The politics of flying: aeromobile frictions in a mobile city

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ABSTRACT

This article joins recent calls for greater attention to be paid to the politics of mobility. In particular, it examines how air transport is not only experienced inequitably among different social groups, but is also an activity whose access and opportunities are geographically distributed in uneven ways. Using Singapore as a candidate and foil to reflect on this issue, this paper interrogates how three 'international' legislative frameworks—air traffic rights, air navigation rules, and climate change initiatives—have variously limited the city-state's potential to 'move' at different stages of its flying career. Despite the city-state's widely-acclaimed aviation success, this paper demonstrates how it remains subject to the geopolitical actions of more dominant players, residing interstitially between being at the vanguard, and at the peripheries of global air traffic. It is suggested that further interrogations on how particular transport practices and configurations become salient in the world are needed.

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1. Introduction

A recent high-profile national day speech saw Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announce his administration's plans to add two new terminals to the city-state's Changi Airport, doubling its capacity to some 135 million passengers per year (Prime Minister's Office, Singapore, 2013). Determined to grow a sector that supports some 119,000 jobs and contributes S$14.2 billion (Minister's Office, Singapore, 2013), Singapore harbors high hopes that these new facilities would in time help it ride the momentum of increasing air travel in/to the region. Yet, this fervent optimism masks the true regulatory challenges (Debbage, 2014; Shaw and Sidaway, 2010) that the Southeast Asian city (knows it) must tackle, before it can get air passenger numbers rising to meet that extra capacity. In addition to these infrastructural investments, Singapore's vision must be accompanied by strategies to respond to various international regulatory regimes that continue to limit its ambitions. In short, a turbulent 'airscape' awaits Singapore even before the first new passenger graces the doors of Changi.

Using these airport development plans as a reflexive spur, this paper seeks to ensclose Singapore and, by extension, the greater Asian region's air transport credentials within a wider and contradictory geopolitics of aerial governance and restrictions. While recognizing that this part of the world has made significant strides in aviation, including a doubling of the share of global passenger numbers between 1970 and 2010 (O'Connor and Fuellhart, 2014), this paper is interested in the concurrent subjection of its aeromobile potentials to various standards and legislations that are often arbitrated without it. Insofar as this affects the ability of Asian states to fully partake in the fruits of aeromobility, the discrepant rhythms, routes and frictions (Cresswell, 2010) that result from such uneven modes of incorporation within global aerial networks (Urry, 2007) also deserve greater scrutiny. This is not to dismiss the salience of other, more immediate, kinds of inequalities arising between different categories of passengers, or between 'mobile' and 'immobile' groups (Adey, 2006; Martin, 2011). Rather, in attending to how aeromobile vectors, and the opportunities that they afford places, are irregularly distributed, this paper aims to highlight the oft-neglected macro forces at work within aviation, which not only help produce an uneven hierarchy of cities (cf. Beaverstock et al., 1999), but also circumscribe the aerial networks that most people—save those who can afford to travel by private aircraft (Rudd and Graham, 2009)—can tap into.

This paper additionally wields a second purpose, that is, to re-look at one of transport geography's longstanding interests in aviation networks and regulation through the lens of the 'new' mobilities paradigm (Sheller and Urry, 2006). Such an orientation not only acts as a(nother) “bridge across [the two] disciplinary borders” (Bissell et al., 2011, p. 1008), but also tells a story that foregrounds the geopolitical aspects of (air) transport systems (Debbage, 2014; Shaw and Sidaway, 2010). Thus encouraging...
aviation geography to exceed its utilitarian stance, the rest of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 briefly reviews how air transport geography and aeromobilities studies have both sought to accent the unevenness and inequity inherent within aviation, albeit in different ways. While individually enlightening, I suggest that these two approaches can better complement each other in explaining the internal structures abetting unequal flow patterns in international aviation. After a note on Singapore's position within global air networks in Section 3, Section 4 examines three regulatory systems—air traffic rights, air navigation rules, and climate change initiatives—that have threatened to limit traffic growth in the city-state. While these regimes do not affect Singapore alone, their associations with the dominance of particular—especially, European and North American—air powers will be highlighted. Some reflections follow in the final section on the productiveness of studying aeromobilities through a 'non-Western' example.

2. Revisiting air transport

Scholars of air transport are no stranger to the geographically asymmetric nature of aviation networks. While some authors investigate the extent to which aerial activities tend to concentrate around large urban centers in a domestic setting (Grubesic and Matisziw, 2010; Rodríguez-Déniz et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2011), others are concerned with how similar patterns of coalescence take place in global and regional contexts (Lee, 2009; O'Connor, 1995). In addition to these raw measures of traffic densities, some geographers have recently forwarded analyses that seek to decipher exactly what kinds of flows converge at airports. O'Connor and Fuelhert (2012), for instance, examine how hubs can be differentiated according to the kinds of services rendered—defined in terms of the airlines involved, the preponderant aircraft type used (thus determining the route length, capacity, etc.), and the prevalence of low-cost carriers. Derudder et al. (2007), in a similar vein, make a further distinction between global cities, recognizable by their origin/destination function, and network cities focused more on through-traffic. All these studies prove the presence of a global hierarchy of airports and networks in the aviation industry. This does not mean that the patterns observed do not change (Grubesic et al., 2009; Grubesic and Zook, 2007), but that the unevenness of aviation's spatial reach is probably a permanent feature.

If transport geography has been proficient in identifying the state of unevenness within aviation networks through analyses of traffic data, another body of work is more attuned to the mechanisms by which inequalities arise within aerial systems. Fixated on a rather different scale of analysis, and using mostly ethnographic methods, scholars allied to the 'new' mobilities paradigm (Sheller and Urry, 2006) have furnished understandings of hubs—or, more precisely, air terminals—as not just nodes that facilitate travel, but 'processing' machines that sort through, prepare and reproduce particular desirable forms of (im)mobilities. While some observe the airport's reliance on a complex of signs and materialities to achieve this effect (Adye, 2008, 2010a; Kitchin and Dodge, 2009), others critique how the managerial treatment of passengers inherits a politics that systematically retards or excludes certain bodies by virtue of their (constructed) difference (Adye, 2004; Cresswell, 2010). The turn to biometrics has only further skewed these power geometries. By actively anticipating 'threatening subjects' based on bio-data collected from travelers' bodies, these surveillance techniques are aimed not only at sorting through passengers, but also at divining what crimes they might or might not perpetrate (Adye, 2009; Amoore, 2006; Lyon, 2008).

Elsewhere, the act of flying itself has also been interrogated for its tendency to (re)produce particular social figures. Complementing broad caricatures of airborne experiences—of discomforts, fears, maladies (Bissell, in press; Budd, 2011; Budd et al., 2011), air transport geography with the explanatory power of mobilities studies simultaneously dovetails with Shaw and Sidaway's (2010) insistence that greater "links" be drawn between the two fields. This would allow for a cross-fertilization of not just approaches, but also topics, between transport geography and the 'new' mobilities paradigm. As Shaw and Sidaway (2010, p. 507) assert, as a means of "connecting national space and enabling an idea of the national economy/society... [transport lies deep] at the heart of modern nation-state projects as territorial entities", making it already a highly socio-political endeavor that exceeds mere network-formation. Geoeconomically, it also impregnates "an array of economic, social and political geographies" that potentially affect "the changing global geography of development and urbanization" (Shaw and Sidaway, 2010, p. 508). Given the purchase of all this on issues of access and urban/national/regional 'life-chances', existing insights on the spatialities of air transport and its governance should also not be simply chronicled, but analytically channeled to account for how discrepant (im)mobilities are conceived and activated at various scales. In the rest of this paper, I intend to elaborate on these ideas by examining three constellations of aviation...
legislations that have precisely limited the aeromobilities of one city in Asia. The turn to a ‘non-Western’ example is moreover able to underscore the experiences of cities and states that do not have the power to determine these same laws.

3. Singapore’s aeromobilities

For a country that only came into being half a century after the advent of flight, many of the aviation achievements of Singapore could not be attributed to the island nation. Once a colony of Britain, Singapore benefited immensely from British and other European contributions to regional air transport, particularly in the provision of funds, expertise (such as in air traffic control), and air services. While the first flight, a Bristol Boxkite piloted by Joseph Christiaens, took off in 1911 as part of a flight demonstration, the first commercial services were started by Dutch airline Koninklijke Luchtvart Maatschappij in 1933, and, later, Britain’s Imperial Airways in 1934 (Yap, 2011). Besides these air links, the British also commissioned, and financed, the construction of a new airport in Kallang on the southern shores of the island (Department of Civil Aviation, 1981). When completed in 1937, not only did the aerodrome earn praise as “the finest airport in the British Empire” (Yap, 2011, p. 5), it also signaled British ambitions to expand its air empire in the region through Singapore. As then-Governor Cecil Clementi proclaimed in 1931, “[l]ooking into the future, I expect to see Singapore become one of the largest and most important airports in the world” (Department of Civil Aviation, 1981, p. 23). His words, it seems, could not have been more prophetic, as the port city’s economy was further entrenched in the ways of mobility, this time through the air.

Yet, the future that Clementi envisioned was also one that was contingent on Singapore’s continued umbilical connection to the metropole and its trans-Empire interests. After the end of World War II, the loosening of Britain’s grip over its Southeast Asian possessions had portended an unfavorable shift in the aviation climate for the colonial city. While the British gradually withdrew their technical and financial assistance to the colony, the Federation of Malaya—of which Singapore was part from 1963 until Independence in 1965—battled to reclaim their autonomy in aerial matters (Raguraman, 1997). Inheriting a regionally focused airline jointly operated with Malaysia called Malayan Airways, and, later, Malaysia–Singapore Airlines, the newly Independent city-state soon faced difficulties in expanding its existing aerial networks, as Malaysia insisted that their joint-venture should concentrate on uniting the Malay world first (Raguraman, 1997). Consequently, not only did Singapore now have to grapple with decolonized trade routes and a port economy politically severed from its markets (unlike competitor, Hong Kong), it also did not have the latitude to devote resources to international services without the agreement of Malaysia. Quite distinguishingly, this scenario paints a picture of immobility not nearly as sanguine as what Clementi had prognosticated, revealing a more vulnerable side of Singapore’s aeromobilities.

This is not the place to rehearse how the city-state subsequently managed to reverse its fortunes by establishing a strong network carrier in 1972 to lure transcontinental passengers to its metropolis—their intensity, their safe navigation and their guiding principles—would take place. With agenda-setting powers in aviation matters often held in reserve by a handful of dominant states instead (Staniland, 2003), Singapore’s air traffic growth only belies the city-state’s more modest position within global hierarchies of aerial influence. In the following, I will draw on a collection of interviews with Singaporean aviation administrators, airline newsletters, and news and official reports sourced in 2012 to shed light on these limitations. In particular, three instances in which the city-state’s aeromobilities have been curtailed in the course of its post-Independence flying career—its (obstructed) procurement of air traffic rights; its inability to independently set air navigation rules; and its subjection to recent climate change debates and regulations—will be examined.

3.1. Missed connections

In spite of Singapore’s desire to thrive in an air world that would allow it to be connected to any point on the planet at will, this is a prospect that is denied it by a route rationing system set up at the close of World War II, known, quite oxymoronically, as the “ Freedoms of the Air” (ICAO, 2004). Modeled after the Bermuda I Agreement between the US and UK in 1946 (Little, 1949), the mandatory practice of having states negotiate bilateral—and, in more recent years, multilateral—treaties between themselves before commercial air services can be launched has governed international aviation, and especially, its routes and capacities (Raguraman, 1986), for the last seven decades. Although the exact stipulations of these treaties have evolved over time, “the broad structure” of this framework—i.e., requiring an exchange of ‘traffic rights’ before air services can commence—“remains in place” (Button and Taylor, 2000, p. 211). Such a regime has also been widely reported in transport geography, albeit authors are increasingly noting, too, recent moves towards (conditional) air liberalization in several regions, including in Southeast Asia (Bowen, 2000; Hooper, 2005). To the extent that Singapore is bound by law to these shifting policies and obligations, its vision of an ultra-liberal aerial market is also one that is limited by these artificial frictions and immobilities.

What is more salient perhaps is that these regulations are not something that every state has had a say in, neither, indeed, had its interests catered to. Consider, for instance, this excerpt from a staff newsletter published by the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore, which pursues the roots of this externally imposed arrangement:

Men [sic] realised and understood the importance of the air… Quickly while the bombs were still dropping, [they] frantically [tried] to come to agreement among themselves on some order to govern the air above them… Men [sic] learned the war lesson well. They extended the jealous protection to the economics of the Air. The Agreement from the 1944 [Chicago] Conference, therefore, left a gap for men[sic] to hassle, namely the economic rights to carry passengers, cargo or mail between one Contracting Party and third countries (Aviation Views, 1986, p. 6).

From Singapore’s perspective, the obligation to obtain third-party permissions before the city-state can engage in aerial trade constitutes a “gap” created out of (Western) war-time anxieties that its administrators now have to “hassle” with. Such impious labels are by no means accidental. The city-state has been a victim of aeromobility denial by various protectionist opponents ever since it became an Independent state. In one of its earliest struggles, Singapore was refused rights by Britain to fly to London (The Straits Times, 1970), despite the historical links between the two cities. As one of the country’s lead negotiators recounted in an archived interview, the British counterpart had denied his team’s request for rights as they thought that “Singapore is nothing [while] London is so valuable”, claiming that “what you are offering us – Singapore, is not good enough for you to get to
London’’ (Lim, 2000). It was not until the city-state terminated Britain’s long-held colonial rights to fly to Singapore in 1970—
thereby risking further lost links—that the British government finally relented (The Sunday Times, 1995).

With the inception of the popular Singapore Airlines (SIA) as the nation’s flag carrier in 1972, the city-state’s woes only continued. Backpedaling on rights already granted, West Germany had the police raid SIA’s Frankfurt office in 1981, and summoned the airline’s station managers to Bonn to explain what Germany perceived to be unfair “discounting practices”; this charge was followed by unscheduled checks on SIA flights at the airport, causing “inexcusable delays” and “embarrassment” for passengers (Outlook, 1981a, p. 3). While the Americans and Australians similarly tried to retract SIA’s permits to serve key long-haul markets in the 1980s at the request of their outcompeted local airlines (Outlook, 1981b), Canada granted Singapore access with onerous conditions attached. For example, SIA was obliged to make uneconomic stops in the US before being allowed into Canadian airspace; it also had to await Air Canada and Canadian Pacific’s entry into service on particular routes before it could mount its own services (Outlook, 1986). When these restrictions were finally lifted in 1987, thereby allowing SIA to operate to Toronto via London for the first time, the Canadian government went back on its word only two-and-a-half months after that service started (Outlook, 1991), resulting in the termination of all Singapore–Toronto links to this day.

As much as Singapore desires to “boost...[its] importance on the [world] aviation map” (The Straits Times, 1989, p. 33) by establishing a surfeit of links with the world, it remains in practice encumbered by a system—and often the authors of that system—that refuses to subscribe to its vision of unfettered aerial access. What the city-state’s example evinces is a clash between two philosophies of aeromobilities, between liberality and sanctioned protectionism, and the normalization of the latter by a set-up that legitimizes the treatment of some mobilities as undeserved, or threatening to existing profits. While this is not necessarily a case of the ‘West’ against the ‘Rest’, seeing that fellow Asian states are threatening to existing profits. While this is not necessarily a case of the ‘West’ against the ‘Rest’, seeing that fellow Asian states are equally culpable in denying their competitors the desired traffic rights (Debbage, 2014; Tan, 2010), it bears recognition that the aviation market is only the beginning of the hurdles that aspirant Asian cities like Singapore have to overcome. Even after traffic rights have been procured, there remains a need for local authorities to ensure that any resultant increase in air traffic can be safely accommodated within a nation or a region’s airspace. Here, Singapore is tethered to another set of regulations governing the organization of airspace and the use of its finite capacities. These dictates are, again, not indigenous to it, neither to Asia, but can be traced to the work of pioneering airfaring nations in Western Europe and North America, as well as the (US-led) International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) first set up to “secure international co-operation [and the] highest possible degree of uniformity in [navigational] regulations” (ICAO, no date). To the extent that a majority of the world’s nation-states were not founded at the time of ICAO’s establishment, the labor of writing the first rules of the air was inevitably a skewed exercise that landed on the laps of ‘traditional’ air powers.

In particular, soon after the founding of ICAO, countries such as the US, Britain, and France gathered to arbitrate on a pilot suite of procedures at the International Conference on the North Atlantic Route Service Organization in Dublin in March 1946. To cater to the “unique” airspace environment over Europe (due to the preponderance of short-haul, overland flights), a second version was issued two months later in Paris, at a parallel conference for European–Mediterranean states (ICAO, 2007). By the time the third edition was issued at the close of the 1940s however, these rules were generalizable made “applicable on a worldwide basis” (ICAO, 2007, p. vii), with no special provisions made for the consideration of regional distinctions like before. Instead, air navigation plans for the rest of the world were discussed at so-called “Regional Air Navigation Meetings”, including one for the “South-East Asian Region” (ICAO, 2013a). The goal of these meetings was notably not to re-invent a set of customized rules, but to assess these regions’ facilities, and to determine if additional equipment was required to bring them on par with the forerunning Dublin and Paris frameworks.

Euphemistically, this may seem like a form of technical assistance extended to Asian and other non-Western states, but in reality the formalization of air navigational rules according to principles that Euro-American nations and their aircraft manufacturers were familiar with has far-reaching implications on the technical execution of aeromobilities, and the monopoly of that execution. If the experience of Singapore is any guide, the city-state is today very much an adopter, rather than an inventor, of air navigational techniques, in part because of the continuing concentration of ‘legitimate’ knowledge on aircraft, avionics and airspace design in the hands of a few dominant states like Australia, Canada, France, the UK and the US. As a Singaporean senior technical officer admits, “[w]e are building our own capability, but…we don’t re-invent the wheel…Whatever concept that [is relevant to us], and that can be adaptable for the Singapore context or for the region, we will bring it in” (Interview, 07 August 2012). This is not to suggest that Singapore is uninterested in finding its own solutions to navigational problems that it and its neighbors face, as recent investments to attract top researchers to a new Centre of Excellence for Air Traffic Management would make clear (The Straits Times, 2012). Rather, it is more a case of the city-state, along with much of the world, having yet to muster sufficient authority to re-shape existing regulatory commands in the aeronautical field.

An example of Singapore’s continued subordination to foreign expertise can be found in its recent efforts to reduce permissible longitudinal spacings between aircraft—plane-to-plane separation in the direction of travel—over the South China Sea, using the US-pioneered RNP-10 (Required Navigation Performance) standard. Composed of a series of ongoing system and procedural upgrades undertaken since the mid-2000s, this planned separation reduction is meant to ease congestion over the South China Sea, and to cater to the rapidly growing intra-Asia market (O’Connor and Fuellhart, 2014). However, to achieve this ‘local’ capacity increase, airspace planning methodologies had to be drawn from previous technical innovations first conceived in the 1980s by an ICAO Special Committee (helmed by key representatives from Australia, Canada, France, the UK and the US), which was then working to combat airspace congestion over the North Atlantic (ICAO, 2001). Acting as a prototype for all future capacity augmentations, the North Atlantic was, as such, the ‘original’ oceanic airspace that spurred the development of a ‘new’ generation of satellite-based navigational techniques that Singapore would now import. No longer reliant on fixed, ground-based instruments, airspace concepts subsequently in use would afford a more precise
means of guiding traffic through the air over remote areas (ICAO, 1985), if also a further entrenchment of Western dominance in the development of these flying technologies.

Ostensibly, to adopt these complex procedures takes more than a simple replication of prescriptive steps. The city-state had to actively engage in learning from the authors of this knowledge. To satisfy one of the criteria set by ICAO, Singapore enrolled the help of a US-based company, CSSI, to assist in an obligatory safety assessment for the South China Sea. This turn to American know-how was not arbitrary, but tied to the fact that CSSI “had an established record of supporting the works of the Federal Aviation Administration… to reduce separation minima within international airspace” (ICAO, 2008, p. 5) and experience in “mentoring” specialists from around the world, including the Chinese (CSSI, 2008). Insofar as these extra-territorial skills, circularly mandated by a primarily Western-led ICAO, have to be acquired first before a higher-capacity airspace can be realized, Singapore, as with much of Asia, only managed to implement the desired separation reductions in its airspace some ten years behind time. Disadvantaged by a cycle of technological dependency (Castells and Laserna, 1989), aeromobility futures for those like Singapore hoping to increase their traffic then seem not so much about creating endless growth potentials for themselves, but trying to close the gap in the capacity curve.

3.3. Environmental persuasions

If earlier sections have been about how places like Singapore are restricted in their raw movements and technical practices in aeromobility, this final segment wants to reflect on the moral geographies immanent within the geopolitics of flying. To wit, a climate change discourse has recently become one of the top preoccupations within the air transport industry, thanks to a European Union (EU)-led crusade to apply a form of “green governmentality” (Luke, 1999; Ō Tuathail and Luke, 1994) to aviation. To fully understand the EU’s intents in pushing for the (re)regulation of aeromobilities based on environmental considerations, one must return to 2005, when the European Commission launched the world’s first cap-and-trade scheme to transform Europe “into a highly energy-efficient, low carbon economy” (European Commission, 2013), known as the EU Emissions Trading System (EU-ETS), the plan calls for a 30% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions vis-à-vis 1990 levels by 2020 in Europe, and does so by employing market-based allocation measures to “price in” environmental externalities. As a tool to demonstrate the region’s commitment to this self-imposed green agenda, the EU-ETS not only seeks to instill an ecological consciousness among business operators, but also position the EU—not America—as the “driving force” at the “forefront” of climate change initiatives (European Commission, 2013).

In November 2008, the EU attempted to stretch its global influence on the matter by phasing in new rounds of greenhouse gas reductions that would affect both European and non-European states. Arguing that the polluted potential of aviation was an “essential contribution” to climate change, the EU vowed “to take the lead in the negotiation of an ambitious international agreement,” that would, for the first time, include “measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from aviation” (EUR-Lex, 2009, p. 3–4). As the European Director-General for Climate Change, Jos Delbeke, presses, “CO₂ emissions from the aviation sector have been growing rapidly [and are projected to rise] by up to 700% by 2050… It is more than logical that there is a contribution from the aviation sector” (European Commission, 2012a). Accordingly, the EU mandated that, beginning 2012, a 3% reduction in total greenhouse gas emissions against 2004–2006 levels would be imposed on all flights taking off or landing in EU aerodromes, based on their entire route (EUR-Lex, 2009). Operators that would not comply, or could not submit the correct number of allowances, would face hefty fines, or risk having their aircraft banned or impounded at European airports (CAPA, 2012).

The prospects of higher costs and greater difficulty in doing business with an aviation market as indispensable as Europe had understandably riled a number of the continent’s aerial trade partners. While the US chided that the expanded EU-ETS was tantamount to a unilateral policy compelling America’s airlines to pay environmental “taxes” to the EU (US Senate, 2012), large states in Asia, like China and India, which were also penalized because of their relative geographical distance from Europe, likewise made their dissatisfaction known by such means as denying EU member states traffic rights (Buyck, 2012), and flouting EU-ETS reporting deadlines (Rivers, 2012). In addition to these direct retaliations, two joint declarations were signed in New Delhi and Moscow to consolidate like-minded states in the opposition camp (Borodina, 2012). Contending that the inclusion of international aviation in the EU-ETS “violates the cardinal principle of state sovereignty” (ICAO, 2011a, p. 3)—but never mind the transboundary nature of climate change—the so-called “coalition of the unwilling” (CAPA, 2012) articulated their vehement disapproval and collective resistance against the scheme, urging the EU to work collaboratively with others to address the problem of aviation emissions.

Although the European Commission did eventually “stop the clock” on the application of the EU-ETS to non-European flights (European Commission, 2012b), and, in fact, suffered massive setbacks at the 38th ICAO Assembly when it tried to revive the scheme (Shalom, 2013), a new moral has by now already been forged through this dispute. To the extent that a “global MBM” (Market-Based Measure) is now a chief item in ICAO’s agenda (ICAO, 2013b), the EU’s push for a greener aviation has disciplined how all states ought to view their aeromobilities—as a culprit of climate change needing to be reined in. For small states that depend on air transport for their livelihoods, this newfound responsibility also presents a challenging discursive environment to negotiate. More specifically to Singapore, a nagging fear is that geocliqually motivated policies might in time upend current global flow maps for long-haul flights. As a Singaporean consultant explains, “because parts of Asia… are very far from Europe,… a flight, say, from Singapore to London [will pay] more under [a scheme like] the EU-ETS, than, say, a flight from Dubai… [T]his has the potential of actually distorting the competition” (Interview, 30 November 2012). Recognizing that the green agenda is not one that the city-state can easily neutralize, another means to head off the geopolitical pressures of the EU, so as to stem traffic losses to intra-Asia rivals (Bowen, 2013), becomes necessary.

One of Singapore’s strategies has been to offer ‘softer’ interpretations of its expanding aviation sector. Beginning with its airport, Changi, a recently completed terminal (T3) originally slated to carry a “gardens” theme (Aviation Views, 1998) has today become “a flight, say, from Singapore to London [will pay] more under [a scheme like] the EU-ETS, than, say, a flight from Dubai… [T]his has the potential of actually distorting the competition” (Interview, 30 November 2012). Recognizing that the green agenda is not one that the city-state can easily neutralize, another means to head off the geopolitical pressures of the EU, so as to stem traffic losses to intra-Asia rivals (Bowen, 2013), becomes necessary.

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aeromobilities, a new (re)green(ing) agenda is what Singapore will now have to sell.

4. Conclusion

This paper has used Singapore as a synecdochical lens for understanding some of the aeromobile frictions encountered in Asia. Specifically, it has highlighted how the geopolitics of aerial governance, as performed by dominant states in Europe and North America, can have negative repercussions on the aeromobilities of other nations, precisely since the latter do not directly participate in the initial power play. As the view from Singapore demonstrates, the world’s aerial order remains one that is heavily skewed towards the logics of the Western world (Aaltola, 2005), and one that the city-state has to try to survive in. From the regulation of its aerial connections, to the navigational techniques and environmental discourses it has to abide by, the practices and agendas broached in this paper all constitute legislative impediments that can restrict Singapore’s autonomy to pursue its own aviation future. Such an observation corroborates Sheller’s (2010, 2011) contention that cosmopolitanism and mobility are often concentrated in the hands of a select few. Only here, it applies more to entire nations and regions, than it does to certain ‘white’, economically advantaged citizens.

In uncovering these spatial asymmetries, what this article is proferring is also the idea that aviation geographies are not variegated by ‘nature’. Instead, they are induced by particular ‘international’ actions, regulations, and moral frameworks taken by some states to secure access for their own (elite) populations and economic stakeholders, often at the expense of others. To render this a more politically salient point, one might recall Massey’s (2005, p. 151) proposition that places are not static entities that develop insularly, but ‘ever-shifting constellation[s] of trajectories’ that are formed out of the “throwntogetherness” of things. Accordingly, the marginalization of some locales or countries from reaping the full benefits of aeromobilities is also tantamount to a form of geographically practiced oppression and injustice that need to be unpacked. While a similar critique has commonly been levied at militarized immobilizations of populations through aerial power (Adey, 2010b; Williams, 2007; Weizman, 2007), the ethical implications of mobility curtailment in peace-time settings is an arena that remains to be articulated. More pertinent is the fact that the two fields are not separate, for the militarily powerful are also the ones that have the greatest control over civil aviation matters, given their experience in war and security, monopoly in technologies, and interest in air-related resources (Sheller, 2014). Paying heed to the politics of (civil) flying is, as such, a critical step in reconstituting these connections.

This returns us to the aim of refining the analytical toolbox of transport geography to make it more attuned to recent disciplinary concerns. If what is at stake are the processes by which the world’s (im)mobilities are realized through transport and its particular arrangements, surely decades of research on shifting global circuits, regulatory frameworks, and technological trends can provide some valuable answers as to how transport exactly serves as such cultural and political impositions. Indeed, utilitarian knowledges about transport do not have to be relegated to a “quiet… moribund corner” of academia (Hanson, 2003, p. 469), but can figure as starting points for interrogating how particular models of movement emerge, at whose expense, and with what implications. In short, a common interest in the way transport re-shapes the world—for better or worse—can be a shared theme with mobilities studies (Shaw and Hesse, 2010) based on which to excavate social meaning from transport at both macro and minute scales. Presumably, it is through such a re-framing that transport developments, including Singapore’s latest airport expansion, can become an animated, geographical affair.

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