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Article:

Overcoming car dependence: Review of "The Car Dependent Society – A European Perspective", Ashgate, Hans Jeekel 2013, ISBN 9781409438274, £58.50

Car dependence is associated with some of society's most fundamental problems: climate change, the 'obesity epidemic' and the precipice of peak oil that global civisilisation seems to be sleepwalking towards. The most direct externality is as a socially acceptable killer: cars are implicated in thousands of broken bones, shattered lives and deaths each year, disproportionately aflicting the most vulnerable in society.

If the car is such a destructive force, why is it allowed to literally ride roughshod over our aspirations of a sustainable and healthy future? Moreover, why have we constructed (accidentally and in some ways deliberately) a socio-economic system utterly dependent on such a problematic mode of travel?

Jeekel is himself astonished: "High car use is seldom seen as a problem, it is more often framed as a right! It is this situation that amazes me." Part 1 on "Setting the scene" ranges from an overview of car dependence in the context of the 'risk society' (Chapter 1) to "From Frequent Car Use to Car Dependence" (Chapter 4). I expected the latter to describe how people get hooked on cars over time, building on Jeekel's own use of drug addiction metaphors Instead of expanding on this fascinating metaphor, we get a medley of secondary information from a range of disparate sources including a description of the growth in DIY culture (Watson and Shove, 2010).

Part 2 is ambiguously named as "Problems and Perspectives". The chapter titles meander as much as their contents from "Frequent Car Use: Energy and Sustainability" (Chapter 5) to "The Social and Cultural Aspects of Mobility: Towards a research Agenda" (Chapter 8) and cover a huge amount of ground.

Despite its title, the book is Dutch and Wesern-Europe centric. Section 4.6, "Car dependence quantified", for example, lavishes 8 pages on Dutch perspectives on car dependence (a sobering topic for proponents of Dutch transport policies) whilst providing only a page each on British and German approaches. Not only does this make one wonder about Spanish, Ukranian, Andorran and Welsh perspectives, it highlights the importance of reliable national statistics: absent datasets help explain the focus on just a few countries EU.

Nowhere in the book does Jeekel tackle an influential driver of car ownership: advertising. The book's focus on the social and cultural literature would make it an ideal place to explore the impact of pervasive multimedia marketing on the perceived need for a car. This was also a missed opportunity in terms of policy response: advertising regulation has effectively tackled another dangerous behaviour – smoking (Kasza, 2011) – so offers a potentially effective way of reducing car dependence as well.

On the topic of policy recommendations more generally, Jeekel neither breaks new ground nor clearly states his opinion about what should be done to deal with the catastrophe of car dependence.

Instead, in Chapter 7, he describes abstract *concepts* which relate more to how people think about governance than the actual policies themselves (e.g. congestion charges, car free zones, advertising regulation). I would have liked to seen in this chapter engagement with the solutions, rather than the continued dwelling on the problem. To provide an example, section 7.5 on "Changing in optimism" (yes, there is a grammatical error in the section title!) theorises cars at the centre of modern society, yet offers nothing in the way of actionable ideas. Surely the pragmatic idea that reduced car dependence could lead to healthier and happier citizens via uptake of active travel relates to the section title. Yetthere is nothing on this in the section (and little in the book overall).

The book contains three of the most distasteful aspects of academic writing for me: an insistence on quantity over quality, over-theorisation of relatively straightforward issues and refusal to arrive at decisive, policy relevant conclusions. Dennis and Urry's (2009) "After the Car", incidentally, is on a similar topic but avoids many of these traps. In terms of content, the book largely succeeds, providing discussion and evidence on one most problematic defining features of Western societies. Some very useful information (e.g. in all by one Western European countries – Switzerland – more than 70% of distance travelled is by car) is provided in '*Addendum: Facts and Figures on Car Mobility"* but this is a small chapter seemingly added as an afterthought.

The purpose of the book is not to provide data, though, but to 'get the message out there' about car dependence and in this sense I was largely disappointed. In the area of academics successfully engaging in public outreach, I strongly recommend MacKay (2009) and Dietz and O'Neill (2013). The admirable and difficult task that Jeekel sets himself is the public communication of the problem that is neatly summarised in the quote below. The challenge for academics now is to provide an evidence base that will allow the problem not only to be further theorised, but actually solved.

"An alien had observed that the earth is inhabited by strange creatures called cars, mainly with four wheels. These creatures are served by a host of slaves who walk on two legs and spend their whole life serving them. Cars never seem to go anywhere without at least one slave. The slaves build and maintain long and complex networks of clear space, so that cars have little trouble travelling from place to place" (Miller, 2001, P. 1).

References

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