

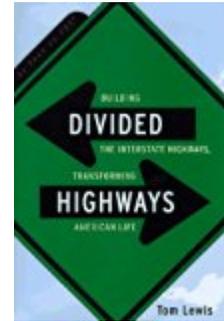
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Tom Lewis. *Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highways, Transforming American Life*. New York: Viking, 1997. 354 pages. \$16.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-14-026771-6; \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-670-86627-4.

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Tom Lewis wrote *Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highways, Transforming American Life* as the companion volume to *Divided Highways*, a documentary film series broadcast by the Public Broadcasting Service (US). The book does not significantly benefit the scholarly community. The real question is whether it will provide the popular audience for which it is intended with a solid, wide ranging overview of the creation, development, and implications of the US highway system.

As is well-known among urban historians, the transformation of US metropolitan areas since the Second World War comprises a major historical event. The shifting distribution of people and resources involved has been in no small part a reaction to mobility and access horizons opened with the capacious national highway network and the institutional regimes that manage the system. It is worth noting that popular interest in the implications of changing forms of settlement and travel patterns is at a high level. The fact that the 1998 election brought the success of “200 state and local ballot initiatives on curbing sprawl” and that growth management, environmental quality, and metropolitan transportation issues are likely to figure prominently into the 2000 presidential campaign testify to this popular interest.[1] Given this, *Divided Highways* comes at a propitious time. The transportation network holds a key part in the broader story, and increasing general understanding of the significance of highways can help reveal the bigger picture in a useful way. *Divided Highways* achieves mixed results on this front.

The book provides a fairly good sample of the issues immediately surrounding highway construction. For ex-

ample, issues of rough terrain, general institutional arrangements, the perspective of highway engineers, and the effects of displacement are all fairly well developed and supported with historical evidence. Highway politics, finance, and major personalities are less well developed, sometimes well supported, but other times tenuous. The transformation of American life remains an underdeveloped topic, with some aspects put forward with adequate contextual information, others put forward in the form of conclusions with very limited support from historical detail or analysis, and others neglected entirely. Ultimately, this holds the book back from accomplishing what it sets out to do in the title and the introduction by way of providing its readers with a good sense of the overall significance of the highway system, and what it might mean for the future.

The first chapter begins with the Twentieth Century and runs through the mid 1930's. Various background information comes out, including rural road conditions, expanding automobile use, and the growth of the highway coalition. This chapter focuses on Thomas McDonald, chief of the Bureau of Public Roads (BPR) from 1919 to 1953, and his leadership from rocky times through the heady days of rapid US Route construction. In doing so, a fairly clear statement is made of how the private and public elements of the highway coalition came to line up behind a set of institutional arrangements hereafter referred to as the BPR system. Chapter Two cites the highway projects of Robert Moses for transforming New York City, providing access for the middle class to recreation and suburban living, and providing powerful examples for civic leaders, the public, and road builders, to whom it also reminded that the BPR system was not the only

way. As is well known, the General Motors Futurama exhibit at the 1939 World's Fair held in New York City fueled a wider interest in a vision of desirable modernity centered around automobile-oriented living, urban reconstruction, and superhighways.

The Pennsylvania Turnpike opened in 1941. Built independently of the BPR with principal financing by the Public Works Administration, this superhighway demonstrated the feasibility of interurban toll roads through rural areas contrary to BPR dogma. Chapter Three provides these details as a backdrop to the BPR's efforts to maintain the primacy of the BPR system against the alternate schemes of the Roosevelt years, made more formidable by the president's role in their conception and propagation. Chapter Four accounts for post World War II suburbanization in general terms as a function of pent-up demand, housing finance regimes, the innovations and efforts of the Levitts and other large developers, and automobile accessibility. Accompanying increases in traffic congestion and interest in expanded highway construction are cited. Chapter Five reports the political process from 1954 to 1956 that led to the adopted plan for the interstate highway system and its legislative product.

Chapters Six through Eight track the implementation of the highway program through the 1960's. First the culture of the 1950's highway engineering is characterized and shown to have been ill suited to anticipate and respond to the social implications of highway construction. The dissatisfaction of the dislocated public during the early years is brought out along with some of the environmental and aesthetic impacts of the program. A critical reassessment of the program from inside the Eisenhower administration is described along with its failure to achieve influence at the time. Rising pressures for speeding progress and for mitigating aesthetic costs are related. The highway revolt in New Orleans that stopped the planned Vieux Carre Expressway and its wider influence is detailed.

Chapter Nine addresses the legislative campaign to open the highway trust fund to mass transit investments that met with some success in 1973. Chapter Ten discusses the oil crises of the 1970's and characterizes popular attitudes to the highway program in the 1970's. Chapter Eleven considers the effects of the program in terms of Sunbelt migration, commuting patterns, safety, the experiences of blacks and women, noise problems, and criticism. The closing chapter touches on changes in land use patterns, freight movement, and induced demand, and offers closing comments.

The book details construction of specific highway construction projects and their immediate implications effectively. For example, the route of the Pennsylvania Turnpike through unforgiving terrain, its partial situation on an aborted railroad alignment, and the dramatic progress in its construction are well laid out. The nature of the institutional challenge that it posed to the BPR regime is pointed out, as is its catalyzing effect for the eight or so other states that built tollways between 1941 and 1955. The description of the development and of the New Orleans highway revolt is similarly successful. This case is effective evidence of the general effects of displacement of people in highway construction, and how difficult it was and is for a popular movement to prevail against the power of the highway construction machine.

Some of the key planks that brought the highway coalition behind the BPR system are laid bare. These themes continue to be important in the national transportation scene and include: a partnership allowing the BPR (later the Federal Highway Administration) to administer standards and the majority of the funds and the state highway departments to design, construct, and operate the highways; an image of highway engineering as an apolitical science; and a willingness to compromise when compromise is needed to achieve greater goals. The early development of these themes remains relatively unexplored however. The book provides some insight into the nature of the highway coalition, its motivations, and its significance. However, its origins too are not developed, which is a flaw, because its impetus, and the dynamic of its success are critical to putting it into a proper historical context.

Extended character sketches are frequently used to help put an individual's role in a historical process or event in context. Discussion of the motivations that set these actors in motion and the complexity of the tactics they employed is sometimes weak though. For example, Thomas McDonald's critical role in creating the BPR system hegemony is made clear enough. However, McDonald is characterized as an apolitical technocrat of complete propriety and integrity motivated by the conviction that road building was the highest of moral purposes. This was essentially his public image, and is not enough to illuminate the man or his inner drives. Clearly personal glory and power can supplement public service in compensating for the absence of substantial financial gain in an enterprise such as McDonald's. McDonald was a highly strategic political actor who achieved great success as a deal maker and a propagandist. Ready to argue in the face of strong evidence contrary to his positions,

McDonald clearly used misleading and obfuscating tactics when it could advance his ends, and these are not much explored.[2] This pattern is repeated for other key figures such as Francis DuPont and Lucius Clay, figures whose intimate ties to the road coalition and personal involvement with General Motors require an exploration of the relationship between transportation investment and private gain that is simply not developed in this book.

Highway politics are outlined, but the significant elements of boosterism, the advancement of land speculation, and the pursuit of financial advantage are not explored in any depth. This is one tie-in to US transportation history in general that would have helped readers put the highway program in a fuller context. The discussion of highway finance provides a useful summary of the general institutional framework of revenue collection and resource distribution. The sheltering and heavy subsidization of the trucking industry from the early days of the highway program are given short shrift, but the outlines of the highway trust fund system and fuel tax based user fee structure are provided. Many nuances are lost, however. For example, in correctly identifying the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1973 as a significant step in opening federal transportation funds to mass transit investments, it states that: "Cities might also decide not to build a portion of their urban interstate and use the money for mass transportation instead." Yes, they might, but to do so required the replacement of allocated highway funds with congressional appropriations from the general fund, with the eschewed highway funds reverting to the highway trust fund.[3] This is significant, because the hurdle remained higher than the book indicates.

As far as the transformation of American life goes, the book provides some points that will benefit its audience. These include the safety and mobility benefits that the Interstate Highway System brought to blacks and women, the organizing impulse the highway system provided to much of the commercial edifice of franchise restaurants and chain stores that surrounds daily life, and a short discussion of Sunbelt migration. On other essential points, the book is less insightful. Discussion of changing travel patterns and urban form are examples. These discussions tend to consist of simple statements of well known trends accompanied by generalizations about how people deal with them on a personal level. The historical significance, the institutional implications, and the changing distribution of people and resources are not clearly tied in.

While the book sets out to explain how highways, cars, and public policy have transformed travel patterns and shipping, it does not build a clear picture of what it was that was changed, how these changes transpired, or what the changes meant. It adequately characterizes early non-urban road conditions, but gives insufficient attention to railroads and urban streetcars. It seems difficult, for example, to put trucking in an appropriate historical context without adequate attention to its competitive dynamics with rail freight. This in turn requires considering the Interstate Commerce Commission's crippling power to review and approve any change in rail shipping prices and the bitter enmity long felt in many sectors of society towards the railroads.[4] Another point is that defining itself as what the railroads were not seems to have been an important element in the identity of the highway coalition as it emerged from its early years. The significance of these aspects of the story for transportation and history in general is not well developed.

Neither is the historical significance of the urban streetcar networks and their demise well developed. Like automobiles and highways, streetcars had enabled major transformations of urban form and urban realities, but the parallel is not explored here. Very little is in fact said on urban transport of people prior to the spread of automobiles. To put it simply, discussions of change generally need a before and after, and the before in this case remains obscure.

All of this makes for a book that will entertain and provide useful perspectives to its audience on some levels, and leave them with cloudy or inadequately contextualized points on others. For that reason, it should be read with an eye towards supplemental readings listed in the bibliography. *Divided Highways* leaves its readers with the truism that the highway system holds a sort of mirror to the society that reflects its changing circumstances and identity, good and bad, warts and all. It is what we wanted, with all the uncertainties that that implies. It reflects who we have been, and who we are becoming, Lewis seems to say. This is all well and good, but in and of itself, it does not reveal that much about what its significance might be.

Notes:

[1]. Timothy Egan, *The Nation: Dreams of Fields; The New Politics Of Urban Sprawl*. New York: New York Times. Sunday November 15, 1998.

[2]. Stephen B. Goddard, *Getting There: The Epic Struggle between Road and Rail in the American Century*.

New York: Basic Books. 1994.

[3]. Edward Weiner, *Urban Transportation Planning In the United States: An Historical Overview Fifth Edition* . Travel Model Improvement Program: September 1997_. <http://www.bts.gov/tmip/papers/history/utp/toc.htm>

[4]. Goddard, Ibid.

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