CAR TROUBLES
This page has been left blank intentionally
Car Troubles
Critical Studies of Automobility and Auto-Mobility

JIM CONLEY
Trent University, Canada
and
ARLENE TIGAR McLAREN
Simon Fraser University, Canada

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK
Contents

List of Figures vii
List of Tables ix
Contributors xi
Acknowledgements xiii

Introduction 1
Jim Conley and Arlene Tigaran McLaren

PART 1: CULTURES OF AUTOMOBILITY

1 T-Bucket Terrors to Respectable Rebels: Hot Rodders and Drag Racers in Vancouver BC, 1948–1965 21
Catharine Genovese

2 Automobile Advertisements: The Magical and the Mundane 37
Jim Conley

3 SUV Advertising: Constructing Identities and Practices 59
Fiona McLean

4 Bad Impressions: The Will to Concrete and the Projectile Economy of Cities 77
Derek Simons

PART 2: RISK AND REGULATION

5 The Safety Race: Transitions to the Fourth Age of the Automobile 95
David MacGregor

6 Implementing Restraint: Automobile Safety and the US Debate over Technological and Social Fixes 111
Jameson M. Wetmore

7 ‘Mind That Child’: Childhood, Traffic and Walking in Automobilized Space 127
Damian Collins, Catherine Bean and Robin Kearns
PART 3: INEVITABLE AUTOMOBILITY?

8  The Politics of Mobility: De-essentializing Automobility and Contesting Urban Space  
   Jason Henderson  
   147

9  The Chilean Way to Modernity: Private Roads, Fast Cars, Neoliberal Bodies  
   Ricardo Trumper and Patricia Tomic  
   165

10 Driven to Drive: Cars and the Problem of ‘Compulsory Consumption’  
   Dennis Soron  
   181

PART 4: BEYOND THE CAR

11 Mobility as a Positional Good: Implications for Transport Policy and Planning  
   Todd Litman  
   199

12 The Global Intensification of Motorization and Its Impacts on Urban Social Ecologies  
   George Martin  
   219

13 Post-Car Mobilities  
   Kingsley Dennis and John Urry  
   235

Index  
   253
# List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Incentives and Related Primary Textual or Visual Elements of Car Ads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Economy and Related Primary Textual or Visual Elements of Car Ads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Volvo XC70 2.5T Reproduced by Permission of Volvo Cars of Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>Excitement and Related Primary Textual or Visual Elements of Car Ads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Luxury and Related Primary Textual or Visual Elements of Car Ads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>Status and Dominance and Related Primary Textual or Visual Elements of Car Ads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Hemlock Street Overpass, Vancouver, BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>The Transit Détente in Atlanta. Based on ARC 2004a, 2004b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>Pension Funds and Highways, 2005 – Billboard on Highway 68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>Wealth and Happiness. Based on Stutz 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>Sustainable Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>Mode Split in Selected European Cities. Based on ADONIS 1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>Suburban Location Prestige Shifts Consumer Decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>Travel Demand Curve</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This page has been left blank intentionally
List of Tables

3.1 List of Magazines Used in Advertisement Search and Analysis 73
7.1 Perceived Benefits of Routine Walking for School Travel 134
9.1 Toll City Highways 176
11.1 Summary of Positional Value Travel Impacts 210
11.2 Summary of Costs of Vehicle Travel 211
12.1 World Motor Vehicle Production, Total, and Distribution, 1994, 2005 220
12.2 World Motor Vehicle Registrations, Total and Per 1,000 People, 1994, 2004 221
This page has been left blank intentionally
Contributors

Catherine Bean, School of Geography, Geology and Environmental Science, University of Auckland

Damian Collins, Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences, University of Alberta

Jim Conley, Department of Sociology, Trent University

Kingsley Dennis, Department of Sociology, Lancaster University

Catharine Genovese, Department of History, Simon Fraser University

Jason Henderson, Department of Geography, San Francisco State University

Robin Kearns, School of Geography, Geology and Environmental Science, University of Auckland

Todd Litman, Executive Director, Victoria Transport Policy Institute

David MacGregor, Department of Sociology, University of Western Ontario

Arlene Tigar McLaren, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Simon Fraser University

Fiona McLean, Coordinator, Car Fuel Efficiency Campaign, Friends of the Earth Europe, Brussels

George Martin, Department of Sociology, Montclair State University

Derek Simons, School of Communication, Simon Fraser University

Dennis Soron, Department of Sociology, Brock University

Patricia Tomic, Department of Sociology, University of British Columbia, Okanagan

Ricardo Trumper, Department of Sociology, University of British Columbia, Okanagan
John Urry, Department of Sociology, Lancaster University

Jameson M. Wetmore, School of Human Evolution and Social Change, Arizona State University
Acknowledgements

We thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada for supporting the Traffic Safety Project from its inception as a Research Development Initiative in 2004 to the October 2006 symposium entitled “autoConsequences: Automobilization and its Social Implications” held in Vancouver, British Columbia. Simon Fraser University, including the Dean of Graduate Studies and the Dean of Arts, financially contributed to the symposium. We thank John Urry for his interest in the symposium and for serving as the keynote speaker. Colleagues and staff in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at SFU, and particularly the Chair Jane Pulkingham, provided consistent support and encouragement. Arlene is grateful for Jim Conley’s early and continued involvement and the project would not have been possible without the enthusiasm, interest and hard work of graduate students Sylvia Parusel, Lucie Vallières, and Stephen Carley who assisted with the research and the symposium. A special thanks to Sylvia for her unfailingly meticulous assistance and to Margaret Manery for her expert help in finishing the manuscript. We thank Jean Wilson and Melissa Pitts for their encouragement and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful and constructive criticism on earlier versions of the text. We are grateful to Margaret Grieco, series editor at Ashgate, for her interest in the text and facilitation of its publication. We appreciate the work and guidance of Val Rose, Jude Chillman and Maureen Mansell-Ward in producing the book.

Arlene thanks friends in Victoria, Vancouver, and London for their love, interest and support as well as her parents, Margaret and Bud Tigar, who first introduced her to the joys of the car at a time when its contradictions were less evident. She is forever grateful to her strongest supporters and critics, Angus and Jesse.

Jim wishes to thank Arlene for organizing the symposium, and inviting him to co-edit this book. He also thanks Jay Owen of Volvo Cars of Canada for so promptly giving permission to use one of their advertisements in his chapter, and Sam Petherbridge of Sharpe Blackmore Euro RSCG for supplying the image. He is grateful to the Department of Sociology at Trent University for providing the flexibility to offer a course in Sociology of the Automobile, and to the students in that course. His late parents, Mike and Millie Conley, showed that it was possible to live without a car in mid-twentieth century Edmonton, thus helping to put him in a position of optimal marginality for a sociologist of automobility. Shelley, Patrick, and Gregory cannot be thanked enough for their love and support.
This page has been left blank intentionally
Introduction

Jim Conley and Arlene Tigar McLaren

I suppose you could get all worked up about the wretched excess of the whole thing – but that would be just small minded, wouldn’t it? We’d all have one, or something similar, if we could, wouldn’t we? (English 2008)

So concludes automotive journalist Bob English’s road test of the 2008 Lexus LS600hL Luxury Hybrid Sedan, a car that boasts a base price of $125,400, both a 5.0 litre V8 engine and electric motors, “exterior styling [that] combines that nice touch of elegance and arrogance,” and a “stunning” level of luxury. But would we all want one? This volume challenges the assumption that desire for such an automobile is uncontroversial and natural. At a time when cars are increasingly reliable mechanically, Car Troubles is a multidisciplinary exploration of other kinds of trouble associated with the growing global reach of the automobile.

Automobility and Auto-Mobility

The car in modern societies entails both experience, which we refer to as ‘auto-mobility’ and a system of which it is a part – automobility. For most people the experience of car travel includes the act of driving a car or feelings towards it and implies autonomous, flexible and speedy travel. Yet automobility is a complex and expanding system that makes driving a car possible and even necessary (Paterson 2007). In Urry’s definition, automobility is “the self-organizing, self-generating, non-linear world-wide system of cars, car-drivers, roads, petroleum supplies, and many novel objects, technologies, and signs” (2004, 27).

Paradoxes abound with both auto-mobility and automobility. Anyone who has felt the thrill of speeding along an open road, the irritation of getting stuck in gridlock and the fear of crossing a road as cars barrel towards them knows the automobile as both liberating and constraining. Even in its self-propelled forms such as cycling or walking, auto-mobility is virtually impossible because paths, roads and so on are required (Böhm et al. 2006a; Paterson 2007). In the case of the motor vehicle, the contradictions are more apparent. Autonomous motorized travel depends on the system of automobility to sustain and promote it, while the latter cannot exist without people who need or want auto-mobility. Neither can be reduced to the other and their relation of dependence is the source of consequences and contradictions explored in this volume. Together they encompass an array of interlocking social, cultural, technical, political and economic forces.
By examining the relation between automobility and auto-mobility, this book does not simply highlight the car’s negative consequences. Instead, it problematizes, or troubles the car by considering how and why it is so deeply embedded in social life. Auto dependence for mobility can seem inevitable. Only in crises (oil shortages, failures of infrastructure, chronic congestion, rising fuel prices, economic downturns and so on) does the automobility system that gives rise to and sustains the car become an object of concerted public and media attention.

Rather than assuming essential characteristics of auto-mobility (e.g., that it is inherently an expression of freedom), or that the system of automobility is all-powerful, we suggest it is important to socialize the analysis. In pursing this objective, this volume takes on a range of approaches that includes social theory, specific case studies and/or policy analysis in diverse disciplines (for example, sociology, geography, social and technical studies, environmental science, history, economics, transport policy). Given its iconic status in modern production and consumption and its critical relationship to urban design, the automobile is a particularly fruitful object for multi- and interdisciplinary exploration. New trends in scholarship such as the ‘mobility turn’ in various disciplines (Hannam et al. 2006), work that brings together technical and social studies (Beckmann 2004; Norton 2008), and governmentality and cultural studies that investigate subjectivity (Paterson 2007; Packer 2008), have helped to invigorate the study of automobility.

While interdisciplinarity is crucial for understanding automobility, it is challenging. The theoretical and methodological conventions of one discipline can appear bewildering and unsatisfactory to another. Yet the complexity of automobility, we suggest, requires nothing less than the multi-faceted lens of various disciplines. The traditional separation of technical and social studies, for example, does not suffice for adequate theoretical explanations and strategies for change. Working across disciplines allows for greater insight into how automobility is entangled with material and social life globally and in specific cultural contexts (for example Derek Simons’ chapter brings together insights from Western art history, science and technology).

While this volume is part of a growing chorus of criticism, it places itself in the intersection of the undoubted appeals of auto-mobility and the equally undoubted harms of automobility. Understanding the former is necessary for successful strategies to address the latter. The volume explores the reasons for a critical view of automobility and for its worldwide dominance over other modes of land transport. In this introduction and the book as a whole, we emphasize the recurring car troubles of: environmental unsustainability; economic wastefulness; death and injury; and social dislocations, inequities and exclusions. We also address debates about the economic and cultural power of automobility – why it prevails as a local and global system – and how change may come about in a complex system and politics of automobility.
The Critique of Automobility: Theoretically Troubling the Car

Almost since its inception, some people have found the car troubling. At the beginning of the automobile age in the US, when cars were playthings of the rich, driven too fast, frightening horses and killing pedestrians, class exclusion fuelled critiques (McShane 1995; Norton 2008). The advent of Fordism and the mass production of cheaper vehicles defused the class critique. Crucial to its success in sparsely settled countries such as the United States and Canada, with a less unequal distribution of income than elsewhere (Flink 1988), the automobile originally had much to recommend it relative to the alternatives. Even so, into the 1930s and beyond in the US, cars continued to be disquieting: they allowed youth to circumvent adult controls and social norms; upset established status relations; disrupted and destroyed communities and depopulated small towns; and in cities produced traffic congestion and “the parking problem” (Flink 1988, 151–52; Lynd and Lynd 1929; 1937). After World War II, when mass motorization became highly advanced in North America and Western Europe, a sustained public critique of automobility emerged that focused on American automakers for their shoddy products, manipulation of consumers, and neglect of safety (Keats 1958; Nader 1965). In the 1990s, and closely connected to environmentalism, criticism of automobility accelerated in both popular (e.g., Alvord 2000) and academic publications (Miller 2001a; Featherstone et al. 2005; Böhm et al. 2006a; Paterson 2007).

Recent scholarly interest in the automobile is due to a host of reasons that include its increased production and consumption in developed and developing countries and the gnawing sense of the growing risks and troubles associated with automobile-dominated transportation. The advantages of auto-mobility to individuals and society have become curses in large part because mass motorization produces economic, social, health, environmental, and institutional externalities. That is, the benefits of automobile ownership and use largely accrue to individuals, while the costs of that consumption in the aggregate are borne by society at large (Miller 2001b), and often differentially by specific groups in society (see below). Though drivers or car-owners pay the private costs of automobile use (gas, oil, maintenance, the price of the vehicle itself, insurance), and reap some private benefits (mobility, status, pleasure), they do not pay directly the full costs of the automobility system (including enormous public investment in and maintenance of infrastructure such as roads, bridges and parking spaces, to say nothing of pollution, urban sprawl, and death and injury from traffic collisions) (Freund and Martin 1993). Externalities include in the case of risk and safety, for example, vehicle designs that protect drivers and passengers to the detriment of pedestrians and cyclists (or occupants of smaller vehicles – when people buy big SUVs because they feel safer in them despite the increased risk of rollovers – Bradsher 2002; Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) 2005). Other externalities include institutional entailments necessary for automobile transportation (e.g., the
police, courts, license bureaus and so on that regulate cars and drivers) – returning us once again to automobility as a vast interlocking system.

Yet, those who drive are not separate from externalities: as taxpayers they pay for public (but often hidden) costs of automobility and are non-drivers, if they walk or cycle. Further, the aggregate use of motor vehicles turns their consequences back onto the individual user, as congestion, pollution, risk of injury and so on. As Beck (1992) argues, risks in society often have a boomerang effect: those who contributed to the ill effects also experience them and therefore may be motivated to address the problems. Yet, the question remains of how individuals and groups in society will effect change to reduce the risks.

As C.W. Mills (1959) argued, to advance social change it is critical to demonstrate the links between private troubles and public issues. Yet for many people the car is not a private trouble; it is a solution to private concerns, such as access to jobs, housing, recreation and social status. When the private troubles of automobility have become public issues, the approach usually taken seeks to improve automobility: making cars safer for their occupants; removing dangerous drivers from the roads; and creating technical changes that leave consumption patterns unchanged. In contrast, this volume raises fundamental questions about the viability of the automobility system.

Environmental Unsustainability

Growing worries about the natural environment account for much of the recent upsurge in criticisms of automobile transportation. Environmentalist critics condemn cars for their contributions to global climate change and air and water pollution, their depletion of non-renewable resources, especially oil, and their land use impacts (e.g., Böhm et al. 2006b; Newman and Kenworthy 1999; Paterson 2007). The environmental impacts of automobility form the backdrop to several chapters in this volume (Jason Henderson; Todd Litman; George Martin; Kingsley Dennis and John Urry). Several other chapters more directly address the automobile’s complex and contradictory relation to urban life, the suburbs and cultural images of nature. Both Jim Conley and Fiona McLean document how automobile advertising appropriates images of nature while neglecting the impact of the car on the environment. The automobile has provided a technology for escaping the conditions and consequences of its own production to a romantically conceived nature that, whether it is a pure, pastoral Arcadia, or a harsh, dangerous place of adventure, is accessed and mastered by the same technology that destroys it (Williamson 1978). Paradoxically, growing environmental concerns for nature are in part a product of automobility (Flink 1988; Sachs (1992) including its encroachment as systems of roads and suburbs develop. In light of such contradictions, McLean raises the question of how advertising messages might shift as the industry responds to growing concerns about the contribution of SUVs to climate change.
In contrast to Conley’s and McLean’s cultural analyses, Dennis Soron criticizes environmentalist anti-car politics for neglecting material constraints on individual choice and placing too much responsibility on individual consumers for the evils of auto dominance. In arguing that the consumption of cars is compulsory in automobilized societies, Soron highlights a debate over the priority of material and cultural analyses that runs through this volume.

Economic Waste

To the extent that the production and consumption of automobiles has been an engine of economic growth and a source of well-paying jobs (Paterson 2007), and that possession of an auto industry has been a sign of modernity and source of national pride (Edensor 2004; Garvey 2001; Koshar 2004; Sachs 1992), it is counter-intuitive to base the critique of automobility on economic wastefulness. As Catharine Genovese’s chapter on hot rodders in 1950s Vancouver Canada illustrates, the vast and proliferating auto system afforded a range of mainstream and alternative economic opportunities. Indeed, the very success of automobility as a pervasive system makes it difficult to calculate economic costs and benefits – for example, how policing, health care and other services subsidize automobile travel (cf. Miller 2001a). Yet, using conventional economic reasoning, Litman provides grounds for considering the automobile, in particular as a status symbol, to be economically wasteful. To the degree that auto-mobility and other forms of mobility are prestige goods, and therefore zero-sum, then auto consumption is socially wasteful. By inducing more expenditure on cars than would otherwise occur if it were not a source of status, auto-mobility is an economic trap.

Other chapters also suggest that automobility is economically wasteful (Henderson; Ricardo Trumper and Patricia Tomic). Martin’s analysis of the expansion of automobility in less developed countries implies that one of the ‘advantages of backwardness’, namely the lack of sunk costs in automobile infrastructure, provides the opportunity to spend transportation funds more wisely than more developed countries have.\footnote{In Canada in 2005, 40 percent of the dollar value of government-owned infrastructure consisted of roads and bridges (Roy 2007), a figure that is probably representative of other developed countries.} If these infrastructure costs (roads, bridges, pipelines, oil sands projects) needed to support automobility are also economically wasteful at the societal level, recent failures of the latter (e.g., bridge collapses in Laval, Quebec in 2006 and Minneapolis, Minnesota in 2007) catastrophically illustrate a collision between economic and political logics. More political capital is often to be gained by opening new infrastructure projects, such as freeways, that contribute to urban sprawl and auto dependence, than in repairing and renewing existing infrastructure, and developing better alternatives. At the beginning of 2009, as governments provide bailouts to automakers and consider infrastructure spending to counter a deepening recession, it seems doubtful that, in the short
term at least, a more critical systemic approach to automobility will appear in politics as it has in scholarship. Such an approach suggests that what seem to be simply economic and engineering problems would benefit from a multidisciplinary approach, a lesson also conveyed by a third basis for the critique of automobility.

**Carnage: Death and Injury**

Automobility raises public health issues that range from the health effects of urban sprawl such as the loss of walking space and opportunities for physical exercise in day-to-day life (Freund and Martin 1993) to evidence that automobile pollution has contributed to respiratory ailments and premature death. Public health strategies, for example, include increased land use mix for promoting walking and diminishing car use to reduce problems of obesity (Frank et al. 2004).

Most tragically, however, the public health impact of automobility appears in the form of death and injury in motor vehicle collisions. Approximately 1.2 million people die each year in motor vehicle collisions worldwide, and countless others are injured (Peden et al. 2004). Jain (2004, 61) asks: “What are we to make of this susceptibility to injury and the lack of recognition of this major, but potentially rectifiable public health issue?” While an environmental movement has argued effectively that cars pollute, the safety movement has stalled rather than surged forward. It has maintained a strategy of improving the car, not seeking alternatives to it. Safety only intermittently appears on the radar of public concerns; it remains primarily as a routinized technological, legal or educational issue remote from central political, cultural and social agendas, despite the fact that it is a public health problem, and anything but the accidental result of automobility.

Several chapters explore the cultural, social and technical dimensions of automobile sacrifice and safety. Emphasizing speeding projectiles – artillery shells, locomotives, automobiles – hurtling through concrete, Derek Simons roots the death and mayhem of automobility in a ‘will-to-sacrifice’ located historically in Western culture. While agreeing that a sacrificial urge may be present, David MacGregor shows that states vary in their willingness to regulate individual behaviour or the automobile industry. Even as a safety race is emerging amongst automakers in a new cultural age of the automobile, MacGregor claims, the state must be the major promoter of auto safety. Jameson M. Wetmore’s historical analysis of the air bag demonstrates that safety innovations have multiple sources, including the state, the car industry and other sectors of society. He argues that in the United States safety advocates were most successful when instead of one-sidedly pursuing either ‘technical fixes’ (regulating industry) or ‘social fixes’ (regulating driver behaviour) they distributed responsibility by promoting both simultaneously. Wetmore’s analysis exemplifies the science and technology studies maxim that technical artefacts and social relationships cannot be considered separately. Similarly, Genovese shows how hot rodders, in facing public disquiet and disapproval, sought respectability by adopting safety strategies of both regulating ‘outlaw’ driver behaviour and improving the technical
performance of vehicles. In contrast, in their study of walking school buses in Auckland, New Zealand, Damian Collins, Catherine Bean and Robin Kearns find that adults make child pedestrians responsible for collisions by emphasizing the need to discipline and regulate their behaviour, not that of drivers. Their research supports other literature that considers how traffic safety discourse privileges car-based transportation, ensuring that pedestrians do not impede automobility (Jain 2004; Norton 2008; Vallières 2006).

The debate about safety and the impact of automobility raises the question of how responsibility is allocated and thus of how power is distributed and exercised. How, for example, do neoliberal governments choose to discipline and regulate the ‘responsible agents’ or support transport alternatives to the car (McLaren 2007)? The allocation of responsibility brings us to the social dependencies and externalities of automobility – the contradiction between the individual benefits of car-driving and its social costs.

*Community, Sociability and Inequality*

The individual mobility of auto-mobility forms both part of its appeal and a powerful basis for its critique. Critics of the social implications of automobility have focused on its spatial effects, its relation to excessive individualism and its creation of social inequalities and exclusions of specific populations.

Much of the critical literature of automobility’s spatial effects has centred on cities, in the form of urban sprawl: the hollowing out of central business districts; the dispersion of places of residence, work, leisure and shopping to far-flung suburbs that are difficult to service effectively with public transportation; and traffic congestion. Jane Jacobs’ influential *Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), like Lewis Mumford’s (1964) *The Highway and the City*, blamed not the automobile per se, but urban planning that reduced diversity and promoted over-dependence on a single mode of transportation for the destruction of the dense face-to-face sociality of urban neighbourhoods.

While sprawl is a contested domain (see Henderson’s chapter for a specific case study), it is facilitated by and contributes to the hyperautomobility analyzed by Martin and the self-reproduction of automobility emphasized by Dennis and Urry. Simons’ chapter is a reminder of how the automobile has shaped the built, material environment: concrete overpasses, underpasses, on-ramps, bridges, pillars and dividers along which motor vehicles hurtle like bullets through the barrel of a machine gun. His analysis will resonate with anyone who has walked in a wholly auto-dominated environment.

But automobility begets ironies: on the one hand, automobile travel makes possible the maintenance of social networks amongst geographically dispersed people, at the same time that it contributes to that dispersion – another way in which it is reproduced by both creating a problem and solving it (Urry 2004). New communities and connections may be formed through automobility (Sheller and Urry 2000). Cars do not just destroy community; for those who have access
to them they also make possible new kinds of community and identity, not rooted in geographical proximity, as Genovese indicates in her chapter on hot rodders. Likewise, even though urban space prioritizes motor vehicles over pedestrians and thereby creates “socially dead ‘public’ spaces dominated by vehicular traffic and associated externalities,” Collins, Bean and Kearns show that routinized walking at the neighbourhood level both accommodates and challenges the subjectivity and social organization associated with automobility. While families appreciated the benefits of auto-mobility in extending networks and opportunities, they found the walking school bus less private and isolating; it helped to create socially vibrant neighbourhoods. And as authors as diverse as Jacobs (1961) and Augé (1995; 2002) have argued, collective modes of travel themselves create such ‘non-places’ as airport lounges or subway cars that are hardly conducive to sociability, at least in a private, local or intimate sense.

Some scholars celebrate an affinity between auto-mobility and the individual autonomy of liberal political philosophy (Dunn 1998; Lomasky 1997). Cars potentially free people from social regulation in a variety of ways: from direct dependence on other people or organizations and regimentation by their schedules and routes; from face to face interaction with others not of one’s choosing such as occurs on railways and mass transit; and from social obligations, especially those associated with civilization and domesticity.

On the other hand, holding out the possibility that we can go where we want, when we want, with whom we want, and at the speed we want, the auto’s flexibility creates conditions for the anomic, unlimited desires against which Durkheim (1966) warned. The anomic inherent in car travel is exacerbated by the coerciveness of flexibility and the consequent need to “juggle tiny fragments of time” (Sheller and Urry 2000, 744). As Sheller and Urry (2000; Urry 2004) have noted, the unprecedented individual flexibility and autonomy provided by cars is coercive, because once generalized it comes to be expected – we are forced to be flexible. In providing privacy, cars isolate their occupants and impair their interaction with occupants of different cars (Lupton 1999; Sheller and Urry 2003; Urry 2006). Especially under the conditions of lifestyle differentiation (Gartman 2004), cars are ideal vehicles for egoism, as each driver’s wants, frustrated by everyone else trying to achieve theirs, weaken solidarity with non-car users of the road and occupants of different types of vehicle. As Sachs (1992, 176, 177) puts it, when everyone is behind the wheel, “their desires get in the way of other desires” and “everyone is stealing everyone else’s precious time; annoyance reigns everywhere, and rage.”

In Martin’s terms, hyperautomobility and hyperindividualism appear to go together with the increased use of the privatized, individualized automobile. In their chapter on road-building in Chile, Trumper and Tomic argue that auto ownership and use is promoted as part of a neoliberal modernization project in which the “car [is] a hybrid that changes drivers’ views of the world, making them more consumerist, individualistic, and concerned with the pursuit of self-determined private purposes.”
Critics of automobility have not just blamed it for weakened communities and excessive individualism; they have also attacked its implications for a variety of social inequities and exclusions of class, racial and ethnic group, gender, age and ability. The benefits of automobile ownership and use generally are unequally distributed; some segments of the population disproportionately bear its costs, while others disproportionately reap its benefits.

As in much else, the externalities of automobility are borne especially by the poor, and by the racially marginalized (Freund and Martin 1993). Those who cannot afford to buy an automobile have fewer job opportunities, particularly as a result of urban sprawl. With white flight in Atlanta, Georgia, for example, inner-city blacks without a car are unable to gain access to suburban jobs (see Henderson). When freeways cut through their neighbourhoods the poor suffer more automobile pollution, and in particular cases such as Chile, they undergo the added inequity that workers’ compulsory pension savings are used to build freeways from which they do not benefit (see Trumper and Tomic). While contrasting the hyperautomobility of the US to the emerging mass motorization in countries such as India (Waldman 2005) and China, Martin’s chapter indicates that increased motorization in China – and its emergence as a world-scale consumer and producer of automobiles – has produced urban sprawl, displacement of the poor and migrant workers to urban peripheries, and further social fragmentation.

Complex gender inequalities are also associated with automobility. Since its inception, the automobile has been associated symbolically with masculinity, especially when technical knowledge is involved (Freund and Martin 1993). The masculine bias of North American car culture continues to be reproduced in the way in which some vehicle types have developed stereotyped feminine associations: minivans with ‘soccer moms’; ‘chick cars’ – small sports cars, and small SUVs (or ‘cute-utes’) – with young women. Yet, changes in family forms, the growing prevalence of multicar, multiple earner households, and perhaps changes in masculinity and femininity themselves contribute to shifts in popular culture to representations of the car as “a highly ambiguous gendered space” (Jain 2005, 187). Several chapters in this volume consider the cultural significance of gender in automobility: in hot rodding, automobile advertisements and walking school buses. The latter study (Collins, Bean and Kearns) also attends to one of the most intractable exclusions that can be directly tied to automobility, which is age, especially for children. Scholars have long recognized the precarious position of children in auto-dominated urban environments as their play spaces are taken over by motor vehicles (Freund and Martin 1993; Lynd and Lynd 1937; Norton 2008).

---

2 Beyond car use and the representations of cars, however, little research has examined how the other facets of the automobility system are gendered (e.g., who designs the cars or plans urban environments, with what conceptions of masculinity and femininity).
The Economic and Cultural Power of Automobility

Auto-mobility continues to be celebrated despite automobility’s troubles. Its worldwide expansion suggests that auto-mobility has considerable appeal to large numbers of people. But what is the basis of its appeal and power? Scholarly debate about the power of automobility divides roughly into ‘cultural’ versus ‘materialist’ explanations. The debate between them, which is as old as social science itself (see Sahlins 1976), is complex and unlikely to be resolved here. Nonetheless, automobility offers an ideal site for scholarly explorations of materialist and cultural explanations.

In this volume, several chapters highlight materialist explanations of the power of automobility: the physical organization of urban and suburban space, utilitarian motivations for car use within that space, and economic interests that seek to profit from the production, expansion and consumption of cars. Other chapters emphasize cultural explanations: symbolic representations, discursive and ideological formations, social identities and social motivations in relation to the car. Additional chapters suggest, however, that the material and cultural are so intertwined that it is not possible to separate them in explaining auto hegemony.

In his chapter on ‘compulsory consumption’, Soron forcefully argues the materialist position. He maintains that compulsory automobility persists due to “the cosy and often incestuous relationship between private industry and government.” Once a full-fledged system of automobility is established, it is increasingly difficult for individuals to engage in the normal run of daily activities without having use of a private automobile, particularly with the physical constraints created by urban sprawl. Soron contends that regardless of what individuals may feel about cars, they need them for the flexibility they provide in the daily round of activities in highly dispersed locales. Soron’s argument helps to explain why, even when they recognize the aggregate problems of automobility, people are constrained in having to rely on cars for instrumental reasons.

Several chapters investigate which groups have the most power for making decisions about the material shape of the environment, particularly the ways that capitalist interests invest economically and politically in mass motorization. The business of automobility is spread widely throughout an auto-industrial complex including auto manufacturers and dealers, petroleum and rubber producers, road builders, and real estate developers, who operate at local, national and global scales. Trumper and Tomic explain the development of automobility in Chile as a neoliberal capitalist accumulation strategy, from which transnational corporations, the political elite and the affluent middle classes benefit, not the lower and poorer classes of Chile. Martin argues that the complex of auto-oil-construction firms, “coupled with the support of governments, is the basis of a powerful bloc in the global economy” that promotes auto hegemony. While agreeing on the power of the auto-industrial complex, Henderson in contrast shows that capitalist interests in Atlanta were by no means united. On the one hand, powerful corporate interests opposed unrestrained automobility; on the other hand, a largely white, middle-
class anti-urban cultural ethos that combined “rural idealism, ‘family values’ and fundamentalist religion” supported secessionist automobility in alliance with real estate and road-building interests. Material interests are not the whole story, as they are intertwined with cultural concerns that cohere around ‘race’, family and religion.

Without a doubt, automobile manufacturing is a powerful economic force in the more developed countries and increasingly in the less developed countries. As Conley’s chapter notes, in the first half of 2005 alone, 29 auto brands were estimated to have spent over 5 billion dollars in US media. Such pervasive and intensive advertising raises the question of the extent to which the auto industry manipulates consumers’ desires and needs. Conley disputes the view that advertisers simply manipulate consumers and instead argues that advertisers draw upon a stock of collective representations through which people make sense of their lives within automobilized societies. His semiotic analysis shows how central cultural oppositions such as excitement and safety, and masculine and feminine combine the mundane and magical sides of automobility, with excitement from speed, for example, as a prominent symbolic representation in car advertising. McLean argues in her analysis of SUV advertising that by systematically appropriating cultural representations, the auto industry contributed to the surge in the popularity of the SUV in North America and elsewhere. By the design of images that associate the SUV with glorified natural environments to escape from urban settings, advertisers take advantage of consumers’ attachments to symbols and meanings with deep roots in Western culture.

Litman also offers a cultural explanation in arguing that individuals desire automobiles not simply for transportation, but to acquire status. In his analysis of mobility as a prestige good, Litman maintains that cars signify social mobility and social status for individuals or families: what you drive is a key marker of status. He makes the point that the utilitarian argument does not address the prior question of why people were attracted to automobiles, suburbs and so on in the first place.

Beyond being status symbols, cars also create cultural opportunities for the experience of power, speed, and excitement, showing the driver’s skill and daring by taking risks and transgressing norms (Freund and Martin 1993; Gitlin 1986), as Genovese shows in her case study of hot rodders in mid-twentieth century Vancouver. This chapter illustrates the notion of ‘affordances’ (Hannam et al. 2006) and the interpretative flexibility of technical artifacts (Kline and Pinch 1996): in addition to its prosaic, utilitarian transportation functions, the car provides opportunities to do things and have experiences not necessarily anticipated by their makers (although seeing a potential market, they or other capitalists soon move to supply it).

Several chapters that address the issue of safety and automobility combine material and cultural explanations. MacGregor stresses the importance of the state as well as recent technological developments for the emergence of a new cultural age in which ‘safety sells’. Wetmore’s history of the air bag draws clearly on
the science and technology approach, arguing that technical artefacts and social relationships cannot be considered separately. Collins, Bean and Kearns focus on the ‘social fix’ of walking school buses, but this strategy also has the side-effect of redesigning the material world by reducing the number of cars on the road and thus reshaping urban space. Simons challenges directly the very distinctions between the material/objective and the social/subjective in his interdisciplinary analysis of the material culture of concrete and the projectile economy.

In drawing on complexity theory, Dennis and Urry adopt a highly fluid notion of the material and the cultural in assessing the current state of automobility and projecting its future. They observe that both economies and social life have been ‘locked in’ to the ‘steel-and-petroleum’ car as a result of relatively small causes that laid down an irreversible pattern, ensuring the preconditions for automobility’s self-expansion over the past century: “supported through a huge economic, social, and technological maelstrom of vested interests, agents, and interrelated flows.” While the current structure of the car system is remarkably powerful, stable and unchanging, Dennis and Urry suggest, this complex assemblage is neither socially necessary nor inevitable.

**Beyond Critique – Beyond the Car**

Any critique of automobility requires going beyond what Henderson in his chapter calls the ‘inevitability hypothesis’, that is, the unquestioned assumption that the domination of the automobile over all other forms of transportation is inescapable. But once the inevitability of automobility is challenged, what lies beyond the critique of car hegemony? Chapters in this volume address in diverse ways the question of how we get ‘beyond the car’.

First, what is to be changed? Is it automobility or automobilities, car culture (singular) or car cultures (plural)? To put it differently, once a society embarks on mass motorization, do certain consequences inevitably follow? Chapters vary in their emphasis on either inherent features of automobility that make it self-reproducing, or on different, particularistic automobilities that depend on specific conjunctions of interests, circumstances, national cultures, local politics and social structures.

Second, who or what are the agents of change? In this volume, the main candidates include consumers, states, corporations, social movements and the system of automobility itself. While consumers potentially have an impact on changing automobility, none of the chapters highlight their significance. To the extent that the problems created by individual auto-mobility are externalities in which the collective costs of automobility are not borne by the individual driver, getting beyond the car is caught in a collective action or free-rider problem that renders individual consumer action an unpromising avenue for change: individuals who use alternative means of transport, and accrue extra costs in doing so (added commuting time, inconvenience, transit fares, loss of status) reduce congestion
and thus make car travel less costly. Each cyclist with a ‘one less car’ sticker, and each subway or bus rider makes it easier for others in cars to reach their destinations, so the cumulative impact may be less than hoped for unless there are changes in urban design that give priority to non-car modes of transportation (Newman and Kenworthy 1999). On the other hand, the worsening position of American automakers, as increasing fuel prices have shifted North American consumers away from SUVs and trucks to smaller, more fuel-efficient vehicles, should caution against prematurely dismissing consumers as a source of change.

Some chapters in the book imply that change can come about primarily through the action of states, and perhaps only anti-capitalist or post-capitalist states, or the state in conjunction with the car industry and other sectors of society. Others emphasize local community action and social movements that consciously attempt to direct change. While social movements rarely achieve all that they strive for and their effects are difficult to estimate (Tarrow 1998), some movements related to automobility have had notable successes, such as those for automotive safety, and against drunk driving. Yet neither have challenged auto hegemony, and the success of the latter has depended upon both powerful state allies and a congenial ideological climate (Reinarman 1988; McCarthy 1994). With the exception of campaigns against freeways in the 1960s, movements that more directly challenge automobility have had more mixed results. For example, environmentalists have achieved some success in limiting automotive emissions, but judging by continued road-building agendas in many countries, anti-car movements such as ‘Reclaim the Streets’ and ‘Critical Mass’ have had more limited impacts.

Third, just as critiques of automobility have revealed its social inequities, so the social justice implications of strategies to reduce automobility must also be considered, especially in societies where it is deeply embedded. For example, in the absence of policies to mitigate their impact, higher gasoline taxes intended to reduce driving and internalize social and environmental costs hurt lower income more than higher income drivers (as the former spend a higher proportion of their incomes on transportation); the same is true of congestion charges and road tolls; and strategies to encourage a walking-city drive up real estate values in central cities, making housing there unaffordable for low-income people and increasing their dependence on cars at the same time as more affluent people are able to walk or cycle to work.

Finally, do alternatives to automobility involve ‘technical fixes’ (redesigning the material world) or ‘social fixes’ (changing social life and relations of power)? As several chapters suggest, strategies for change are likely a combination of both, even if they emphasize one over the other. For example, Henderson’s discussion of contesting automobility through denser urban spaces and cultural change implies ‘social fixes’. Social fixes would consist of convincing people to drive less, buy smaller, lighter, more fuel-efficient vehicles and live in denser urban spaces to enable other forms of mobility. Or, they would involve states making changes in the physical context of people’s daily lives: stopping or even reversing urban sprawl, providing more and better public transit, and the like.