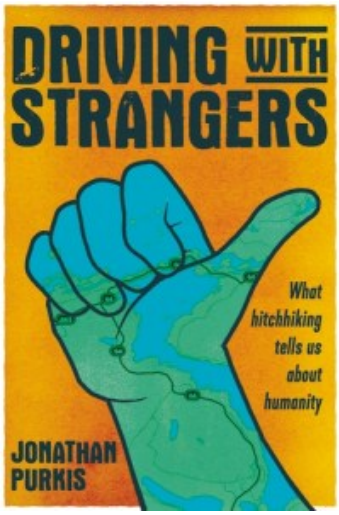
Book Review: Driving With Strangers: What Hitchhiking Tells Us about Humanity by Jonathan Purkis

In **Driving With Strangers: What Hitchhiking Tells Us about Humanity**, **Jonathan Purkis** *argues that the nature of hitchhiking and its place in the world has important things to tell us both about who we are and who we might be. This hopeful book suggests that if we could harness the mutuality and generosity brought to the forefront during the COVID-19 pandemic into a political movement, we might find ourselves hitchhiking again, writes* **Tim Newburn**.

This blogpost originally appeared on LSE Review of Books. If you would like to contribute to the series, please contact the managing editor of LSE Review of Books, Dr Rosemary Deller, at lsereviewofbooks@lse.ac.uk.

***Driving With Strangers: What Hitchhiking Tells Us about Humanity*. Jonathan Purkis. Manchester University Press. 2021.**



Though I am likely a few years older than Jonathan Purkis, like him I started hitchhiking in my teens. Along British roads in the mid- to late-1970s, such activity was far from uncommon. It was cheap, of course, fairly easy to do, so long as you were patient, and was a mix of the exhilarating and the deeply tedious. However, other than being a considerable source of stories of people met, conversations had and disasters narrowly averted, it was not something to which I gave a great deal of thought at the time.

Not so for Purkis. He's made from different stuff and his relationship with hitchhiking, sustained for much longer than mine, is a source of considerable contemplation and inquiry. As the subtitle of *Driving with Strangers* indicates, this is a book in which the author wants to suggest that the nature of hitchhiking, and its place in the world, has some important things to tell us both about who we are and who we might be.

Though we only hear about it late in the book, Purkis's story – very much in line with C. Wright Mill's prescription that the task of the sociologist is to link private troubles with public issues – originates in a period of particular vulnerability for him and his recognition that he needed to make changes in his life. From this period of reflection, he began to draw a range of lessons about the power of community, of conversation between strangers and of the importance of trust and generosity. All of these he links to the nature of hitchhiking and to the character of those who are seriously committed to it.

His approach he describes as 'vagabond sociology', though it is not entirely clear what this really is. If all it means is a sociologist who wanders from place to place, then the concept is of little utility. If, as I feel is implied but never fully spelt out, it means that the wandering practitioner brings something different to the craft of sociology, this is of much greater interest – and scholars from Walter Benjamin to Georg Simmel and beyond might usefully have made an appearance in this volume as a consequence.

What we have here seems in part like a form of participant observation, but one that also places significant emphasis on personal biography – albeit in both cases contemplation about method is kept to a minimum. In many respects greater sociological reflection would have been welcome. Echoes of many a long-established sociological lesson are to be found throughout the book. Different readers will see different things. For me, and as just one example, I kept coming back to Erving Goffman's work, and especially that on the 'presentation of self' and on 'interaction rituals', and what they might offer in helping frame and analyse much of what is reported in *Driving with Strangers*.

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In the heart of the book Purkis uses his own history and reminiscences, together with those he has collected from around the globe, to reflect on mobility, on transience and the values of the modern world. In some respects, the rise and fall of hitchhiking is a story of modern times. It is a product of the automobile age, emerging in the early twentieth century. The Great Depression of the 1930s left large numbers of people impoverished; for those searching for a better life, like the Joads in John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, the only answer was to take to the road. A more romantic version of such mobility emerged from Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and the idealism of the Hippy Trail. Indeed, it was arguably in the midst of the anti-establishment vibe of the sixties that hitchhiking had its heyday in the West. Simpler times perhaps. Less cynical times certainly.

The period since appears to have witnessed a fairly rapid and sustained decline in hitchhiking. Why have people with cardboard signs at motorway sliproads become much less common? The answer sketched here runs through a variety of factors, from the growing ubiquity of the motor car – so many more people now have access to them – through to the growing selfishness and individualism characteristic of neoliberalism. At heart, Purkis puts it down to shifts in relation to 'trust' in late modern times and to linked fears about both our personal and ontological security.

As the blurb indicates, *Driving with Strangers* is in some ways also a manifesto. The decline of hitchhiking leads to a lengthy consideration not only of how forms of trust might be re-established, but also what role hitchhiking might play in the creation and maintenance of a range of positive social values. If this sounds idealistic to you, then you wouldn't be wrong. This reflects Purkis's general outlook – he's an anarchist at heart – and he clearly shares a broad standpoint with many of those who seem to be at the forefront of hitchhiking culture. That those who are heavily invested in such activity (what he describes as 'hitchhiking-type people') are also keen environmentalists and tend to shun or are highly critical of many aspects of modern capitalism, shouldn't come as a surprise.

The hope expressed in *Driving with Strangers* is that the continuing presence of young hitchhikers – long before middle age when most of us, including Purkis himself, appear to give it up – and others who share their general outlook means an alternative future remains possible. Though the capacity-building and political re-imagining that Purkis would like to see emerge seems almost unrealisable in these conflictual and alienating times, we should not forget the mutuality and generosity that were brought to the forefront of everyday life during the COVID-19 pandemic. If that could be harnessed in a political movement, we might even find ourselves hitchhiking again.

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