

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Jane Holtz Kay.** *Asphalt Nation: How the Automobile Took Over America and How We Can Take It Back.* New York: Crown Publishers, 1997. xii + 418 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 0-5175-8702-5.

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In *Asphalt Nation: How the Automobile Took Over America and How We Can Take It Back*, author Jane Holtz Kay is on a mission--a mission to rally readers to rise up against the root of all evil: the automobile. This she does with great enthusiasm and conviction in an elaborate, though sometimes disjointed style, furnishing information that is compelling, if not always accurate.

Kay, architecture critic of *The Nation* and a native of Boston, divides her book of over 400 pages into three sections. The first section, "Car Glut," is meant to show "how deeply enmeshed we are in the car culture" (p. 7). In the second section, "Car Tracks," Kay provides some historical narrative in an attempt to explain how Americans have developed their intractable attachment to an initially "benign technology." The final section, "Car Free" provides the reader with an overview of "solutions, some new, some traditional, to show how we can relieve this dependence and destruction and secure human and global well-being" (p. 8).

*Asphalt Nation* is not an academic text. Notes are at the end of the book, but do not appear by notation or in parentheses within the text; the reader curious about a piece of information can look in the notes section to see if the information is attributed to a source, but can expect to find no notations within the text as a signal of referenced material. Some quotes or facts are attributed to a source but not to a specific work or interview. The sources for many of these quotes and facts are not included in either Kay's notes section or her bibliography. For example, Kay refers to a Department of Housing and Urban Development study, published in 1974, that "calculated compact development at 40 percent of the cost of low-density sprawl" (p. 131). But this source--whatever it is--does not appear in her bibliography, nor is the citation clarified in the notes section.

*Asphalt Nation* is also not a transportation-policy book or a transportation-history book. Those interested in transportation policy or history should turn to other sources: David Jones's *Urban Transportation Policy*, Anthony Downs's *Stuck in Traffic*, Paul Barrett's *The Automobile and Urban Transit*, or Scott Bottles's *Los Angeles and the Automobile*, to name just a few.[1] What *Asphalt Nation* is, however, is a critical commentary on the failings of a society in which consumerism, environmental degradation, and alienation are but a few of the consequences of a car-dependent culture. Kay is not an academic, but rather one of a "forgotten breed," according to Robert Fishman, a Rutgers University historian: the "public intellectual." [2] Thus, one should read *Asphalt Nation* as an example of contemporary public discourse, as an expression of anti-auto outrage.

Kay begins her attack gingerly, at the outset disarming the would-be critic of her anti-auto fervor. She finds allies in civil engineers, whom one might expect her to vilify. She catalogs certain attributes of the automobile, such as its role in liberating women. Having so far seduced even the most skeptical reader with her enticing prose, Kay soon positions herself for the attack: "[I]t is a false form of consciousness that fails to assess women's enslavement to the motor vehicle in the auto-dependent households and society it has helped install" (p. 24). "False form of consciousness"? "Enslavement"? These are fighting words. Kay then goes on to enumerate other victims, the "mobility disenfranchised"--children, the poor, the elderly--people who live without cars in a car-dependent society.

Kay blames the automobile for virtually all of society's ills, from a withering political consciousness, to the deterioration of the family, to a junk food diet. She recognizes the zeal of her argument: "It may sound ludicrous to blame the car for fewer oven-baked potatoes and more fatty

french fries, less grandma's chicken soup, and more franchised chicken nuggets, but the junk food diet--and the environmental toll from its trash also stems from the wrappings of the highway-based franchise. The car is scarcely the sole villain in the growth of Kentucky Fried Chicken but it is an accomplice" (p. 32-33).

Kay often embellishes her critique of the automobile with a critique of automobile-based architecture. She refers to "big box" outfits such as Wal-Mart and Home Depot as "mean spirited," and as "architecture without architects" (p. 66), characterizing Sunbelt auto-dependent cities such as Phoenix as "the antithesis of Frank Lloyd Wright's 'place'" (p. 59).

Also scattered throughout the book are various and sundry "car facts." Kay cites a Heidelberg study, for instance, that reveals that 29 tons of waste and 1,207 million cubic yards of polluted air are produced by the manufacture of a vehicle, before it ever leaves the plant (p. 93). But her facts, while intriguing, are often pulled from context and on occasion conflict with one another. There is, for instance, a fair amount of controversy in current transportation economics literature regarding the "true cost" of automobile usage and the total amount of "government subsidy." Without even mentioning this important debate, Kay cites one study that maintains that the gas tax covers only 60 percent of road costs, leaving the government to subsidize the remaining 40 percent (p. 121). Twelve pages later, she refers to the government's subsidizing 90 percent of road work (and for this figure, she provides no citation).[3]

In Part II, Kay provides a popular history of urban transportation. Her history of the automobile follows automobile historian James Flink's narrative, including the auto's positive impacts such as getting farmers "out of the mud," emancipating women, and relieving the city of pollution caused by horses.[4] In her brief discussion of road paving, Kay completely neglects any mention of the Good Roads Movement or the role of bicyclists in advocating for better roads. She then moves on to a discussion of streetcar development, but she fails to differentiate between the various types--track-tied city streetcars versus interurbans versus electric trolley buses--usually referring to the entire stock as "trolleys."

More egregious in terms of a truthful and complete recounting of urban transportation

history, Kay neglects to develop the policy context in which the decline of the streetcars occurred. One might not expect such a recounting in a work of popular commentary like *Asphalt Nation*, but Kay virtually invites this criticism through her presentation of the popular, but discredited, conspiracy-theory explanation for the decline of streetcars. Labeling Ford, General Motors (GM), and Chrysler the "trio [that] drove the era of excess and consumerism" (p. 171), Kay goes on to present her take on the conspiracy theory: "Sold by General Motors salesmen whose maneuvers would earn opprobrium, the motor bus spelled trouble for mass transit. In turn, the replacement of streetcars by buses and the need for more transfers made suburbanites buy more cars. In concert, the truck, the bus, the multiplying motorcar, and cheap gas powered the auto age and undermined the monopoly of the rails" (p. 174).

While Kay acknowledges the role of Americans' preferences for the automobile, she embraces the argument of antitrust attorney Bradford Snell and economist David St. Clair, who argue that replacement of streetcars with the less-desirable motor bus all but drove travelers away from transit and into their cars.[5] Like Snell and other conspiracy theorists, Kay blames GM and its subsidiary, National City Lines (NCL), for the replacement of popular streetcars with unpopular motor buses. Absent is any discussion of the local politics that effected this change, that in fact put motor buses in place before GM or NCL were ever on the scene. As transportation policy analysts and historians such as Sy Adler, David Jones, Scott Bottles, and others have pointed out, the punitive and exacting provisions of the local streetcar franchise required costly line expansions to developing suburbs and spendy "modernization" programs.[6] These requirements in an era of increasing labor costs and decreasing revenues (thanks in large part to the flat, low fares--which Kay advocates), caused many transit companies to begin putting the more affordable bus on their routes before NCL was formed in 1936 and in cities where neither GM or NCL ever stepped foot.

Kay's main point in her recounting of the decline of the streetcar is that the demise of the streetcar meant the demise of the city: "With the trolleys would go the cities they served" (p. 214). This is a facile explanation for urban decline that obscures the interaction of other, more complex factors--capitalism, population shifts, racism,

poverty, changing political tides--factors that, if she mentions at all, Kay ultimately attributes to the automobile.

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Despite her at times unfocused discussion of the many proposed remedies to excess automobile use, Kay clearly emphasizes land use and densification approaches. She also advocates low, if not free, transit fares. She neglects three important considerations regarding low or free transit. One is that the low, flat fare is a large part of what crippled the transit industry to begin with. Second is the political ramification of the very large public subsidies required to operate a transit system that covers very little to none of its operating costs from the fare box. Third is the dismal fact that study after study has shown that the price elasticity of demand for transit is about -.30, meaning that a 10-percent reduction in transit fare would result in only a 3-percent increase in transit ridership. Transit ridership, in other words, is not very responsive to reductions in fare.[7]

In her discussion of free transit, Kay turns to the "utopia" of Portland, Oregon (this reviewer's hometown), as an example. It is true that Portland has a "fareless square"--a free zone in the CBD that is meant to service primarily downtown short-hoppers, that is, people who travel within the downtown core (not to or from it). But it is not true, as Kay maintains, that Portland's downtown is "lined by trolleys," or that the fareless square brings "walkers striding a dozen abreast along city streets in the center" (p. 320). There is presently one light rail line running through downtown Portland, soon to be followed by another. These two routes hardly "line" the downtown core. Nor do walkers stride "a dozen abreast." During a peak period, there might be a couple dozen people walking along an entire city block, but unless sidewalk maintenance forces them all to converge in one spot, they are hardly "abreast."

Despite these weaknesses, Kay's book is an important addition to the public discourse meant to rally people to a "counterculture rescue movement" (p. 286). Her mission is to urge readers to action, to help light the fires of anti-auto activism. The reader already cynical about our auto-dependent culture will be inspired. But whether Kay's stated mission "to evoke the very root of transportation in the word 'transport' that can carry us to a loftier place and state of being" (p. 358) can be realized is, perhaps, a bit ambitious and, as Kay herself

admitted, maybe even somewhat arrogant.[8] Nevertheless, voices such as hers need to be heard if we are to avoid lapsing into a complacency that got us so mired in the car-dependent culture in the first place.

#### Notes

[1]. Barrett, P. *The Automobile and Urban Transit: The Formation of Public Policy in Chicago, 1900-1930*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983; Bottles, S. L. *Los Angeles and the Automobile*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987; Downs, A. *Stuck in Traffic: Coping with Peak-Hour Traffic Congestion*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution; Cambridge, Mass.: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 1992; Jones, D. W., Jr. *Urban Transit Policy: An Economic and Political History*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1985.

[2]. Fishman, R. Comments on Kay, J. H. "Dismantling the Dream: Hardtoppers, Road-Stopppers, and the Activist Agenda, 1960 and 1990." Paper presented at the Seventh National Conference on American Planning History, sponsored by the Society for American City and Regional Planning History, Seattle, October 25, 1997.

[3]. The 40-percent figure comes from the widely cited MacKenzie, J. J., R. C. Dower, and D. T. Chen. *The Going Rate: What It Really Costs to Drive*. Washington, D.C.: World Resources Institute, 1992. Mark Hanson calculates a 70-percent subsidy in Hanson, M.E. "Results of Literature Survey and Summary of Findings: The Nature and Magnitude of Social Costs of Urban Roadway Use." Prepared for the Federal Highway Administration, 1992. A 1-percent subsidy emerges in Beshers, E.W. "External Costs of Automobile Travel and Appropriate Policy Responses." Highway Users Foundation, 1994.

[4]. Flink, J. J. *The Automobile Age*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1988.

[5]. Bradford S. *American Ground Transport*. Reproduced as an appendix to U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on the Judiciary, The Industrial Reorganization Act: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Antitrust and Monopoly on S. 1167, Part 4A, 93rd Cong., 2d sess., 1974, A-2, A-29; St. Clair, D. J. "The Motorization and Decline of Urban Public Transit, 1935-1950." *Journal of Economic History* 41 (September 1981): 579-600. St. Clair, D. J. *Motorization of*

*American Cities*. New York: Praeger, 1986.

[6]. Adler, S. "The Transformation of the Pacific Electric Railway: Bradford Snell, Roger Rabbit, and the Politics of Transportation in Los Angeles." *Urban Affairs Quarterly* 27 (September 1991): 51-86. Bianco, M.J. "The Decline of Transit: A Corporate Conspiracy or Failure of Public Policy? The Case of Portland, Oregon." *Journal of Policy History* 9 (1997): 450-474. Also, Bottles. *Los Angeles and the Automobile*; and Jones. *Urban Transportation Policy*.

[7]. Kraft, G., and T. A. Domencich, "Free Transit." In Edel, M., and J. Rothenberg, eds. *Readings in Urban Economics*. New York: Macmillan, 1972.

[8]. Kay, J. H., Comments during presentation of "Dismantling the Dream: Hardtoppers, Road-Stopppers, and the Activist Agenda, 1960 and 1990." Paper presented at the Seventh National Conference on American Planning History, sponsored by the Society for American City and Regional Planning History, Seattle, October 25, 1997.

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