Eisenhower, Hitler, Jan and Dean, J. G. Ballard, Ralph Nader, OPEC, and, of course, cars, all come into play in this wide-ranging but remarkably wry and perky book. A dazzling display of erudition, Autophobia is cultural commentary at its most compelling, history at its most searching—and a surprising page-turner.

BRIAN LADD received his Ph.D. in history from Yale University and has taught at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and the University at Albany (SUNY). He is also the author of The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape.
they weren't caught in traffic), and they emitted no exhaust fumes. Even the new diesel buses that came into use during the 1930s spewed stinking smoke, and their engines were far from silent. But the nostalgia for smooth, quiet, comfortable streetcar rides departs from the reality of the 1920s and 1930s, when streetcars were in fact widely unpopular. It forgets the squealing of metal wheels and the queasy sway of crowded cars lurching around corners. And that was not the worst of it. Lingering Victorian morality, which feared wafting miasmas carrying moral as well as physical decrepitude, was apparent in a 1913 Los Angeles newspaper account of a streetcar ride: “Inside the air was a pestilence; it was heavy with disease and the emanations from many bodies. Anyone leaving this working mass, anyone coming into it . . . force[s] the people into still closer, still more indecent, still more immoral contact. A bishop embraced a stout grandmother, a tender girl touched limbs with a city sport, refined women’s faces burned with shame and indignation—but there was no relief.” One can scarcely imagine a more urgent plea to flee the streetcar for an automobile, as millions did in the following years.

Electric streetcars predated automobiles, if only by a few years. Although they provided remarkably efficient transportation, they were also, like automobiles, a frightening menace on the streets, a fact that was soon forgotten amid the flood of motorcars. More fateful, it soon became clear that streetcars and automobiles coexisted awkwardly at best in busy city streets. Collisions between them were common, as were even deadlier accidents in which embarking or disembarking streetcar passengers were struck by cars, just as motorists getting in and out of their cars were vulnerable to passing trams. For better or worse, hardly anyone before the 1970s thought of banning automobiles from the streetcars’ paths, whereas traffic planners and civic leaders clamored for the removal of streetcars. They could, after all, be replaced by more maneuverable buses, if not by underground railways that would entirely remove mass transit from the street.

The technological limitations of streetcars were probably less of a problem than the economic circumstances in which the streetcar operators were working. Riders mistrusted companies they saw (with good reason) as greedy monopolists. Unpleasant rides in crowded cars reinforced their wish to escape from the monopolists’ clutches as soon as possible. Already in the 1920s most American streetcar systems were losing passengers. Cities typically required the private franchises to operate on certain routes. In the face of declining ridership, the companies, which often were forbidden to raise fares, of course reduced the number of operating cars, thus maintaining traffic. As a result, the country was left to the prospects of the people who would prosper and those who would not. Into this milieu, unlike the one that had led to the combustion engine, one could scarcely imagine a more urgent plea to flee the streetcar for an automobile, as millions did in the following years.

In Europe, the automobile was manageable only by the beginning of the 20th century. The street railways and tramways of the 1960s were already in decline. If Europe had the organizing principle for streetcars, it was the automobile. The combination of economic and social theory, with the recent arrival of the automobile in Paris, revolutionized the role of the streetcar.
o exhaust fumes. Even the 1930s spewed stink. But the nostalgia for the reality of the y unpopularity. It forgets the crowded cars burh it. Lingering Victorian moral as well as phys- es newspaper account it was heavy with dis- ine leaving this work-people into still closer. A bishop embraced a city sport, refined — but there was no re- to flee the streetcar years.

The decline of the streetcar predated, outlasted, and far exceeded the alleged conspiracy. Streetcars were the old technology, compared to motor buses. Americans were buying cars in large numbers in the 1920s; they were moving to new low-density suburbs not served by trolleys; they were shopping at new auto-accessible plazas. The fixed tracks in the streets impeded the flow of cars, whereas buses could share the road space more efficiently. Even without the private franchises typical of the U.S., streetcars nearly disappeared from many other countries as well, including most of Latin America, Australia, New Zealand, India, Japan, Korea, China, Britain, France, Spain, and Italy. If there was a conspiracy, it was far bigger than General Motors and Standard Oil. The fact that highway interests had demanded the abolition of tramways since the 1920s certainly influenced the climate of opinion in many places, but so did the daily tussle of streetcar and automobile."

In Europe, unlike the U.S., near-universal car ownership was conceiv- able only in the 1960s, and by then the disillusionment with the car was beginning to set in. Although many European cities dismantled their street railways (as early as the 1930s in Paris, among other cities), by the 1960s they were investing in other transit improvements, such as subways. If Europeans had less reason to be nostalgic about mass transit, there was still talk of the French trams having been the victim of an "automobile lobby." The less elaborate French version of the conspiracy theory, widely shared among Parisian intellectuals in the 1970s, was that the recently deceased President Georges Pompidou had headed a cabal of economic and bureaucratic interests that forced freeways on a reluctant Parisian populace. As in the U.S., critics had forgotten how willing the populace had been, just a few years before. They pointed an accusing

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30. This is the argument presented in Ted Balaker and Sam Staley, The Road More Traveled: Why the Congestion Crisis Matters More Than You Think, and What We Can Do about It (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).


32. Quoted in Mark S. Foster, A Nation on Wheels: The Automobile Culture in America since 1945 (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson, 2003), 18.


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