Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JIM CONLEY and ARLENE TIGAR MCLAREN, Car Troubles: Critical Studies of Automobility and Auto-mobility. Burlington: Ashgate, xii + 258 p., index.

Joining a growing body of critical work on mobilities, Car Troubles: Critical Studies of Automobility and Auto-mobility examines our addiction to the car. The book offers a collection of studies that probe timely questions around how and why the car has become so deeply insinuated in the ways people live together. In the sprawling cities of North America, for example, the car remains an indispensable fact of life, and this is increasingly the case across rapidly developing regions in China and India. But one can raise the question: what are bicycles for? Are they for recreation, or are they for other practical purposes too, like getting to work? A growing number of cities express the latter idea, suggesting that cycling offers a practical means of transit. In response to problems associated with the car, from obesity to global warming, governments are talking about shifting towards greener transportation. Yet meaningful reform remains elusive.

Jim Conley and Arlene Tigar McLaren highlight two underlying dilemmas that complicate the use of the car. First, automobility forms a deeply ambivalent system of travel. Cars enjoy the appeal of getting people and goods through spaced-out neighbourhoods and cities, often as the crow flies compared to transit routes and timetables. They also sustain face-to-face relationships that might otherwise fade before geography. But the freedoms and flexibility of car travel come with a "dark side," namely environmental degradation; stultifying sprawl; economic waste; and routine, violent casualties. Second, the distribution of costs and benefits associated with the car remains badly skewed, not least between more and less developed countries. This inequality sharpens a social dilemma in which the gains of individuals are accompanied by enormous public costs and institutional externalities. To its credit, Car Troubles approaches these dilemmas in a productive way. It acknowledges some benefits of car travel in order to improve strategies that address the darker side of automobility, and prods readers to consider an intriguing problem: if car-based cities and cultures are not inevitable, then why are they so difficult to change?

Car Troubles is organized around different conceptual ways of approaching the complexity of car travel. It begins with cultural accounts of contradictory meanings associated with the car. Tracing its interpretive flexibility and making semiotic connections, the first section follows a drag racing community struggling for social legitimation, decodes the "magical and mundane" grammar of car and SUV advertising, and links concrete cement as a "technology of impression" to a disturbing economy of violence. The second section mixes cultural with materialist explanations in the consideration of strategies to fix or at

least manage the risks of car violence. Revolutionary technologies which could render car casualties extinct are considered in addition to grassroots responses, such as "walking school buses" led by parents in Auckland who negotiate meanings of the street, gender and childhood. A third section highlights materialist explanations that take readers squarely into the politics and domination of car travel. Seeking to de-essentialize automobility and challenge the auto-industrial complex, this section examines anti-urban and racialized impulses of "secessionist" automobility in Atlanta, neoliberal construction of Chilean roads to modernity, and the "compulsory" nature of car consumption by people locked-in by pragmatic constraints. Fittingly, the final section looks beyond the car, starting with an increasingly tenuous relationship between automobility and happiness. The problematic shift in automobile growth from more to less developed countries is examined, and the book closes by exploring the tipping points that may in the future produce a mobility paradigm shift.

Two notable strengths of Car Troubles come from the way it brings different kinds of sociology to bear on the car. First, by analyzing the symbolic and ideological dimensions of automobility, including discursive formations and group identities, together with the material conditions of the car, including hard infrastructures tied to political and industrial power, the book gives readers a clear sense of the heterogeneous nature of car travel. Such a diverse assemblage that contravenes a division between the "social" and the "technical" may not seem novel to readers familiar with debates in science and technology studies. But by incorporating agencies as diverse as pension plans, transnational capital, and social status along with photographic techniques, air bags and high-velocity techniques of the self, we can envision the embeddedness of the car in space and society as a dynamic process occurring across a variety of fields. Second, the collection does not simply juxtapose but actively links contrastive accounts, with each chapter tying in threads from others. For example, it acknowledges tensions over the role of the state in comparison to more distributed sources of change and the relative importance of the pragmatic factors that sustain automobility versus more "magical," symbolic relations. Occasionally causal claims about modernization, cultures of aggression, or deeply held ideological beliefs are not entirely substantiated and leave the reader wondering which actors are disproportionately connected. But the overall effect of combining and actively associating different kinds of explanation effectively foregrounds the sociotechnical complexity of automobility.

Having implicated the car in a complex array of collective problems, Car Troubles articulates a challenge to policy reform that privileges narrow technical solutions (such as new fuel systems or smart car architecture) and ignores the broader circuits of capitalism, unequal power relations, and individualistic values in which the car circulates. This challenge could be strengthened in several ways. The book would have gained by further developing how the car shapes the body and is sustained by specific corporeal practices, and by acknowledging how non-human species of life contribute to cultures and materials of automobility. Also, the final section on moving beyond the car towards "post-car" mobilities problematically revolves around the car, and should have recognized how bicycles and trains also currently constitute ways of living together. Nevertheless, Car Troubles builds a convincing case through multiple perspectives for taking seriously the social and technological momentum of automobility. In a carefully

organized contribution to the field of mobility studies, the book does not pull many punches. Incisive chapters on politicizing and contesting hegemonic automobility illustrate how we need not diminish nor oversimplify the heterogeneity of actors in car travel in order to address sociospatial injustice and call for collective action. Readers are left with the sense that everyday transportation matters. Interdisciplinary in nature, Car Troubles may be of particular interest to researchers in urban sociology, science and technology studies, political sociology, and social geography; and would fit appropriately into graduate and upper-undergraduate syllabi.

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