

Book Review: The Car-Dependent Society: A European Perspective

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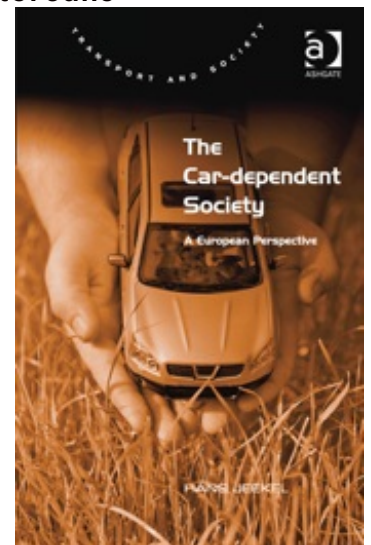
*Are our modern lifestyles possible without cars? Using data from Western Europe, this book examines frequent car use, car dependence, and the future of passenger car mobility in societies. **Carlos Carrasco Farré** recommends this read to urbanists, sociologists and those interested in the ways we interact and rely upon technology.*



The Car-Dependent Society: A European Perspective. Hans Jeekel. Ashgate. June 2013.

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Cars are essential for many in modern Western societies. For example, the car mobility growth between 1995 and 2006 for Belgium was 12 per cent, for France 13 per cent, for Norway 19 per cent, for the United Kingdom 12 per cent and for Finland 24 per cent. This is a unique situation in history, but one that does not get much attention since car use is seen as just a normal part of our everyday lives. Despite knowing the grim environmental and safety risks that come with regular car use – transport worldwide is responsible for 14 per cent of the global CO2 emissions, with 76 per cent of these emissions coming from road transport – we continue to keep driving. In *The Car-Dependent Society*, [Hans Jeekel](#) (Eindhoven University of Technology) uses data from Western Europe to examine three key themes: frequent car use, car dependence, and the future of passenger car mobility in societies.



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Jeekel paints a broad and comprehensive picture on frequent car use and on car dependence, its driving forces, its problems and its perspectives. The book not only covers the Dutch situation, but takes a broader perspective and analyses the picture in Germany, the UK, France, Switzerland, Flanders, Sweden and the Netherlands. The focus is placed on the social and cultural aspects of car mobility, making the book perfect for those not trained in statistics and more involved in sociological and cultural research. Jeekel works from a broad conceptual framework, bringing in all sorts of relevant literature: he introduces some relevant theories such as the [mobilities approach of Urry](#), the [time geography of Hagerstrand](#), and the [commons approach of Ostrom](#).

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The book is structured around four central concepts. The first one is car dependence and its different definitions. As Jeekel states, some authors define car dependence as synonymous with a high degree of car use. The point is that although the degree of car use is an important indicator, the author thinks it is an incomplete indicator: “dependence has a relationship to lacking alternative, or at least to the perception that alternatives are lacking”. In other words, car use is an indicator of the need for mobility, but not of dependence. The second aspect is the difference between the factual and the perceived car dependence both at personal and at societal level. The third concept is the driving forces behind frequent car use, such as the urban development that disperses activities over greater geographical areas. The final concept is risk society, based on the idea developed by Beck. Our societies are no longer suffering from primarily external risks such as disasters and diseases, but man-made risks are starting to dominate and these risks are “embedded” in the expanding patterns of modern life. Modern western risk societies are presented and the relationship between those characteristics and frequent car use are explored. To further explain these issues, figures and facts from a number of European countries are presented.

With these four concepts, Jeekel tries to answer five central questions: (1) What is the current situation on car use in Western Europe? (2) Which driving forces, and which big societal stories can be seen as responsible for frequent car user? (3) What is the current situation of car dependence, and which persons and activities are more car dependent? (4) Which problems and perspectives related to frequent car use and car dependence can be seen in Western Europe in the near future? (5) Is, in the light of questions 3 and 4, a form of governance necessary and which form could such governance take?



OstAutobahn A4, near Bruck an der Leitha. Credit: [sejanc](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

question 2, Jeekel identifies car use as a result of many individual attitudes and decisions. These attitudes and decisions are elements in societal contexts that stimulate car use, but they remain individual choices. He identifies five motives for car use: convenience, flexibility, protection, freedom and habit. Those individual choices are heavily influenced by societal characteristics such as the urge for flexibility, geographical spreading out of activities, expectations in the social sphere or fears and vulnerability. In fact, the car is indispensable in reaching the level of flexibility considered normal by many in modern societies. As Jeekel notes “the car organizes production and consumption, and the car helps us to be able to keep consuming, an essential demand in our societies”. That production and consumption organization is the reason why people without a car (and their households) will miss chances and opportunities, bringing us to the next point.

Another part of the book I found interesting is Chapter 6. In modern western societies, some 20 per cent of households do not drive or do not own cars. This chapter analyses who these car-less households are and how they cope with living without a car. The author writes that the price of driving, especially for poorer households, and the social exclusion that it creates is a big problem but receives little policy and media attention. With increasing prices for fuel and vehicles, an even bigger part of household budgets will have to be spent on mobility, putting poorer households in an even more difficult situation. Having difficulties with mobility then goes on to negatively impact our access to shops, health care, work and services. This is an issue that receives little attention in our comprehensive welfare states, argues Jeekel. With the focus of transport discussions revolving around congestion, the author writes that “mobility policy in our western risk societies is essentially policy for the middle classes”.

From the point of view of urbanism, Jeekel points out something key relating to space: the trend towards building new highway locations should be reversed. Restructuring existing areas would be wiser than creating new businesses and housing areas, while letting older and poorer areas lose their identities and positives. These changes will lead to less car dependent societies, raising the quality of life and hence accessibility for carless and poorer households. Some will say that this is easier said than done, but Jeekel points where to start. This book is recommended for those interested in how the world’s growing population will attempt to face one of its biggest challenges.

Carlos Carrasco Farré is a researcher at IESE Business School “Cities in Motion Strategies” and analyst at Planol.info. Carlos holds a BA in Political Science from Pompeu Fabra University and a MSc in Public and Social Policy from Pompeu Fabra University and Johns Hopkins University. He also took some courses at the LSE and Bloomberg School of Public Health at Johns Hopkins. He has previously worked as consultant for several local governments and for the economic development agency of Barcelona. [Read more reviews by Carlos.](#)

