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Automobility and the Future of Transport

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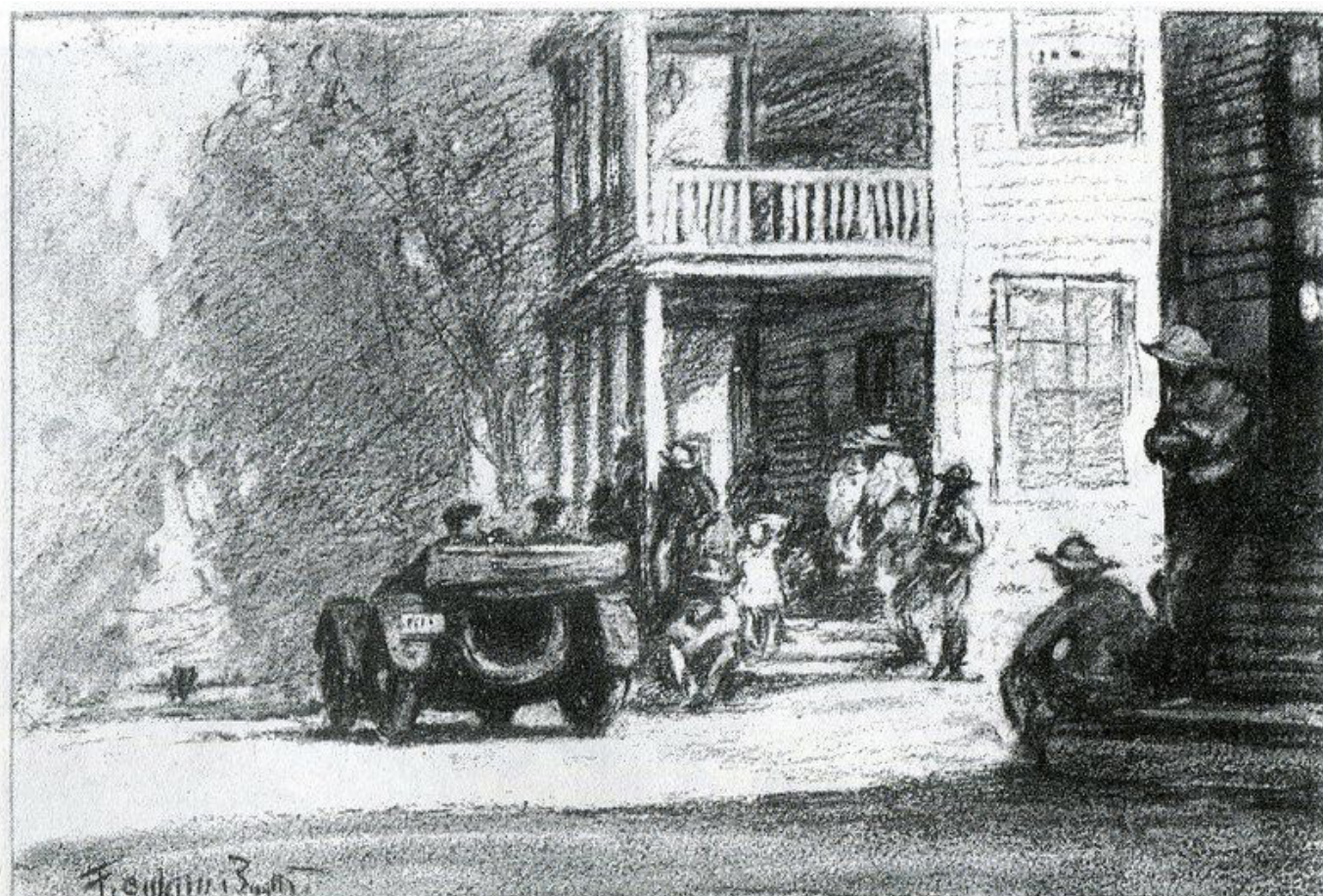
Automobility and the Future of Transport

In the early 20th century, the rise of Taylorism and the scientific method in the US had created an ideological crisis:

“Frederick Winslow Taylor’s scientific management theory, developed over the last two decades of the nineteenth century and first publicized in 1895, made explicit the fading of individualism. Taylor sought to increase productivity through precise delineation, measurement, surveillance, and enforcement of workers’ activities. The engineer regarded his proposed reduction of the laborer to an interchangeable machine part without much pathos.” (Seiler 25+26)

This process cut deeply into the social space of many citizens, and to preserve their space, many people turned towards the newly invented automobile. This search for freedom can for example be seen in the rise in popularity of the road trip and the literature connected to it.

The popular biography *A Hoosier Holiday*, for example, tells of a road trip by Theodore Dreiser to his hometown. Dreiser frequently describes the road as “magic” (82), and describes how he feels like the road liberates him not only physically but from civilization itself (82).



https://www.tribstar.com/features/valley_life/remembering-dreiser-s-evocative-journey-home-a-hoosier-holiday-a/article_3044438f-0929-55f3-8ac4-f4115674ec09.html



<https://www.furosistemas.com/trafficcjams-ss-saopaulo/>

However, this idea of the road is a socially constructed one, and part of what Michel Foucault would call “cultural discourse”. If it is true that freedom through the automobile is discourse, then that means that this freedom can’t be universal, and that automobility can potentially influence our culture in unintended ways.

The novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, by John Steinbeck offers a different perspective on the road. To the lower class family the Joads, the road is an obstacle they have to overcome on their way to a new home. Since they can’t afford to travel, but also can’t afford to stay, the road in their discourse is a dangerous place. Automobility has developed into something unsustainable. It has been confirmed by multiple studies conducted throughout the years that the problems connected to large-scale individual transportation can’t be solved.

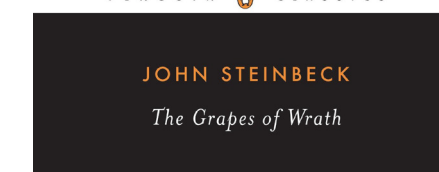
At fault is unnecessary mobility such as commuting, or migration of businesses. More importantly, according to Vance Packard our high degree of mobility has made us a “nation of strangers”, it has made us lonely, rootless and uncaring.

Beep beep, move your car
Out of my way, I’m the star
I’ll cut you off to get ahead
You drive like you’re still in bed

Out of my way, this is my road
Move it you big fat sluggish toad
Off the road, stink up your own street
Get lost or your head I will beat

I’ll fly over a lane without a blinker
When you see me coming, move you stinker
But if you try to cut in front of me
I’ll cut you off and force you to flee

My tunes I will blast so all can hear
My horn I will blare if at all you dare
Get in my way and you’ll feel my wrath
With my hot coffee I’ll give you a bath



<https://www.amazon.com/Grapes-Wrath-John-Steinbeck/>

And when the police bring me to a halt
I will prove that it all was your fault
It could not possibly be my road rage
As the court reads my name off a page

<https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/traffic-22/>

If we want to keep our idea of the road as something liberating instead of frustrating and environmentally destructive, we have to partially turn away from it.

Plans for sustainable transportation such as the UN’s Agenda 21 have to be adopted, and culturally we have to turn towards the things that ground us, towards the community and the people around us.

This way we can reduce unnecessary and unhealthy automobility, while still keeping the “magic” Dreiser talked about.

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