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Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America

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Reviewer:

Margaret Walsh

Cotten Seiler, Associate Professor of American Studies at Dickinson College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, has written a challenging and ambitious book that is designated to appeal to a range of scholars in Cultural Studies, Cultural and Historical Geography, American and Social History, Literature and Literary Criticism, Political and Social Theory and Sociology. He aims to examine how driving a car or a private motorised vehicle has come to be 'part and parcel' of modern American identity. It is a well-known fact that Americans, unless they live in a major metropolitan city such as New York City, have a disability that impedes driving or are too poor to afford a vehicle are wedded to their cars. Seiler wants to show that driving has become identified with citizenship and that the United States has become a republic of drivers.

Once the 20th century was drawing to a close, historians and other academicians started to take a greater interest in researching automobile history, rather than paying so much attention to rail transport and travel. What was a relative dearth of scholarship, not so much on the production of cars and automotive entrepreneurs, but on the use of these vehicles, has more recently turned into a welcome body of books and articles examining a variety of aspects of automobility ranging from car design, to industrial relations, through car salesmanship and on to gender and literary and filmic analysis.⁽¹⁾ Relatively little of this research, however, has followed the 'cultural turn' and has used critical theory and post-structural analysis, possibly because many authors have come from a tradition of labour history, business history or transport

history.⁽²⁾ Certainly all of these historical strands are well aware of the impact of the cultural approach, but they have preferred to see this as another tool in their research and writing rather than as the essential and underlying basis from which to argue.

Seiler sets out to write a different narrative. He states that his book's 'essential questions are cultural, philosophical and political, not automotive nor technological, nor even psychological, narrowly defined. Its objects of inquiry are the *affect* (author's italics) generated by driving and the instrumentalization of that affect under shifting regimes of liberalism and capitalism in the twentieth century' (p. 2). In other words he wishes to examine how driving has made Americans feel, think and act and to describe 'the way of being in and perceiving the world around us' organised and reinforced by driving' (p. 3). Driving has become a key component of the American character and is an essential part of the modern form of American individualism. Indeed the image on the book's cover reflects the all-encompassing mantle of the car for Americans because readers are invited to view the road ahead from behind the wheel and at night.

How does Seiler make his case? He selects two periods of automotive history for analysis, the pioneer years from 1895 through the 1920s and the post-war boom years of the 1950s. Both of these periods witnessed a rise in car sales and the development of highway infrastructure and both experienced a crisis in or renegotiation of individualism. Seiler argues that the first period witnessed the acceptance or more likely the establishment of driving as a way of life. Indeed he suggests that mass automobility had arrived by 1929 because the car was already perceived to be the agent of transforming characteristics for Americans. In this consumer age the automobile had the capacity to give American drivers the 'sensations of agency, self-determination, entitlement, privacy, sovereignty, transgression and speed' (p. 43). Such features facilitated the establishment of automobility as a public good and ensured its growth as an 'apparatus' or an all-encompassing system.

How did this happen? The advent of strong organisations early in the 20th century threatened the demise of sovereign selfhood, which was deemed to be a key quality of the American character. The new political economy was seemingly tied into co-operation rather than personal independence. Americans needed to find a new way of expressing themselves within or against organisations, whether these were the growing power of government, the tyranny of the factory regulated by scientific management or masculine dominance in the public arena. Driving a car could give primarily white middle-class and working-class men a sense of social sovereignty in a world of economic abundance. They had the freedom and increasingly the ability to choose among a range of consumer goods and brands. Driving offered a new means of masculine expression even though it was bound by traffic regulations. For women driving offered the potential of freedom and liberation from housework. It also suggested fashionability, self-determination and competence. Driving women might well still be a numerical minority, but there was now an alternative model of femininity compatible with women's new political status.

Moving to the 1950s, Seiler extends his thesis about cars and self-expression. These were the years in which car registrations rose from 40 million to 62 million and when there was one automobile for every three persons.⁽³⁾ In order to keep pace with the abundance of vehicles, the federal government authorised the building of the interstate highway network (1956), giving Americans not only a modern route for trans-continental mobility, but also an express route. For Seiler this massive expenditure and the consolidation of a new level of automobility can be perceived as an American response to the Cold War struggle between capitalism and communism. Here was a conflict between two irreconcilable political ideologies; the United States was committed to the freedom of the individual and the Soviet Union was based on the centrality of the collective will. Some Western European countries were also experimenting with socialism. For Americans and their government the ensuing ideological struggle required a re-formulation of and preoccupation with individualism and the 'vitality of American individualistic virtues' (p. 70). The construction of the interstate system was not exclusively a result of Cold War anxieties, but it was a key catalyst. Driving on these super highways could distinguish Americans from Soviets.

Driving could also be a counterbalance to the managerial culture that had been consolidated by the triumph of American industrial capitalism during the Second World War and the following years. Bureaucracy and

bureaucratic communities had come to dominate both business management and political life and the individual, whether a white, blue or pink collar worker, was increasingly required to conform in order to succeed or to survive. American consumers were also persuaded into conformist quiescence by a barrage of advertising, even though this differentiated between brands of goods and services. Driving, however, could reaffirm autonomous individuality. It was capable of re-fashioning this key quality of the American personality to fit in with the modern corporate model of organisation. Drivers might be constrained by uniform traffic regulations and find that access to interstate highways was limited, but they were free to express themselves in flexible ways within these porous boundaries. There was an element of freedom on the road which offset 'the organization man'.

The peculiar combination of flexibility and coercion for American drivers leads Seiler into some interesting dilemmas connected to citizenry. The 1950s may not have been well known as an era of civil rights in the same way as the following decade, but the roots of the equality struggle were visible, perhaps more so for African Americans than for women and ethnic minorities. Seiler recognises the black American pursuit of equal automobility by devoting a chapter to examining the risks, perils and pleasures of African Americans when driving and owning a car. As fitting with his cultural approach to history he uses midcentury travel guides published between 1936 and 1957 as an entry point to demonstrating how racial attitudes and policies shifted. These texts provide insights into the complex and often contradictory language and ways in which black Americans traversed the public space of the road and joined the expanding culture of automobility. Discrimination, violence and intimidation sit side by side with greater access to both vehicles and the roads, especially beyond the confines of the American South. It was impossible to deny access to increasingly standardised spaces like interstate highways and black Americans behind the wheel could approach first-class citizenship, if driving was a requirement for that status.

Women were seemingly not offered this type of first class citizenship because driving was still perceived to be a masculine activity despite the rising numbers of female drivers. In the 1950s anxieties about the feminisation of American culture, the decline of rugged masculine traits and the perceived transformation of American society into a matriarchy suggested that men could and should continue to claim authority and self-expression through their motor vehicles. Suburban women might need access to the family vehicle in order to run the modern household efficiently, but they were deemed at best to be timid drivers. More likely they were inept drivers who should not be trusted behind the wheel and they continued to be the butt of male humour. It didn't matter that women were safer drivers; cars really belonged to men and driving was a means of expressing tough masculine characteristics. It will remain for a cultural analysis of the later years of the 20th century to examine how the substantial increase in registered female drivers, women's financial ability to buy their own vehicles and the female presence in automobile manufacturing has altered the gendered perceptions of good American citizenship.

Republic of Drivers is essentially a history of an important aspect of American thought and culture. The automobile and more particularly the act of driving is the vital ingredient of change which allows the re-formulation of key national characteristics, most notably individualism and self-reliance in an age of organisation, bureaucracy and global politics. Mobility is also another indispensable component of American dynamism and democracy and the changing face of motoring offers new and inventive ways of considering what it is to be an American. In surveying, amalgamating and moving on from a vast array of sources Seiler has suggested many thoughtful pathways for considering American notions about the self and the social and political community. He draws as much, if not more, from theoretical and philosophical writings as he does from automotive texts and archives. As such he offers a treatise that will be read and used more by intellectual and cultural historians and those in the interdisciplinary area of American Studies rather than by transport and business historians.

While the book is well researched and executed and will doubtless be received as offering a clever and nuanced argument, it is not always easily digestible. Readers need to be fully conversant with both theory and empirical materials drawn from diverse disciplines in order to engage fully with the narrative. This is a pity. There is a potentially large general, let alone academic audience for a volume which discusses Americans' love affair with the car and how automobile use became so crucial to American identity. Many

Americans and many who live elsewhere who are concerned about the prospect or the possibility of following American trends could profitably read this volume. But they may become discouraged by the post-structural language and the assumption that everyone respects critical theory. Some historians may also question the decision to use two particular periods of automobility from which to argue and whether indeed mass automobility had arrived by 1929. Nevertheless *Republic of Drivers* is likely to become compulsory reading for anyone researching automotive history and may well become a major text for American Studies students who are trained to think in interdisciplinary ways.

The author does not wish to respond to this review.

Notes

1. See, for example, Virginia Scharff, *Taking the Wheel. Women and the Coming of the Motor Age* (New York, 1991); David Gartman, *Auto Opium. A Social History of American Automobile Design* (New York, 1994); Ruth Milkman, *Farewell to the Factory: Auto Workers in the Late Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, 1997); Kathleen Franz, *Tinkering. Consumers Reinvent the Early Automobile* (Philadelphia 2005); Tom McCarthy, *Auto Mania. Cars Consumers and the Environment* (New Haven, 2007) and Steven M. Gelber, *Horse Trading in the Age of Cars. Men in the Marketplace* (Baltimore, 2008).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Notable exceptions are Deborah Clarke, *Driving Women. Fiction and Automobile Culture in Twentieth- Century America* (Baltimore 2007) and Georgine Clarsen, *Eat My Dust. Early Women Motorists* (Baltimore, 2008). Work on tourism, especially if grounded in sociology, has been much more willing to engage with modernist cultural approaches. See, for example, *Tourism Mobilities: Places to Play, Places in Play*, ed. Mimi Sheller and John Urry (London, 2004) and essays in *Being Elsewhere: Tourism, Consumer Culture and Identity in Modern Europe and North America*, ed. Shelley Baranowski and Ellen Furlough (Ann Arbor, 2001). See also John Walton, 'Transport, travel, tourism and mobility: a cultural turn?', *Journal of Transport History* 27 (2006), 129-34. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For statistics on automobile registrations and drivers see United States Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, *Highway Statistics. Summary to 1995* (Washington DC. 1997) FHWA-PL-97-007 and *Highway Statistics 2000* (Washington DC, 2001) FHWA-PL-01-1011.[Back to \(3\)](#)

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