of the parliamentary traffic committee (Juel, 1999; Politiken, 1999b).

Yet, the single most contested event in the time of Mikkelsen as Minister of Traffic was the negotiation of the Finance Act in 1999, which planned to include a major transport change and a long-term agreement of improving the DSB, the national rail provider. Politiken, one of the tone-setting capital newspapers referred to the dramatic negotiations as follows: ‘First Sonja Mikkelsen shows the liberal and conservative members out of the door. Next she contributed to the creation of a proposal to finance improvements of public transport with input from the left winged and Christian people’s parties’ (Politiken, 1999b).

The idea of Mikkelsen and the left-wing members of the traffic committee was to create a red/green solution with taxes aimed at financing public transport. The proposal was regarded as a provocation both by the conservative members and tone-setting social democratic ministers, because they were against transfers between transport and tax policy. The incident was eagerly reported in detail in the press, that foresaw her dismissal. Both the minister of finance and the prime minister

were very upset, when she on Wednesday night chose to do it alone and presented a catalogue of green charges, aimed at financing an extended rail network. In other words, she went far beyond her mandate. Shortly before both the Liberal and the Conservative representatives had left and slammed the door; they under no circumstances could accept the proposals from the ‘greens’.

(Havskov, 1999)¹¹

The unfinished negotiations were then removed from Mikkelsen's roles and responsibilities and finalised by the powerful minister of finance. The agreement still implied a six billion DKK budget to improve the railway tracks, but not the longstanding investment in an electric railway (Buksti, 2005).

Sonja Mikkelsen was, during her entire period as minister for traffic, subjected to both verbal and parliamentary attacks – in particular from the 'blue' representatives of the traffic committee. The subtext was that the transfers made in favour of public transit were seen as an attack on private car owners. The opponents often addressed her and her political allies as children and for 'stealing money' from the car owners. As said by one of the representatives:

If she continues her car hunt, we do not want to create compromises with her in other fields. We have reached the bottom level. We do not want to enter into compromises with her – when she consequently spent the savings on (public transit).

(Abild and Westh, 1999)¹²

The car policy, which referred to higher charges for diesel cars, was seen as a witch-hunt on car owners – a perception which was echoed in readers' letters:

As a car-owner one has become a target of the hunt issued by the current traffic minister Sonja Mikkelsen and others are in the process of limiting our right to motorised mobility in the cities ... it is called environmental regards'.

(Ekstra Bladet, 1999a)

The events from car charges to metro mistakes were placed not only as a political mistake, but as a national catastrophe:

If this was the private sector she would have been sacked a long time ago. Sonja Mikkelsen might not be a burden for the government, but she is a catastrophe for the country – one needs to look for long after a bigger mistake.

(Ekstra Bladet, 1999)

While Mikkelsen's visions of broader and more knowledge-based transport policy was acknowledged, both foes and friends regretted her lack of interest or abilities to form alliances. This tended to leave her as a lonely and contested rider for her policies.

Sonja Mikkelsen evaluated – A bracket or a new beginning for transport policy?

In general, the Danish media seems to have had an arrogant and convicting attitude towards the long and shifting row of transport ministers. 'The truth is that the shifting ministers for transport have never been the sharpest knives in the

cupboard' (Palle, 2009) and 'the ministry of transport has been marked by an endless row of incompetent predecessors in this resort' (Jyllands Posten, 2011) are just a couple of examples of this harsh tune. Yet, the style – both in terms of vocabulary as well as the political assessments – was particularly sweeping towards Sonja Mikkelsen as minister. What is more, her political opponents in alliance with the media created an image of her time as minister as a bracket, a disruption in the otherwise smooth running of the ministry's car-friendly politics. In 2001, a fellow social democrat succeeded Sonja Mikkelsen not as traffic, but as transport minister; a change intended to mark a broader horizon for the policy resort. The new transport minister, Jakob Buksti, was immediately appreciated – by a businessman from Jutland – for promoting new highway plans in Jutland. The positive welcome to the new transport minister was seconded by the chair for Danish transport and logistics:

We have a very positive cooperation in every respect ... Even though he (the minister) does not make any promises, he seems to be a much more popular personality compared with Sonja Mikkelsen, his predecessor. She did not do well with the transport sector, but also here we now hear new tunes.

(Erhvervsbladet, 2001)

Members of the parliamentary traffic committee also commented on their strained relation with Sonja Mikkelsen and appreciated the former social democratic ministers: 'The working climate in the committee was substantially better with ministers such as Bjørn West and in particular with Jan Trøjborg'. On the one hand, left-wing politicians and environmentalists were critical and from time to time found Sonja Mikkelsen too weak on environmental issues. On the other hand, they tended to appreciate the efforts of Sonja Mikkelsen as: 'The only one of a long row of transport ministers, who did a lot to handle transport as a whole. She fought courageously for more than roads and cars' (Politiken, 2000). Her climate-friendly politics were acknowledged. 'She is one of the best – she is the one who had prioritized public transit the most and also supported the repair of trains and tracks' (Politiken, 2000).

In Sonja Mikkelsen's entry to the Ministry of Traffic, her break with the tradition of forming alliances, the change in acts of policy-making, together with the large critical media coverage of her as minister of traffic, there are ongoing complex gender (im)balances at stake. Looking at the gender performativities and gendered positions in this particular policy culture, shows several issues. One is that the traditional dominance of male agents led to a culture in which groups of male politicians regarded transport policy as a playground and a game – one which belonged to them. Through talks and actions they enacted a suite of conservative and oppressive masculinities related to core virtues of traditional Danish culture. Second, their acts were closely entangled with the fight for privileges of private car owners and road transport. The older and powerful members of the traffic committee regarded the new female minister, Sonja Mikkelsen, as an intruder in this unspoken, but also very established culture, which included not

only policy-making but a whole way of life both in the ministry and outside. In the aftermath of her time as Minister of Traffic, she positioned herself as the rational actor, who wanted to enhance rationality and transparency in this complicated policy area: 'I am not a jolly type of person, I am more after the content and not so keen on window dressing and trappings. That's my way' (B.T., 2000). An interpretation of herself, which echoes the analysis of masculinity and car culture by Catharina Landström, who argues that certain processes of interpellation initially invite men into an imagined homo-social community and a shared culture of cars and transport artefacts. Car culture, thus, becomes implied in the 'doing' of heterosexual masculinity and pleasure, and in such a stereotyped framework women are often constructed as practising a rational femininity as opposed to, or even as a threat to, this type of male sociality and pleasure (Landström, 2006).

The question remains how transport policy and transport as a culture can be opened up and made useful and a climate-friendly playground not only for certain men, but for other groups as well, not least for a broader group of women with various backgrounds.

Epilogue

There is, by 2020, ample evidence that policy and planning are still in a circuit of knowledge produced by a neo-classical growth-oriented paradigm or a genderless sustainable paradigm. The critical paradigm, which highlights the structural inequalities in terms of privilege and disadvantages related to gender and other categories in transport and mobility is weak and still absent from political agendas (Kębłowski and Bassens, 2018; NOAH, Denmark). This means that alternative transport such as non-motorised and climate-friendly transport policy is still contested, and supporters have recently been addressed as 'climate fools' in the Danish media.¹³ Yet, cycling and more attention to climate-friendly motorised and non-motorised transport are also gaining currency. The ideas of sustainability and 'bikeability' in combination with a decent public transit system are not new but have persistently been advocated by NGOs such as the Danish Cyclist Association but with limited influence on the governmental transport committee. Also, and currently, following the COVID-19 crisis, various forms of biking – not least e-bikes – are enjoying a growing popularity both inside and outside of Copenhagen. Last but not least, climate change has lately become a hot policy topic partly generated by a younger generation and revitalisation of critical social movements where young women are upfront. This seems to show promise for a game changer in the circuit of gender and diversity in transport and mobility as well as fresh and more diverse knowledge production.

Notes

- 1 This chapter forms part of the TiNNGO project, which received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement number 824349.

- 2 The Danish Climate Council is an 'independent' expert council which provides suggestions for cost-effective climate solutions.
- 3 The idea of transport policy and planning as a performative act has been applied by several scholars, but not reflecting agents as gendered, see also Lissandrello (2016).
- 4 The name of the ministry was changed from Ministry of Traffic to Ministry of Transport in 2005. – In this chapter we follow this chronology using traffic about the ministry, committee, department, etc., till 2005 and ministry of transport after 2005.
- 5 From the 1990s, the environment and climate have been placed in various constellations as political resorts, which also echoes political priorities of governments.
- 6 In 2020, the list includes committee members in both Transport and Housing which might bring women's participation levels up.
- 7 The current EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 combines gender mainstreaming and an intersectional politics approach. EU Gender Equality Strategy, 2020.
- 8 This is a particularity which also applied to the former head of the traffic department, who served in the ministry all his working life (38 years in total, with the last 20 years as chief head of the department). He was extremely unpopular among male politicians and was nicknamed with degrading labels such as 'Godfather', 'a snake' and 'an intriguing emperor' etc. The ideal public servant in Denmark is the 'unpolitical person', that at all times follows seated governments and ministers. 'It is a fundamental principle that public employees at all levels must both be and appear to be impartial and that they must make decisions and rulings based on objective grounds' – these principles were updated in Code of Conduct in the Public Sector in 2017.
- 9 Besides the interests of (e)automobility are catered for by, for example, the FDM (Association of Danish Motorowners, Danish car import/Danish Transport and Logistics (DLTL) and more lately by e-car associations: such as Association of Danish E-car Drivers and Danish E-car Alliance (from list of hearing partners related to the suggested climate law, 2.3. 2020).
- 10 Denmark with many separated islands – and waterborne borders – has made big bridge-building projects a main priority and a major issue of contestations. From the Great Belt Bridge in the 1980s and 1990s to the Oresund Bridge in 2000, up until today when big projects are also underway: with the Femern Belt Bridge linking Denmark with Germany and the projected Kattegat Bridge linking Copenhagen with Aarhus over water. The bridge projects are often backed onto other compromises – and therefore hard to change.
- 11 Politicians later recalled that the conflict also unfolded around the unspoken gender composition of the members of the transport committee/the team of negotiators consisting of four women.
- 12 14.2. 1999, Berlingske Tidende. (Lars Abild og Maria Westh).
- 13 A degrading label suggested by Pia Kjærsgaard, former chair of the Danish Peoples Party. <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/politik/pia-kjaersgaard-jeg-staar-100-procent-ved-der-er-mange-klimatossier>

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