

Tommaso Pardi

Lewis H. Siegelbaum, ed. *The Socialist Car: Automobility in the Eastern Bloc*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011. vii+242 p. ISBN 978-0-8014-4991-8.

Tommaso Pardi. Address for correspondence: Ecole Normale Supérieure de Cachan, Pavillon Laplace, 61, Avenue du Président Wilson, 94235, Cachan CEDEX, France. tpardi@gerpisa.ens-cachan.fr.

As stated in the introduction by Lewis Siegelbaum, the principal objective of this collective book is “to explore the interface between the motorcar and the state socialist countries of Eastern Europe, including the USSR” (2). This is done mainly from two different perspectives.

The first perspective consists of studying the motorcar both as a point of convergence between the state and the private sphere and as a point of divergence (and compromise) between the socialist project and its reality. The focus here is on the practice of private car consumption and on the material culture specific to the acquisition and use of the “socialist car.”

Mariusz Jastrzab, for example, studies the use of cars “as reward” by the Polish government’s representatives in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as well as the strategies developed by common citizens to acquire them. György Péteri analyses mobility practices of the members of the salaried apparatus of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party from the early 1960s to the late 1970s—in particular, their systematic and illegitimate use of the Party’s cars for private purposes. Kurt Möser focuses on practices of tinkering with cars in the German Democratic Republic of the 1970s both as a distinctive manifestation of the use of “socialist cars” and as a cheap way to acquire social distinction.

Through the study of these “grey” practices, the authors develop a distinctive approach to the so-called “little deal,” or social contract in socialist societies in the 1960s and 1970s. As stressed by Siegelbaum, “this posits the power of the state working through the modes of everyday life to intersect with the articulation of individual desires and needs” (5). Access to and use of the private car in socialist societies is therefore understood here as a major middle ground where the needs of the regime and the needs of the population could meet.

The second perspective aims at examining socialist automobility through a broader transnational and international comparison. Two different sets of questions are at play here. First, did a homogenous transnational socialist automobility exist, despite significant differences between Eastern countries and the USSR and within the USSR itself? If yes, what characterized this specific form of automobility, and what were the forces that shaped it? Second, how did this socialist automobility relate and compare to capitalist automobility? Was it a poor relative of the dominant Western paradigm? Was it a distinct and autonomous variant of what should be better understood as a transnational global phenomenon? Or did it represent some form of “alternative modernity”?

Concerning the first set of questions, most of the contributors to the book concur on the existence of a homogenous socialist automobility. Luminita Gatejel refers, for instance, to a “common heritage” shared by all of the socialist countries despite differences in the chronology and development of mass motorization. Scarcity of supply, special retail and distribution patterns in the absence of official market transactions, artificially high prices, long product cycles, infamous waiting lists, a widespread reliance on owners to service their own cars, and the prominent role of truck drivers and mechanics are described in the book as the main features of this common heritage.

These somehow ubiquitous components of socialist mobility are attributed by Siegelbaum to the failure of “the socialist car to generate a viable infrastructure around it; planned economies simply could not cope with all the details of such a highly sophisticated system” (13). Gatejel insists, also, on the ideological constraints that prevented the import of Western cars, which might have reduced the impact of economic shortages on the supply of cars. Valentina Fava, in the only chapter focused on production, develops a similar argument, showing how the attempts by Skoda engineers to implement Western methods and technologies as practical solutions to the problems generated by the shortcomings of the planned economy were vetoed by Soviet planners.

However, when the authors try to provide a more comprehensive analysis of how this socialist system of automobility reproduced and transformed itself over time and how its evolution related and compared to capitalist systems of automobility, their views and conclusions tend to diverge.

Some evoke the possibility of an alternative socialist modernity under the form of a collective transport system in which the cars would be shared, provided to the population as a service by the state. This alternative path was embodied in Khrushchevian ideas about the social use of personal cars and was pursued by urban planners and socialist elites in the 1960s. But this path was abandoned in the 1970s in favor of the mass diffusion of the private car. According to Brigitte Le Normand, in the case of Yugoslavia at least, this represented the victory of motorists “who embraced a more autonomous, individualistic notion of mobility over the collectivist notion” of urban planners” (103). György Peteri, however, claims that the project was betrayed by the very political class that was supposed to implement it: their choice to make personal use of Party cars “contributed to and confirmed the inability of the state socialist order to emancipate modern social and economic development from capitalist patterns” (68).

Some others suggest that Soviet urban projects, like those of Zelenograd or Togliatti (Elke Beyer), Naberezhnye Chelny (Esther Meier), or Marzahn in Berlin (Eli Rubin), projected an alternative socialist form of modern life in which mass housing would not make citizens dependent upon their own cars. But these projects—which implied an almost ubiquitous availability of services to families—failed in reality because of the shortcomings of the planned economy. In the end, according to Beyer, when socialism faded away what was left were “traces in the form of traffic infrastructures that were not much different from those constructed under capitalist conditions” (91).

Others, like Gatejel, claim that on the contrary, despite (or even because of) these failures and contradictions, “the car culture of the USSR, the GDR, and Romania was both genuine and socialist” (156). Rubin in particular links the peculiarities of the Trabant “plastic” model manufactured in the GDR with the utopian urban planning of East-Berlin Marzahn and refers to them as an example of the “interconnectedness between the economy—the all-important planned economy—and the everyday life of people and the materials and places that constituted that life” (138). As such, the Trabant and the automobility built around it should be understood as truly socialist.

In the introduction, Siegelbaum summarizes these differing views by stating that “the Eastern Bloc’s version of automobility both replicated and departed from Western standards” (13). Regrettably, the book lacks a conclusion in which this bland statement might turn into something more insightful.

Perhaps the problem here has something to do with the concept of automobility itself. While the concept is useful in foregrounding the role that users and consumers have played in shaping modern automobile landscapes, it can also turn into a dead end if this leads us to neglect the links between the sphere of consumption and the sphere of production. For instance, several authors refer to private car ownership as a “capitalist” Trojan horse inside socialist automobility. But they seem to forget that the main difference between capitalist and socialist societies did not lie in the ownership of goods but in the ownership of the means of production.

How a noncapitalist mode of production contributed to shaping a different form of automobility in the Eastern Bloc is a question that lies between the lines of this book. Unfortunately, it also lies outside the boundaries of its theoretical and methodological framework.