Book Review/Compte rendu

Jeremy Packer, *Mobility without Mayhem: Safety, Cars, and Citizenship*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008, 360 pp. $US 23.95 paper (978-0-8223-3963-2), $US 84.95 hardcover (978-0-8223-3952-6)

In keeping with the "mobility turn" in social theory, sociologists are beginning to examine the automobility system and its impact on the organization of space, time, social institutions, mobility, and everyday practices. Jeremy Packer, associate professor of communications at North Carolina State University, provides an important contribution to this field and to what can be called new critical approaches to mobility safety. In contrast to traditional applied research that focuses on engineering, law enforcement and education to improve traffic safety, Packer examines traffic safety as a social and discursive construction.

By drawing on a wide range of sources including magazines, films, books, newspapers, traffic law, experts and organizations, Packer synthesizes a rich body of cultural evidence. Influenced by Foucault, the author provides a genealogy of the power/knowledge relationships involved in US automobility. He tells, in other words, "a story about the political and cultural battles waged to determine how best to govern automobile-related mobility" (p. 3). In following Mary Douglas' cultural rather than Ulrich Beck's more realist approach to analyzing risk, Packer argues that public responses to motorized driving behaviour are largely political. US culture treats similarly dangerous forms of driving — as reflected in statistical patterns — in immensely different ways. He shows, in particular, how authorities, agencies and popular culture use safety to discipline culturally defined "unruly" forms of mobility linked to marginalized social groups such as women, youth, workers, and African-Americans.

Packer begins his study by focusing on driving in the 1950s, when suburbanization and the two-car family were expanding and automobility had already become essential to the US worldview. Two dangerous figures — the woman driver and the hot rodding youth — came to define the debates about automotive safety. Women's incursion as drivers into spaces coded as male became a focus of anxiety in magazine articles that drew on commonsense stereotypes and expert assumptions about women's inferior technical abilities. After insurance studies showed that women were safer drivers than men, other stereotypes came into play:

women were safer because they were more law abiding than men, and as nurturers, should be responsible for controlling husbands' and sons' aggressive driving behaviour. During this period, young male drivers were central to such morality tales as in the film *Rebel Without a Cause* and the novel *Crash Club*, in which the lack of self-control and excessive love of speed and souped-up cars inevitably led to tragic outcomes. Attempts at governance came from a variety of sources, including the expansion of driver education programs in schools that linked safe driving with citizenship.

In the following chapters, Packer shows that more severe forms of cultural disapproval were reserved for the "outlaw" mobilities of hitchhikers, motorcyclists, speeding truckers and "driving while black." Hitchhiking, historically practiced by a wide range of people, including the returning soldier and the Samaritan, was singled out, especially in the 1960s and 70s, as dangerous. With cultural anxieties about the mobile, radical youth movement, hitchhiking scare stories were in abundance and helped pave the way for the outlawing of hitchhiking. The leather-clad motorcyclist also fell victim to safety concerns. This "dangerous other" underscored the relative safety of the automobile and validated it as the normative standard of acceptable levels of risk.

In each chapter, Packer teases out paradoxes and contradictions. In chapter 4, his analysis of truckers and their CB radios highlights especially well the power of resistance. Truckers rose to iconic status in the 1970s as they expressed a populist form of freedom and self-determination in their wildcat strikes and resistance to new speed limits and police surveillance. In chapter 5, he shows how, as African-Americans began to own Cadillacs as a way to express themselves and to display wealth, the Cadillac acquired new meanings. It came to signify criminality, gangsterism and welfare embezzlement to police and the white dominant culture. It also came to mark a particular car's driver as black, and therefore an intruder in "white space."

Packer's focus on driver safety campaigns and social inequality is paramount, but his argument goes further in the two concluding chapters to suggest that increasingly, as evident in road rage and national security concerns post 9/11, governance is beginning to shift ominously from disciplining unruly groups to controlling everyone. Safety discussions now pathologize all drivers as vulnerable to rage and as possible suspects of terrorist activity. Communication, control, and command technologies are sold to the driving public as upscale commercial goods that promote freedom, convenience, and safety, but provide the state with the potential to monitor and control all mobility in its wars on terrorism.

Packer is rightly concerned about how manufactured safety crises use fear to control populations. But in amassing the evidence, in an entertaining though sometimes repetitive way, his approach borders on hip journalism (inspired, for example, by Hunter S. Thompson's observations on motorcycling), sacrificing theoretical depth and clarity as well as systematic analysis of evidence. Packer borrows selectively from a wide range of other studies and his own research is rather casually conducted when, for example, he peruses magazine content for evidence that supports his argument. In addition, he does not acknowledge the ways in which his focus on discursive constructions is limiting: it does not allow for how social institutions put into practice safety discourses. Except for a few offhand interviews with motorcyclists, and interestingly his own self-reflections on motorcycling, Packer does not explore how drivers take up safety discourses in their daily lives.

The book's approach also borders on populist libertarianism in discounting the benefits of social regulation (as in the case of speed limits that aim to protect pedestrians), with the possible effect of reinforcing current neoliberal hostility towards the state. The danger of automobility, Packer claims, primarily exists in the cultural imagination: "over the past fifty or sixty years automobility has been imagined as an arena fraught with danger to the citizen subject" (p. 273). While insightful, this argument is one-sided in suggesting that the street is not dangerous. For Packer, the street belongs to the motor vehicle and to speed. He romanticizes the freedom of the open road, evoking the deep connection of freedom in US culture with the automobile. He is on the side of truckers, for example, who circumvent speed limit restrictions. He laments how safety campaigns undermine the benefits of motorized risk-taking.

If Packer had reflected on how traffic safety regulates nonmotorized mobility, for example, in excluding pedestrians from urban streets, his analysis would have been more compelling and nuanced. While he hints at how safety concerns, focused on marginalized groups, take attention away from the risks of the normative automobile, he does not adequately address the key issue about how and why the safety apparatus protects the automobility system. He does not consider how safety regimes serve to protect the driver's freedoms and entitlements at the expense of the pedestrian, the cyclist, the tram or the environment.

This book is to be commended for broaching significant questions about mobility safety in a way that will interest students and scholars in such fields as communications, cultural studies, sociology and mobility studies. It also raises important questions for further analysis, including: how automobility regulates and disciplines nonmotorized travel for the sake of motor vehicles; how automobility creates coercive as well as

voluntary risk-taking, and how the latter form of risk-taking articulates with various structures of power such as gender.

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