

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Kingsley Dennis and John Urry, *After the Car*. Oxford: Polity Press, 2009, 180 pp. \$23.95 paper (978-0-7456-4422-6), \$71.95 hardcover (978-0-7456-4421-9)

This short book adds to the large critical discourse on the car. John Urry is a leading contributor to the contemporary cultural analysis stream of this discourse. The car has had periodic critics since its beginnings, and a substantial scholarship on the social problems of automobility has existed since the 1960s. In the US, it contributed significantly to the emergence of state regulation of vehicular safety and tailpipe emissions in the 1970s. Since then, the car as a social problem has required ever more policy response.

The newest compelling subject for this discourse is the substantial contribution that personal cars make to carbon emissions and hence to global climate change. Dennis and Urry address this issue in conjunction with “peak oil” and “virtual worlds.” Their book is essentially a tract on the technological future for personal transport and its energy sources, especially in urbanized areas in the more developed nations of the world. As its index indicates, the book roams far and wide, from Abu Dhabi to Zurich, Theodor Adorno to Virginia Woolf, and biopiracy to Wal-Mart.

The authors sketch three alternative scenarios or “contested futures” in a coming age of climate change and resource scarcity. These are not limited to the specific subjects of the car or transport. They are drawn from a 2006 UK Office of Science and Technology foresighting program in which Urry was involved. The four scenarios produced in that exercise have been altered and reduced to three here. Two of them have a decidedly dystopian potential. The “digital networks” transformation, in its application as a ubiquitous form of state surveillance, has Orwellian, Big Brother implications. The potential for “regional warlordism” includes a Hobbesian, “Mad Max” barbarism based in intensified conflict over dwindling natural resources. The third alternative of “post-oil localism” or “local sustainability” has back-to-the-future and green features. It is the most desirable and least probable outcome. In the end, in a rather all-or-nothing moment, the authors conclude on a pessimistic note: “There are, we might suggest, no good outcomes after the car” (p. 164).

While broad coverage and quick uptake are their rewards, simplification and hyperbole can be the costs of such short books. A few examples

convey the style used in this one. On p. 19, the authors write that “since around 1990 there has been a remarkable change in the nature of human life itself.” The change posited is the arrival of the technological virtual world. Perhaps a remarkable change in human *communication* would have been more apt. With regard to human *life*, the mapping of the human genome in the same era arguably will have more remarkable consequence. The title of the book is itself a simplification, as the authors note on p. 2: “When we talk of ‘after the car,’ we are suggesting that the car as a complete system may be surpassed.” The subject of the book is in fact car-centred transport systems.

There are places for this book. Already knowledgeable readers wanting to read more about the future of auto-centred transport systems may appreciate its reach. The book’s once-over-lightly style, as well as its coverage, its portability, and its topicality can make for a handy guide-book for learners. For sociology curricula, one course at the introductory undergraduate level, Social Problems, is a possible home for the book. Its timely assembly of an array of issues linked to “car troubles” and their possible outcomes make for a potential text in that course. Additionally, the book could be a worthy read in upper-level undergraduate courses in Social and Technological Change. Its rather provocative scenarios likely will attract interest in an undergraduate subculture for which digital applications rule. Perhaps the book itself can be made digitally available, together with interactive virtual versions of its scenarios, and of the technological alternatives it portrays for the contemporary car-carbon nexus.

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