

David Rooney, *Spaces of Congestion and Traffic: Politics and Technologies in Twentieth-Century London* (London and New York, Routledge, 2019), 221pp., £96.00, ISBN 978-1-138-58073-2 (Hbk)/£36.99, ISBN 978-0-367-58790-1 (Pbk)

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London has never solved its traffic problem. Since the start of the twentieth century, average weekday vehicular speeds have doggedly remained about ten to twelve miles per hour. Yet, as David Rooney demonstrates in this excellent new book, the traffic problem itself has proved far more protean. Against whom, and to what detriment, traffic congestion was seen to operate shifted considerably over the century, as different professional agencies, civic authorities and academic disciplines fought over its discursive meanings and the appropriate mechanisms with which to resolve it. Rooney's book skillfully recovers these debates in all their complexity. By pushing the usual suspects, such as Patrick Abercrombie and Colin Buchanan, firmly into the margins, he provides a compelling and productively multi-layered account, in which mechanical engineers, software designers, police commissioners, research institutes and property developers become as visionary and influential as the city's canonical town planners.

To untangle these complexities in greater detail, Rooney settles on a series of case-study faultlines or pinpointed moments when understandings of traffic congestion were destabilized and became once more up for grabs. Informed by Actor Network Theory, but wearing it lightly across his pages, he dissects how certain values, ideologies, and professional practices intersected with particular technologies or bits of infrastructure, to redefine the traffic problem, with varying degrees of durability. Some of these discussions are quite dazzling. An early chapter on the Silvertown Way (1934), for instance, which elevated

six lines of traffic over the East End's crowded Canning Town and set it down again in the Royal Victoria Dock, cleverly unpicks the disciplinary ascendancy of highway engineering, the poetics of concrete, and the reconfiguration of imperial spectacle. Named to invoke Mussolini's recent Via dell'Impero in Rome, this first UK flyover became a symbolic and syntagmatic link between the free passage of motor vehicles and the free flow of goods and materials by which London was reimagined to exist as the heart of a reformed Empire. Another fascinating case study explores the Pimlico Precinct implemented by Westminster Council in 1967. Here, an elegant grid of Georgian terraces was submitted to a labyrinthine system of one-way streets, widened footpaths and parking bays, to force cars out of its conduits and back onto the congested main roads around its edge. Rooney thus shows the false logic in naïvely equating traffic congestion with unproductive waste. In Pimlico, as elsewhere in London, congestion was quietly engineered back into the environment, to improve the area's amenity to middle-class gentrifiers and solicit the investment capital of speculative developers.

A major narrative within Rooney's book is the historic shift from earlier perceptions of congestion as the result of poor planning to one that diagnosed traffic jams as a failure of the market. An especially useful chapter traces the evolution of road pricing in Britain, from the ideas of economists and statisticians in the 1950s, through neoliberal orthodoxies of the 1970s, and onto its final implementation, in the guise of an environmental pollution tax, as the Congestion Charge in 2003. This endpoint, of course, falls outside Rooney's purview as a historian of the twentieth century, and so this chapter lacks the kind of grounded untangling of infrastructure, technology and place that he gives us elsewhere. But in recovering an important and neglected discursive lineage, he still has much to offer historians of transport. Equally good is his chapter on the West London Traffic Experiment of the late-1960s. This cybernetic system relayed a network of under-road electronic sensors to a mainframe

computer and modelling software, to automatically detect and correct congestion as it congealed within real time. This marked the ascendancy, Rooney argues, of a further definition of traffic congestion – that as a failure of modelling and information processing. It also came with particular social effects, as the benevolent CCTV cameras that ostensibly monitored London’s traffic were swiftly co-opted by the Metropolitan Police for the covert surveillance of public order.

Not everything in Rooney’s book sticks perfectly. A chapter on the traffic-management strategies of Herbert Alker Tripp, the traffic-control tsar at the Metropolitan Police during the 1930s, goes a little too far in its reading of the pedestrian guard rails that he saw installed along the East India Dock Road in 1936. Rooney usefully traces the influence of American traffic-control techniques on Tripp’s thinking, including strategies of population segregation that had been developed in US cities to racially police black neighbourhoods. Yet Rooney’s conclusion that London guard rails were, therefore, “racist” (203) is a bit too swift, and would have benefitted from tighter historical evidence about local East End pedestrians and the impact of these guard rails upon them. But this is a minor niggle about an otherwise excellent book that both successfully challenges us to rethink the traffic problem, and brings to light many forgotten and important episodes in the history of London’s highways.

(802 words)