

Zitierhinweis

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In *Automobility and the City in Twentieth-Century Britain and Japan*, Simon Gunn and Susan Townsend have written the equivalent of three books. Gunn, Director of the Centre for Urban History at Leicester, offers a learned study of Birmingham and the car since the 1920s; while Townsend, a specialist in the urban and intellectual history of Japan at Nottingham, pairs it with a similarly rich study of Nagoya.

But it is the third book between these covers that I want to focus upon in this review. This book, which could be titled simply *Automobility and the City*, offers a temporally, geographically, and conceptually expansive study of the origins, ascendancy, partial displacement, but ultimately lasting—and, alas, possibly terminal—legacy of what the authors label the ‘modern car system’. Though grounded in this pair of second cities, Birmingham and Nagoya, the authors’ arguments extend beyond either particular case. By historicizing an object of study that should be as striking as it is familiar, the ‘modern car system’; and by analysing that system in a frame that reaches not merely across the Channel or Atlantic, but indeed across the hemispheres; this book enables historians, sociologists, planners, engineers, and policymakers to better understand a defining feature of the present: our cities’ organization around a system linking drivers in Birmingham to commuters in Nagoya, and both to an oil economy stretching from Dallas to Riyadh.

By the ‘modern car system’, Gunn and Townsend refer not simply to the fact of cars, nor even to the 20th century’s exponential increase in their numbers, so much as to the implications of a world organized around the car upon our selves, our cultures, our environments, and indeed our species—as well as, more immediately, our roads and cities. As these chapters document, engineers, planners, and politicians took decisions that shaped the forms of Birmingham and Nagoya, and these decisions were inflected by each location’s particular histories. In another sense, however, these decisions represented but local accommodations to less visible, but no less real, forces remaking urban spaces globally—forces that the authors capture through their key concept, the modern car system.

Let me illustrate this expansive meaning of the modern car system by picking up on the book’s discussion of Toyota City—as the town of Koromo, east of Nagoya, was renamed when Toyota Motor Corporation moved its headquarters there in 1959. As it happens, when I was 15 years old, I summered in Toyota City. My father spent his career in the U.S. auto industry, and so, when I was a child, we moved between those classic motor cities, Detroit and Los Angeles. During the 1980s, Japanophobia surged in U.S. politics and culture, eventually producing such shameful artefacts as Michael Crichton’s *Rising Sun* (1992). Mindful that its fortunes largely depended upon its standing in the States, Toyota took to sending its U.S. workers’ children to this eponymous suburb of Nagoya during summers. We toured factories, took in baseball games, and endured our first nervy encounters with sashimi, while being periodically invited to reflect upon the mutually beneficial relationship between our two countries. So not only my father’s career, and the cities that it bounced between, but also these more obscure networks—across which children shuttled back-and-forth, moving between otherwise unrelated suburbs, across the Pacific Ocean—all developed in tandem with this distinctively 20th-century technology and industry.

And yet, by introducing this personal digression, I fall afoul of one of the core arguments of this book. Because Gunn and Townsend are also offering a corrective to U.S.-centric histories of the motor age. Britain, Japan, and other places, they argue, represent not derivative auto-modernities, echoes of a history with its roots in the U.S., so much as European and East Asian iterations of a truly global history. That history, the evolution of the modern car system, included—alongside the United States—Germany (with its autobahn), Britain (the world’s leading car exporter in the early 1950s), and Japan (the largest auto manufacturer from the 1980s). One can only hope that this decentring of the U.S. history might find its way into conversations in U.S. historiography—a historiography too often still remains blissfully self-referential.

The more multi-sited history evidenced here becomes clear through the book's comparative analysis. Though I have used the term 'transnational', and in some ways this is a 'global' history, the book's most important feature is its comparative framework. As Gunn and Townsend write, 'It is the value of comparative history of the type we have undertaken in this study that the differences in the adoption of a transnational phenomenon – automobility – become visible and open to analysis' (p. 176). This theme of a broadly shared phenomenon, yet variously managed, runs throughout these chapters: from the contrasting pre-histories of Birmingham and Nagoya (Chapter 1), through their attempts to accommodate the emerging car system (Chapters 2-3), through their considerations both of the car's liberatory power and its collateral damage (Chapter 4), through the growth of new concerns and crises from the 1970s – including what the authors label the 'ME dilemma', the seemingly intractable conflict between motorization and the environment (Chapter 5). In the end end, after a prolonged readjustment evident after (but not, the authors note, caused by) the 1973 oil shock, Gunn and Townsend conclude: 'In urbanized societies like Japan and Britain, a large proportion of the population still relies on the car for shopping, commuting, and ferrying. But from a historical viewpoint, the romance is over' (p. 174).

When romance falters, cue the historian. Historians of cities and technologies will read *Automobility and the City* for what it has to say about the car's remaking of these second cities; about the paradox pitting motorists' lifestyles against their environmental consequences; and about these two island nations' contrasting experiences of modernity. Above all, though, this well-constructed book compels recognition of the historicity of a world built around the car. The motorways, flyovers, ring roads, and car parks that define our landscapes, however permanent they can seem, are in fact of recent vintage. During not two decades, in the middle of the previous century, the modern car system remade our cities, our lives, and our world. More recently, though—and more hopefully—the authors discern signs of a 'rebalancing' of the relationship between the city and the car. It is becoming more possible to imagine a future in which the car, while still claiming a place, must also take its place—a reimagining of the present, and of possible futures, that this vital work of comparative history delivers.