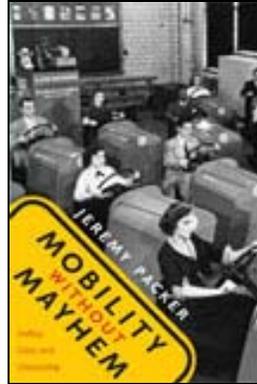


Jeremy Packer, **Mobility without Mayhem: Safety, Cars, and Citizenship**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 349 pp., \$23.95 (paperback).

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As any European can tell you, the United States is addicted — perhaps even fatally addicted — to the automobile. According to the latest estimates from the Federal Highway Administration, the country has roughly 200 million licensed drivers with over 250 million cars plying its vast network of highways and roads. The average American adult spends more than an hour a day sitting in a motor vehicle of some kind and typically drives more than 12,000 miles per year. Together, gasoline, automobile purchases and auto repair account for roughly 8 to 9% of all U.S. consumer spending. The car occupies a privileged place in our popular culture, our economy, our national identity and our daily lives. To be an American is, to a significant degree, to be a driver.

Over the past decade or so, scholars and critics have written illuminating studies about the impact of the American obsession with the automobile on our cities and suburbs (Kay, 1998; Duany, Plater-Zyberk & Speck, 2001), on the environment (Tamminen, 2006; McCarthy, 2007), and on U.S. foreign policy (Klare, 2004; Engdahl, 2004). But this burgeoning literature has had remarkably little to say about the various cultural, political, social scientific and legal discourses swirling around the omnipresent activity of driving itself. Jeremy Packer's *Mobility without Mayhem: Safety, Cars, and Citizenship* aims to fill that void.

Packer begins by noting that although automobility has often been interpreted as a token of "Americans' restlessness and their desire for freedom" (p. 2), it has also been framed as a potential threat to public safety and social order that needs to be carefully controlled and regulated. But not all drivers have been treated as equally risky. Rather, as Packer demonstrates, "whole demographic categories, historically disenfranchised, have been described by experts and represented as hopelessly dangerous" (p. 9). Women, teenagers, people of color, hitchhikers, motorcyclist, and independent truckers — each of these disempowered groups has been cast as a threat to traffic safety and "suffered extensive scrutiny

and surveillance" at one time or another in the years since World War II. Drawing on an analysis of driver's education manuals, government reports, news stories, political speeches, TV shows, instructional films and Hollywood movies, Packer's book sets out to examine how each of these populations came to be "regarded and represented as dangerous to self and society" (p. 13).

In Chapter 1, Packer chronicles the escalation of public concern about traffic safety during the 1940s and '50s, focusing in particular on the hysteria that developed around women drivers and hot-rodding teens. He describes how, starting in 1954, the federal government's Crusade for Traffic Safety enlisted the media in a massive effort to inculcate the public with a need for responsible, cautious driving. In a period marked by rampant suburbanization and the confinement of many middle-class women in the role of homemaker, women's access to automobiles was both a practical necessity and a challenge to male control of the road. Initially, women drivers were caricatured in jokes, cartoons, news accounts and even psychological studies as frivolous, hysterical and easily distracted. Yet by the mid-'50s, insurance companies and the American Automobile Association had concluded that women drivers cause fewer accidents than men, and eventually women came to "define and thus reorient the norm" of the good driver (p. 53). As Packer explains, the other problem population of the 1950s was adolescent drivers, especially hot-rodders and drag racers. Analyzing a number of Hollywood and educational films about juvenile delinquent drivers, Packer shows how such films amplified the menace posed by the adolescent driver and helped to legitimate high school driver's education courses and police-organized hot rod clubs as solutions to the problem.

Packer's focus in Chapter 2 is the intense anxiety that was generated by hitchhiking during the 1950s, '60s and '70s. Like hot-rodding, hitchhiking as a practice has long been identified with youth. As Packer tells it, in the early postwar years, hitchhiking was regarded predominately as an activity of college boys and returning GIs and was not seen as particularly troublesome. By the early 1950s, though, the meaning of hitching had begun to shift. In the '50s, classic *film noirs* like *Detour* and *The Hitchhiker* popularized the image of the hitchhiker as pathological killer. During the 1960s, legions of young people — inspired by Jack Kerouac's novel *On The Road* and Peter Fonda's cult film *Easy Rider* — began hitchhiking around the country in search of "freedom, adventure, escape, discovery and community" (p. 89); radical counter-cultural groups like Youth Liberation of Ann Arbor, Michigan even encouraged hitching as an act of rebellion against adult control. In response, government authorities — including notoriously paranoid FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover — demanded a clampdown, in part because hitchhiking was a popular means of transportation for young activists involved in the civil rights and anti-war movements. By the 1970s, the media was raising the alarm about yet another danger related to hitchhiking: the possibility that female hitchhikers "were practically inviting rape" (p. 95) by getting into cars with strange men. The representation of the hitchhiker as both dangerous and endangered ultimately fueled the push for a wave of anti-hitchhiking laws around the nation. Small wonder, then, that by the mid-1970s the practice of hitchhiking had all but disappeared.

Chapter 3 dissects the often alarmist postwar cultural discourse on motorcycles and motorcyclists and is, in many ways, the strongest chapter in the book. Prior to World War II, Packer explains, motorcycles were valued as cheap means of personal transportation and their riders were not treated as fundamentally different from the rest of the motoring population. However, during the 1950s, the

motorcycle and motorcycle enthusiasts became the focus of a host of fears. Sensational news stories and films like *The Wild One*, Packer argues, stoked a moral panic over lawless outlaw biker gangs. Somewhat later, the popularity of motorcycles with affluent youth in the 1960s spawned public concerns about the enormous risks involved in motorcycle riding. Packer uses the contrasting representations of these two populations to illustrate the ways in which social perceptions of risk vary depending on cultural and historical context. As he explains, "it is easier to ignore . . . motorcyclists' deaths when the riders are thought to be 'dirty, rough-neck, outlaw types' than when they are thought to be the progeny of postwar suburban bliss. This may help explain why there was a shift from acceptance of 1,103 motorcycle deaths in 1949 to outrage in 1964 when there were 1,118 deaths" (p. 125). Ultimately, Packer shows that the construction of the motorcycle as an inherently "risky" vehicle is predicated on an often implicit opposition to the automobile, understood as the norm of American personal transportation.

Consistently imagined as the car's dangerous, threatening "other," the motorcycle and its rider over the years have been increasingly subjected to a host of often onerous safety regulations and to heightened police surveillance. This, in turn, has led to sometimes blatant "discrimination and police brutality against bikers . . . often masked as safety concerns" (p. 129). Yet, as Packer observes in the closing section of the chapter, "motorcycling is increasingly described as a leisure and lifestyle market" (p.159) and motorcycle manufacturers are increasingly targeting older, more affluent customers.

Chapter 4 traces the largely unknown history of Citizens Band (CB) radio and its use by independent truckers to coordinate wildcat strikes and mass protests against new traffic regulations. He details the economic and regulatory changes that made CB radio into a viable medium of popular communication in the mid-1970s and describes how advocates promoted it as a possible alternative to the mainstream broadcast media. He also reviews the celebration of the defiant independent trucker in popular film, music and TV during the late '70s, observing that the CB was consistently represented as a tool of the independent trucker's populist revolt against government control in hit songs like *Convoy* and movies like *Smokey and the Bandit*. While the historical narrative this chapter constructs is fascinating, it struck me as only tangentially related to the overarching argument of the book concerning the social construction of risky drivers and America's obsession with traffic safety.

In Chapter 5, Packer explores a range of different cultural representations of African American automobility. He devotes much of the chapter to a discussion of the iconic status of the Cadillac in the black community, particularly during the 1970s. In a systematic survey of images of black car ownership in *Ebony* magazine, he finds that the Cadillac was consistently held out to the magazine's readers as a symbol of success and upward mobility even as GM refused to purchase ads targeted at the African American market. Indeed, in films like the James Bond movie *Live and Let Die* and in other pop cultural texts of the '70s, the black-owned Cadillac was transformed from a sign of affluence to a marker of criminality. Packer goes on to argue that the black motorist in the U.S. is still stigmatized as criminal or at least "suspicious" and points out that laws against certain forms of automobile customizing popular in the black community (like tinted windows) justify racial profiling by police in the name keeping the roads accident-free. Once again, the cause of "traffic safety" provides cover for government efforts to discipline a socially marginalized population.

Chapter 6 brings Packer's narrative up to the present by investigating the contemporary panic over road rage. Though the term "road rage" was first coined in the late 1980s, the concept only entered into widespread use in the mid-1990s in response to a perceived rise in aggressive driving incidents. A number of moral entrepreneurs — traffic safety experts, criminologists, psychologists — rushed to define the problem and explain its causes. Conferences were convened, studies conducted, reports published. Some psychologists pushed to have road rage included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* as an officially recognized pathology. Their incentive, as Packer explains, was partially financial: "insurance companies most often demand that that official DSM prognosis accompany any insurance payout" (p. 237). The media dutifully picked up the story and has covered it relentlessly ever since. Unlike the previous forms of risky driving behavior discussed in the book, road rage was not confined to a limited problem population, but potentially involved 75-90% of all drivers. As such, the solutions that have been promoted by experts and journalists have tended to focus less on technological fixes or new forms of policing than on therapeutic "self-help" for angry drivers. Chief among these has been a media-dependent propaganda and educational campaign — modeled on Mothers Against Drunk Driving's anti-drunk driving crusade — to train drivers to control their tendency to rage and encourage them to "take it easy." As Packer aptly observes, in the age of road rage, "safety has become a mode of morality" (p. 264).

The book's conclusion limns the political implications of contemporary, futuristic fantasies about intelligent highways, driverless cars and computerized monitoring and regulation of traffic flows. Such fantasies are a logical extension of the preoccupation with safety evident in American cultural responses to hitchhikers, motorcyclists and "aggressive drivers." What Packer makes clear is that "dreams of a perfectly efficient and perfectly safe driving environment" (p. 275) necessarily imply more stringent social control over our collective behavior, all for the ostensive purpose of making us individually safe and free from fear while on the road. "The rhetoric of freedom," he suggests, "is . . . being used to produce consumer desire for new dependencies upon control mechanisms" (p. 291).

Mobility without Mayhem is not without its flaws. The writing is sometimes awkward, clunky or repetitious. Packer on occasion invokes slippery theoretical concepts ("governmentality," "phenomenology," "control society," and "neoliberalism") without clarifying what he means by them or adequately justifying their use. Moreover, while his focus on cultural and media representations of driving often yields valuable insights, Packer's broader argument would have benefited from a more thorough, more exhaustive treatment of the political, economic, geographic and demographic forces shaping the evolution of American automobility. For instance, his analysis of contemporary discourses on driving — in the chapter on "road rage" and the concluding chapter on intelligent highways — would have been much stronger if it had explored the ways rising traffic congestion, longer commutes, disappearing public transit options and deteriorating infrastructure have transformed the experience of driving in this country over the past two decades.

Yet despite these problems, Packer's book succeeds in illuminating much about the public discourse on and cultural meaning of driving both past and present. In the process, he manages to call into question the fixation with managing risk that seems so all pervasive in American society in the era of the so-called War on Terror. Overall, the book makes a significant contribution to the growing scholarly

literature on the automobile and the distinctive way of life it has helped to create. This is no small achievement.

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