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Book review

The Urban Political Economy and Ecology of Automobility: Driving Cities, Driving Inequality, Driving Politics, A. Walks (Ed.). Routledge, New York (2014). £90.00 (hardback), ISBN: 978-0-415-70615-5

Automobility refers to the ascendancy of the automobile in daily travel as well as the political, economic, technological, cultural, and ideological practices that support the car as the dominant mode of travel. This multidisciplinary perspective on contemporary society is the focus of a new edited volume by Alan Walks, an Associate Professor at the Department of Geography at the University of Toronto. The volume is a valuable contribution to the growing body of work incorporating critical theory into transportation studies.

The Urban Political Economy and Ecology of Automobility is organized in three sections: Driving Vulnerability, Driving Inequality and Driving Politics. Walks bookends these sections with a thoughtful introduction and conclusion. In the introduction, he provides a readable overview of the concept of automobility weaving together the core concepts from mobilities studies with insights from urban political economy. In the final chapter, Walks, addresses the future and offers his take on what will be required to move beyond the auto-city integrating Lefebvre's right to the city to sketch future transportation policies for cities.

The first part of the book, Driving Vulnerably, explores environmental, economic, and social aspects of automobility. This section opens with chapters, by George T. Martin and Peter Newman and Jeffrey Kenworthy, which situate automobility in historical, global and sustainability contexts. Walks follows these with an intriguing chapter on the relationship between household debt and automobility at different geographical scales. The chapter offers a new angle on ongoing academic discussions of the benefits and burdens of owning cars. The final chapter in this section, by Ron Buliung and others, is an engaging chapter on the role that fear plays in children's travel to and from school. The authors interviewed children and adults separately and highlight the stark differences in each groups' fears and adults' gendered fears about children's safety.

The second part of the book, Driving Vulnerably, zeros in on the role that automobility plays in reinforcing inequalities in society. The chapters in this section on transport policy abroad and the travel of immigrants to Canada are particularly noteworthy. In Chapter eight, Buliung and co-authors highlight the struggle in Dhaka, Bangladesh between citizens who currently travel by non-motorized modes and planners and other policy-makers who advocate for a "modern" motorized city. This struggle is played out in policies that ban cycle rickshaws from major corridors and with disparate impacts for the poor and women. Two chapters in this section examine the specific issues that immigrants face in auto-dependent contexts. Hess and co-authors, add to the existing literature with their discussion of the gendered differences in access to and use of automobiles among Iranian and Chinese immigrants to the Greater Toronto Area. The second chapter on immigrants, by Emily Reid-Musson, describes the precarious mobility of migrant agricultural workers in rural Ontario. For these migrants, access to bicycles provides independence but is also fraught with danger due to harassment and risks of being hit by a car.

The third part of the book turns to the political forces that challenge or underpin the auto-city. Walks writes about the confluence of automobility and conservative electoral politics in the UK and Canada. Jason Henderson writes about the contestations over freeway removal, parking policies and private transit services in San Francisco. Walks and co-authors present case studies of political battles to develop bicycle infrastructure in three cities: Amsterdam, New York and Vancouver. In this chapter, I particularly enjoyed reading about the radical history of bike sharing from the 1960s in Amsterdam. Matt Talsma uses a Critical Mass bike ride and a protest by members of the Tamil community to highlight the power of usurping key highways for protest.

For readers, there are several noteworthy aspects of this edited volume. First, several of the authors, particularly Alan Walks, do an exceptional job of embedding discussions of transport policy within contemporary discussions of urban political economy. In this regard, this edited volume is a useful compliment to Henderson's (2013) study of the politics of transportation planning in San Francisco. Second, while it was not the central analytical frame for any chapter, several authors skillfully highlight the gendered differences in travel, policy and perceptions of travel. Third, one of the most delightful aspects of this book is the extremely varied list of works cited by the authors. I was surprised by how frequently I found myself flipping from the body of the text to the reference list at the back of the book to make a note to obtain an article or book cited by one of the authors.

Reference

Henderson, J., 2013. Street Fight: The Politics of Mobility in San Francisco. University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst.

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