Morley J Weston | Transport Geography -- Freight Transport

Chapter 2 of *The Geography of Urban Transportation* deals with freight transport, a subject that many of us take for granted, but makes urban life possible.

Is there still space for nonindustrialized freight distribution in cities? In Taipei, for example, fruits and vegetables bought in local wet markets and independent retailers are often cheaper and of much better quality than the same goods from a supermarket. It seems that economies of scale don't work perfectly in Taiwan, but this is a very unique marketplace. In the US, wet markets also typically cater to higher-end customers looking for unique food experiences, and the prices and variety are typically not competitive with supermarkets.

Availability of freight transport is highly tied up in question of food equity; the availability of fresh food is a major problem in cities around the world, and the lack of a dependable supply chain is a major cause of this. I wonder how the next few decades will change this equation; vertical farming and meat alternatives are growing more popular, and this would mean that the distance from farm to market could be lessened considerably. Still, these emerging industries require raw materials, and would still produce urban traffic.

More broadly, the shrinking retail space in the face of online shopping means that goods distribution will change in coming decades. Some lifty concepts such as blimp warehouses and delivery drones may change the nature of consumption. In the meantime, delivery services have expanded in global cities, and not always in a well thought-out or planned way. I've noticed that the past few years in Taipei have seen more and more motorcycle delivery services such as LalaMove or Food Panda, and the drivers are especially terrible drivers. If they're paid to deliver as quickly as possible, then they are incentivised to drive quickly and ignore road rules as much as possible. For these on-demand delivery services to be sustainable, the incentive structure for the drivers must be set in place.

Automated driving is a much larger topic, but its implications for freight logistics will have an especially deep impact on society. In the US, transportation and warehousing account for over 10 million jobs[1], and the impending shakeup will leave many behind. Automation can address many of the problems addressed in this chapter -- parking and

[1] https://www.bls.gov/emp/tables/employment-by-major-industry-sector.htm

congestion, warehousing and off-peak deliveries, but this second transition will assuredly not be clean or easy.

This textbook mentioned four categories of urban logistics -- large metros in developed cities, large metros in developing countries, gateway cities to other markets, and smart city logistics. I worry this presents urban logistics in too much of a “march of progress” narrative, and that the advantages to older forms of distribution could be ignored or pushed out. Going back to Taipei’s street markets, the distribution of locally-produced, seasonal goods outside of a perfectly commoditized framework is something that will be enviable in the future.

I’ve focused largely on food distribution in these few paragraphs, but I predict this is a microcosm for larger trends in the future: good distribution will bifurcate into largely commoditized, automated delivery of goods, and a “re-humanizing” of some supply chains, where consumers will seek out connection to unique and localized goods.