

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

PETER D. NORTON. *Fighting Traffic: The Dawn of the Motor Age in the American City*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008, vi + 396 p., index.

Early 21st century demonstrators confronting police sometimes chant “Whose streets? Our streets!” Peter Norton shows that the same question was up for grabs in early 20th century American cities, as pedestrians, police, engineers, automotive interests and others fought over the social construction of city streets. Its contemporary relevance and theoretical underpinnings make his book of considerable interest to sociologists.

Published in the “Inside Technology” series edited by Wiebe Bijker, Bernard Carlson, and Trevor Pinch, *Fighting Traffic* starts from central tenets of the social construction of technology (SCOT): symmetrical consideration of alternative constructions of technical artifacts, interpretive flexibility, relevant social groups, technological frames, closure and stabilization. The book examines the transformation of city streets from pedestrian spaces to thoroughfares for motorized vehicles between 1910 and 1930 in terms of three successive (but overlapping) technological frames: justice, efficiency, and freedom. The results are with us still, in Canada as much as in the US.

The justice frame appeared after 1910, when the introduction of the automobile to city streets destabilized pedestrians’ customarily unrestricted right to use city streets. In this frame, the problem was the growing number of pedestrian fatalities, the victims (especially children) were defined as innocents, and responsibility for collisions was attributed solely to drivers of inherently dangerous automobiles. Social groups mobilized around the frame included parents of child victims, pedestrians, safety councils, police, and loosely organized automotive interests (dealers, manufactures, local auto clubs), each with different understandings and strategies. Parents and pedestrians organized campaigns to memorialize child victims and restrict automobiles in ways strikingly similar to the current framing and strategies of MADD with regard to drinking drivers. Police sought to restore order by regulating traffic “to make streets safe from motorists,” starting with cornermen and progressing through a variety of “Latourian” delegates such as “silent policemen” and “Milwaukee mushrooms.” Safety educators sought to protect children, largely by keeping them off streets, with the unintended consequence that streets could be defined as exclusively automotive spaces. A fascinating chapter on the invention of jaywalking shows how this started to come about, as automotive interests successfully redefined the problem to devolve responsibility for their own safety onto pedestrians, starting with children.

For downtown businesses organized in chambers of commerce, the traffic engineers they employed, and street railways, the problem was congestion. Emerging from their experience in railways and waterworks, and supported by late nineteenth century innovations in economic theory and law, a new group of traffic engineers rallied around an efficiency frame that defined city streets as public utilities to be regulated in the public interest by experts using scientific methods. Efficient and speedy flow to central business districts was obstructed by cars, especially parked cars, and by pedestrians, while street railways made most efficient use of existing street capacity. Remedies for congestion that followed included coordinated traffic lights to increase vehicle speeds, more controls on pedestrians, and restrictions on curb parking, all of which served to further define streets as vehicular thoroughfares, but the prospect of further regulation of cars alarmed the auto industry. In the face of threats to regulate speed in the name of safety and restrict access in the name of efficiency, and as urban automobile sales slumped in 1923-24, auto manufacturers, dealers and clubs (increasingly united as “motordom”) fought back in earnest, redefining the problem not as too many cars, but as too little street space, whose solution was to construct wider streets, not maximize the efficiency of existing ones.

The freedom frame furnished rhetorical closure to the question of “whose streets?” by exploiting the rhetorical possibilities of liberal American values of free enterprise and individual liberty to attack regulation in the name of motorists rights needed defending against the tyranny of both experts and the unorganized streetcar-riding majority. Streets were redefined as commodities to be supplied in response to demand, and gas taxes dedicated to road construction and maintenance gave drivers proprietorship over them. A concerted publicity campaign by the auto industry redefined the safety problem to direct responsibility for collisions and fatalities to careless pedestrians, including children, and to a minority of “reckless” drivers, rather than to automotive speed. New social formations coalesced around this frame: highway engineers replaced traffic engineers, and attention turned to solving the safety problem by means of high-speed urban express roads from which pedestrians were excluded. The American city was ready to be rebuilt for the motor age, represented in the 1930s by Shell’s “City of Tomorrow” and General Motors’ “Futurama,” and by the freeways of the 1950s and 1960s.

With its comprehensive analysis of the variety of relevant social groups, *Fighting Traffic* is a welcome relief from conspiracy theories of the victory of motordom; it shows a complex process in which power is constructed (at times in wearying detail: chapter seven has more than you ever wanted to know about Herbert Hoover’s role in the creation of interest group politics). Like many in its genre, the book wears its theory lightly, and I wish Norton had done more to spell out the implications of SCOT in his conclusion, especially the micro-politics of power and the obduracy of resulting socio-technical ensembles. But the richness of the book leaves room for readers to take up abundant opportunities for their own theoretical development using SCOT, and complementary insights from constructivist studies of social problems and “mechanisms and processes” approaches to contentious politics.

Fighting Traffic is an excellent study brimming with contemporary relevance. Issues of congestion, parking, public transit versus automobility, and challenges by pedestrians, cyclists, skateboarders and other users to the automobile's domination of streets are with us again, and new technological frames are emerging, or old ones re-emerging (such as the efficiency frame in the form of "smart streets"). Although hardly novel for sociologists, the book's lesson that the interests of a majority, and of values such as efficiency (or today, sustainability) which require organization and resources in order to displace entrenched technological frames, is a useful reminder. The book should be read by anyone interested in urban sociology, transportation, and science and technology studies. It is suitable for use in advanced undergraduate and graduate classes.

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