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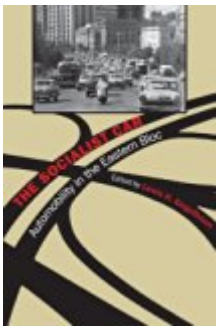
Lewis H. Siegelbaum, ed.. *The Socialist Car: Automobility in the Eastern Bloc.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011. vii + 242 pp. $24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8014-7738-6.



Reviewed by Zachary Doleshal

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Sixty-two years ago, Simone de Beauvoir observed that asking what is a woman is to ask what man is not. The implication was, of course, that woman was understood as the "other" sex, the aberration from the male. The contributors to *The Socialist Car: Automobility in the Eastern Bloc* take on a similar problem as they try to disentangle socialist automobility from its Western, normalized, counterpart. Defining a "second world" car culture, however, appears to be no easy task, as the diversity of the Eastern Bloc takes the authors through a variety of experiences that often seem incongruent with the concept of a shared automobility across the bloc. Certainly, editor and eminent Soviet historian Lewis Siegelbaum, the major architect behind the conceptualization of a "socialist car," sees the complexity of the project in that "the Eastern Bloc's version of automobility both replicated and departed from Western standards" (p. 13). Siegelbaum recognizes the departures common among those behind the Iron Curtain, such as spot fines, dismissal of seatbelts, and self-maintenance, as strong enough to have created a world for the socialist car. In addition to Siegelbaum's compelling and lucid argument for a socialist automobility are the findings of the other contributors. Their assessments leave any meaningful definition of socialist automobility very much in doubt, at least for this reviewer.

On the one hand, contributors' compelling explorations into the car system(s) of the Eastern Bloc convincingly demonstrate certain themes of a socialist automobility. Eli Rubin's fascinating conceptualization of the Trabant in "Understanding the Car in the Context of a System" and Brigitte Le Normand's study of the urban planners of Belgrade in "Between Urban Planner, Market, and Motorist," provide evidence of an experience marked by shortages, corruption, and a general failure of the state to meet the demands of a car-hungry people. Indeed, in nearly all of the eleven chapters, alternative ideas about ways to use the automobile--chiefly car sharing--meet with failure in the face of public interest, shortage of funds, or shoddy design.

Yet, the contributors' essays do much to undermine the concept of a socialist car through careful attention to local contexts. Instead of a clearly drawn socialist car, we see in Valentina Fava's "The Elusive People's Car" how postwar Czechoslovak technicians did not really change their approach to production and relied heavily on Western technology. Fava finds differences in marketing and distribution, but not manufacturing. The aforementioned Rubin, though, sees the Trabant as "a microcosm of the socialist planned economy and its southeastern German industrial heartland" (p. 125). Rubin conceives of the iconic East German car as quintessentially socialist, as it was a piece to a larger system of movement (*Bewegungssystem*). The Trabant's plastic body and two-stroke engine came from the specific political and historical context of East Germany. At least at Marzahn, the utopian housing settlement in far northeast Berlin that Rubin investigates here, the Trabant was "a manifestation of the various mechanisms at work in the socialist planned economy" (p. 138). Also looking at East Germany, Kurt Möser identifies "tinkering" as one of the key characteristics of GDR (German Democratic Republic) car culture. He finds that the key difference with the West was that modifications came "from below, not by a Sloanistic industry" (p. 169).

Conversely, Mariusz Jastrzab's "Cars as Favors in People's Poland" fascinatingly illustrates the ways Polish officials used cars to create patronage networks "and to earn dollars on car exports" (p. 46). Instead of trying to find a way to fit the car into a socialist model, Polish officials and a car-hungry public largely embraced Western conceptions of car use. Like Jastrzab, Gyorgy Péteri's excellent essay, "Alternative Modernity: Everyday Practices of Elite Mobility, 1956-1980," demonstrates the corruption in the distribution model of the socialist car. Péteri though, goes further than any of the other contributors in showing the razor-thin acceptance of a distinctly socialist use of the car by highlighting the cold reception to Khruschev's conception of public automobiles among elite Hungarian Party members. Furthermore, Péteri illustrates that conceptions of how to use and design the car were thoroughly Western. Péteri's insights into Hungary therefore particularly cloud the idea of a socialist car.

The conception of a socialist car gets even fuzzier when former Yugoslavia is included. While this is certainly not surprising given non-aligned socialism, Le Normand finds that urban planners at least initially backed a socialist notion of automobility. Yet, Le Normand argues, the motorists who "embraced a more autonomous, individualistic notion of the automobile" won out, which meant that Belgrade became a city where "the logic of the market overruled official notions of the common good" (p. 103). Le Normand admits that this outcome was unique to Yugoslavia.

This leaves us with the question, did the socialist car system differ enough from the West, and have enough in common among cultures in the East, that we may conceptualize of it as its own way of automobility? Luminita Gatejel certainly thinks so. Her essay "The Common Heritage of the Socialist Car Culture" makes a strong argument that car culture, at least in the three countries under her purview, the GDR, Romania, and the Soviet Union, "was both genuine and socialist" (p. 156). Her argument rests on the idea that the "paradoxes and complications that mass motorization brought about in the Eastern Bloc countries" are what defines the socialist car (p. 155). This is certainly what Siegelbaum has in mind with this collection, "that understanding is derived from the notion ... that what the Eastern Bloc ideologues aspired to was an 'alternative modernity'" (p. 6). Yet, as Fava's, Péteri's, Le Normand's, and Jastrzab's essays illustrate, the state planners' notions of an alternative modernity were often compromised by their own personal desires. What seems to define socialist automobility then, is the states' inability to meet demand, official corruption, and makeshift mechanics. These appear to have been widely variable depending

on the gender of the driver--as Corinna Kuhr-Korolev illustrates in her chapter "Women and Cars in Soviet and Russian Society"--the status of the driver, and the location of the driver within the Eastern Bloc. Perhaps Siegelbaum's conceptualization hoped for a Beauvorian resolution between the Western and socialist versions of automobility and that soon "recognizing each other as subject, each will remain an other for the other."[1] Instead, this reviewer found the diversity of essays in this collection to present a kaleidoscopic picture resistant to notions of a singular automobility.

Though the definition of a socialist car may be stretched thinly over the diverse landscape of Eastern, Central, and Southeastern Europe in this collection, the attempt to follow such a definition is certainly rewarding. The essays are of a high standard and together provide us with an excellent resource for car cultures under twentieth-century socialist regimes. Of particular interest for H-German, Rubin's essay on the Trabant is worth the admission ticket alone. Hopefully, a monograph will come of it. In sum, this would make an excellent addition to any reading list concerned with modern Eastern Europe, material culture, and automobility.

Note

[1]. Simone de Beauvoir, ***The Second Sex*** (New York: Knopf, 1989), 767.