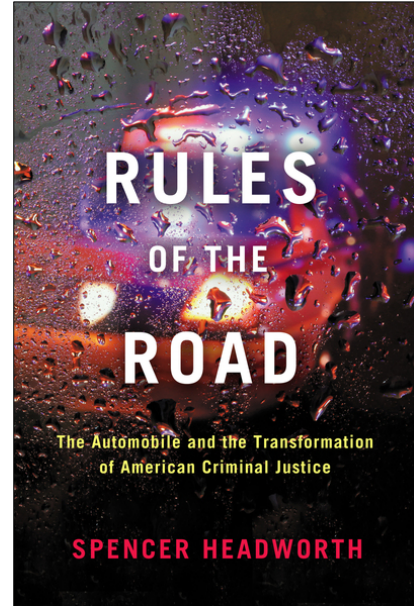


Spencer Headworth, **Rules of the Road: The Automobile and the Transformation of American Criminal Justice**, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023, 300 pp., \$30.00 (paperback).

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Spencer Headworth's *Rules of the Road: The Automobile and the Transformation of American Criminal Justice* identifies the emergence of the automobile into the world as a significant determinant of historical change. Like the printing press (Eisenstein, 1980) and the transistor (Riordan & Hoddeson, 1998), the automobile is a great example of a technology—in this instance, a bundling and updating of existing technologies—whose insertion has transformed the world. The car is omnipresent today, though not terribly old, and it is both an appendage to other things (work, leisure, travel) and at the center of significant social changes and problems, including climate change, the physical and geographical organization of everyday life, and economic relations from industrial production to trade to the insurance industry. Although it is difficult to imagine the current world without the automobile—which could theoretically serve as a focus in innumerable academic fields, from engineering to urban planning and even communications (given the inevitable relationship between physical transportation and the movement of messages and texts)—it is rarely the object of study itself.



The book's subtitle, *The Automobile and the Transformation of American Criminal Justice*, notes that the book is more narrowly focused than I suggested above. But Headworth's focus ranges sufficiently widely, due to the 20th-century expansion of policing and incarceration, that his approach to "criminal justice" invokes the automobile's impact on the breadth of society: race and class, Prohibition and the drug war, the layout and relationships between cities and suburbs, communications technologies, progressive and conservative politics, and so on. Nominally a work of sociology, which Headworth teaches at Purdue, the book also draws from and contributes to work in history, law, and, more marginally but importantly, communications.

*Rules of the Road* is, above all, critical: of policing; of the expansion of federal criminal law and the evergreen political concern with law and order; of the state more generally, including especially those criminal and civil laws whose enforcement targets the poor and people of color; and of the triumph of "automobility" in the built environment, where roads have obliterated neighborhoods and communities, caused enormous physical damage to the environment and to human mortality and limbs, and isolated people in their enclosed vehicles as they speed through the world.

The book serves as an excellent introduction to thinking about the history and sociology of automobile's effects. Consider, for example, the subject of chapter 1, the necessary expansion of federal law and federal jurisdiction to regulate and police objects that can move, be moved, and move people and

things across state lines. This created an inevitable tension within the federalist, constitutional system of the United States, which depends on a balance of power between federal and state sovereigns, and within states of state and local government. The automobile, along with the myriads of new technologies of the 20th century—including electric and electronic communications technologies—forced the balance to move towards the growing, centralizing Leviathan in Washington and away from the little Leviathans in state capitols. Especially significant was the fact that the federal constitution only vests the police power in the states, an issue that continues to create tension as federal criminal law has expanded.

*Rules of the Road* is strongest when tracing the legal impact of machinic mobility. As much as the nationalization of trade across state lines, the automobile challenged a legal structure that was far more localized within states and small municipalities in the 19th century. A recurring theme in the book is the expansion of the regulatory apparatus at state and federal levels. Automobiles need paved and ordered streets. But before the automobile—and for that matter, after it as well—streets were public spaces with multiple uses and types of users. Narrowing the ways streets were to be used while widening and paving them constituted a radical change. In existing cities, this change required putting new arterial roads over existing neighborhoods, seen most dramatically in Robert Moses's New York. The change also enabled the construction of new suburbs and exurbs, which could take advantage of these new arterial roads while they used zoning laws and restrictive covenants to keep out unwanted populations of racial minorities and the working class. All of this required muscular local, regional, and state governments that could build, regulate, and police streets.

Similarly, police needed greater authority to reflect both the fact that cars and trucks move rapidly outside of a local jurisdiction and constitute a private space where stolen or illegal objects could be stored. Legislatures therefore needed to extend jurisdictional boundaries and courts needed to recognize and limit the amount of protection a car owner enjoyed for their mobile property from unconstitutional searches and seizures. The resulting rules that enabled traffic stops thereby allowed the kinds of violent, often race-based interactions between police and private individuals in traffic stops.

The book can nevertheless frustrate readers, especially those who have done some reading of adjacent books on the same topic. It operates at a middle level of abstraction that neither ties the subjects it raises to a more general social theory nor offers a deep dive into the history, sociology, or law that it covers. In its lesser chapters, it remains at the surface without providing an overarching way of understanding what the book covers besides the banal takeaway that the automobile did indeed change things and made worse the United States' inherent inequities and pathologies. Its coverage of the Fourth Amendment law on searches and seizures, for example, largely begins and ends with older Supreme Court precedent without delving more deeply into the law as it is developed in lower courts and the ways in which police departments understand how to comply with general rules that the court laid down decades earlier (or choose to ignore them).

Similarly, for communications scholars the book intriguingly notes the relationship between policing and communications technology via the insertion of two-way radios in patrol cars as a means both to coordinate and control the police's growing dependence on automobiles. But an informed reader would want to ask whether there were other uses of this technology at the time, who was producing the radios and how they

were marketing them, how the police have actually used them, and whether they were more important for coordination or control. The book allows scholars to see the communication problem created by the automobile for bureaucracies as well as more generally for users as the ability to move and travel longer distances more quickly outstripped the ability to maintain convenient and instantaneous communicative contact. But such readers would need more research to consider the actual history and use of this technology by police and other institutions and individuals, as well as to situate the two-way radio into broader technological developments and into theories of communication.

In addition, the book offers little in the way of primary document research, as it relies heavily on other scholarship in the field. Nevertheless, it does offer the reader important next steps, which is to read much more thorough and detailed scholarship on the various issues *Rules of the Road* introduces. These include the legal scholar Sarah Seo's (2021) wonderful account of the history of policing cars; Charles Epp, Steven Maynard-Moody, and Donald Haider-Markel's (2014) book-length history of the traffic stop, and Barron Lerner's (2012) history of drunk driving and the debates surrounding it. Headworth cites them faithfully and often, but those books offer more nuanced and careful study of each of these issues. At the other end of the abstraction spectrum, the book does little itself to consider what the automobile tells us about technology and society, as it never connects with science and technology studies, diffusion of technology, and broader literature on social theory.

But not every book can do everything, and *Rules of the Road* enables a good understanding of the automobile's relation to society and law. As such, the book or a selection of its chapters would prove useful for an upper-level undergraduate or lower-level graduate course, and it serves as an effective introduction to the important role cars have played in the modern world.

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