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The Car Dependant Society: A European Perspective

Hans Jeekel,

2013

Surrey: Ashgate

292pp

£68.00 hardback

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That traffic levels and reliance on cars raise major social, health and environmental concerns, has been recognized for several decades. Yet this recognition does not mean these problems have been given the attention that might be expected, or needed. So the first major contribution of this book is just in emphasizing the issue of car dependency. Beyond that it makes important contributions to broadening debate and understanding of the reasons for reliance on cars, on the governance approaches which might be needed to tackle problems, and on the need for a stronger research agenda in this area. Jeekel explains in his introduction that rather than adopting any one conceptual approach, he draws on diverse ideas and studies to explore the development, problems and possible ways of addressing of car dependency. His approach reflects wider moves within research on transport planning and governance to frame transport and mobility as matters for sociological, political and ethical investigation. In light of somewhat limited success of previous and existing attempts to reduce car dependency, this openness is welcome.

The book begins by describing literature on social changes and trends which, according to the author, set the conditions for the development of car dependency. First, Jeekel discusses work, particularly that by Ulrich Beck on the evolution of our society which, while apparently becoming increasingly adept at avoiding natural risks, has developed social and physical structures making it more vulnerable to man-made disruptions. Jeekel explains how it is within this context that we might understand mobility and the role of the car. He

discusses the 'Mobilities' approach which treats travel behaviour as situated in social and economic practices, including those promoting urban sprawl and development, and in social attitudes towards flexibility, risk and opportunities. All of these, it is argued, combine to lead to the car becoming a desirable, and in many cases a necessary, component of everyday activities. Against this context, Jeekel introduces a notion of car dependency, which he argues, should not be seen as the same thing as high levels of car use. Frequent car use is motivated by a range of social and individual attitudes and factors. For some, car ownership is an aspect of personal identity. Beyond this, parenting and education has come to involve greater expectations that children will be involved in a range of organised activities, coupled with a view of child protection which is fearful of allowing children to travel alone. Further societal factors identified include sprawl, "creation of highway locations," a social "urge for flexibility, combining tasks in tight timeframes," as well as enabling participation (p. 71). Frequent car use may create conditions for car dependence, but for Jeekel, car dependence "is a term that should be reserved for the lack of alternatives to make a journey in another way than by car" (p. 75), which may mean that the journey is impossible or difficult without a car.

Jeekel identifies a range of problems associated with high levels of car use. On one hand, there are questions around politics, continuing availability, and price of fuel, and the associated impacts on those using and even relying on cars. Relatedly Jeekel points to concerns around carbon emissions. On the other hand are societal concerns. These can be understood in part as a general concern about the attitudes and social factors which support frequent car use. On this it would be interesting to have some further reflection on the ways on which some motivations for frequent car use tend to be self defeating: for instance, the desire for flexibility brought by the car, can be undermined by congestion creating a need for careful journey planning. Further societal concerns associated with frequent car use and car dependence, are problems of inequality where those without access to vehicles are excluded in a society where participation in everyday activities can depend on a car. Jeekel offers an interesting discussion of significant problems with frequent car use. There is however scope for more on the huge health impacts and mortality associated with transport pollutants,

especially nitrogen oxides and particulates (see for instance COMHEAP 2010). Further consideration might also be given to some of the concerns about welfare and reduced quality of life associated with living in areas of high volumes or fast traffic, where journeys may be possible without a car but can be unpleasant, unhealthy, and dangerous (Bostock et al. 2001; Pooley et al. 2011). A little more focus on these questions may have strengthened subsequent discussions on governance and further research on tackling problems of car use and dependency.

Jeekel's discussion of governance goes beyond much of the existing debate on transport policy. He begins with an interesting account of dominant approaches to dealing with car use, especially those which tend to treat the problems as ones which can be left until a future date when, it is hoped, technology will provide the efficiencies and alternatives needed to bring about necessary reductions in fuel consumption and pollution. These dominant governance approaches may look unconvincing, and we might look to an approach which aims to reduce frequent car use and car dependency. Yet as Jeekel argues, attempting to steer travel behaviour is complicated, not least because it is influenced by actors and social attitudes spread across society. In response to this complexity, Jeekel makes a case for more participatory governance, drawing on what he calls "creative complexity," in which relevant stakeholders, including car users, take responsibility to consider and act to reduce problems caused by the role that cars currently have (p. 181). Jeekel offers a plausible approach to tackling transport and mobility governance. However there are some significant questions for his argument. First, Jeekel calls on car users to limit the impact of frequent car use on people, and public spaces, and to recognise that '[c]ar drivers are guests in public spaces and should behave like guests!' (p. 183). Yet since it those without access to a car who can suffer some of the worst effects of social exclusion and pollution associated with a car dependent society, they may not consider it sufficient to rely on drivers deciding themselves how to act responsibly. Instead non-car users may demand their own voice in determining how transport is governed. Second, Jeekel makes a reasonable point that even within participatory governance approaches there can be a need for policy measures, beyond those already in

place, to restrict driving. Jeekel argues that roads and other public spaces, can be understood as commons and so as facing some of the same problems of overuse that other commons have suffered. He develops Elinor Ostrom's ideas on governing commons, and suggests measures designed to encourage rationing of, and trading entitlement to, access to road space. Jeekel has given sound reasons to suppose that restricting car use will bring benefits. Yet measures, based on restriction and trade, risk being insensitive to variations in people's need to use cars for basic and vital everyday activities. Indeed Jeekel's own discussion of car dependence provides an understanding of the ways in which car use can be less a matter of choice than necessity, and given this, some discussion of more progressive means of reducing reliance on cars would be beneficial.

Thinking about 'need' in relation to travel is undoubtedly complex and contentious, and it would be unreasonable to expect it resolved within one book, especially when that has already covered substantial questions. Jeekel himself identifies a broad research agenda to deepen investigation of the questions which he begins to explore in this book. While there are gaps, Jeekel's work contributes to reframing an important debate about mobility and how society has created a reliance on cars, the far reaching impacts of that reliance, and how what can sometimes appear an intractable governance problem might begin to be tackled.

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