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# Automobility and the Future of Transport

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### Automobility and the Future of Transport

Founded in the Age of Enlightenment, the United States of America was the first nation trying to incorporate the social contract theories of philosophers of liberalism such as John Locke. Theories that went against the beliefs still widespread in the “Old World” of 18th century Europe, where the reigning philosophy saw men and women being meant to conform from birth to existing arrangements of power and class (Seiler 18).

Liberalism’s idea that a nation is created from rational and free human beings, who enter into a contract with each other to protect their own property, meant that the qualifier for being recognized as a citizen required of a person to be “the owner of their own person or capacities” (18). These conditions, of the philosophy now called “possessive individualism” were used by the republicans of the young nation to enable the suppression of different minorities and social groups. The most notable groups being women and non-whites, as both were argued to possess biological attributes which situated them as subservient to the caucasian male (19). These factors created a society with an ideology esteeming economic autonomy, self determination and freedom, and disdaining dependency on other individuals and institutions (18). An ideology which could, for the most part, only be realized by upper class, wealthy caucasian men (19).

These power structures continued to develop inside society, and though they changed through the time, individualism remained the supreme ideology. Eventually, however, the

system slipped into a crisis during the late 19th century, due to the rise of Taylorism and scientific management.

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. (25+26)

Taylor's theories were highly effective and the control of workers through the bureaucrats we today know as "managers" increased efficiency across the nation (27). But the taylorized factories required the worker to submit to the manager and obey without question directions based on scientific theory they did not understand. Thus, a large percent of the population was seemingly robbed of their individual autonomy (28).

With the old individualism under attack like this, a new ideology needed to take its place. In his book *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre states that "(social) space is a (social) product" (26). As every society creates space for itself and its citizens, the social space of some has to be limited, in order for others to expand their space. That is why social space is not only a space of action, but also of production, power and control (26). Social space sets the boundaries inside of which we live our lives. Cutting into the space of individuals, limiting them in ways they aren't used to, therefore needs to be balanced in some way, by expanding their space in other regions. The automobile, and its never before seen potential for mobility, ended up being a politically healthy outlet for the endangered American individualism.

Cited in the book *The Automobile Revolution*, are the rapidly climbing numbers of car manufacturing especially in the United States. In 1895 three European firms produced all the cars in the world. Benz in Germany produced 135 cars; P & L and Peugeot produced 144 in

france. 1900 France was still leading in automobile production with 4,800 cars being produced, six times more than Germany. But the Americans were already producing 4,000 cars. Seven years later, and US would produce almost twice as many cars as France, more than 44,000 (15). The author notes that, though the early cars were mostly targeted at “sportsmen, doctors and businessmen” (22), the most rapidly growing automobile market soon became the inexpensive car. From 1903 onwards the factories producing the most cars in the world belonged first to the Olds Motor Works and later to the Ford Company. Both produced inexpensive models (40). These numbers point to what is ultimately the conclusion of the author regarding the early adoption of the automobile; that a desire for personal transportation seemed to be universal, but that American culture traits were one of the reasons for the high demand (47).

The cultural belief of the car as being a tool for liberating individuals has left its distinct impression on the literature of the time, which can be used to investigate the underlying ideology. *A Hoosier Holiday* is a famous 1916 travel biography by Theodore Dreiser. The book retells the drive of Dreiser and his friend Franklin Booth to Dreiser’s hometown in Indiana in 1914, which he hadn’t visited for 20 years. To the author, the road trip is an experience of “becoming” and of freedom; something unique one can not find except on the road.

Chapter XI, *The Magic of the Road and some Tales* starts with the two travelers and their driver leaving the small town of Factoryville, to which Dreiser had taken a liking to. Thinking about continuing their road trip, he comments that “the anticipation of new fields and strange scenes was enough to make a mere poor breakfast a very trivial matter indeed” (81). Then they drive off, surrounded by a crowd of onlookers wishful of being in their stead. Traveling through valleys and over hills, past cattle and farm girls. Dreiser can’t help but

shout out his euphoria: “how wonderful it was!” (82). He continues to describe the countryside as they pass by, though they have to stop frequently for Franklin to sketch the landscape and for their chauffeur Speed to tend to the car. While doing so, Speed also complains about their slow traveling speed, stating that, if they instead stuck to larger roads the car would “eat up the miles as good as anyone.” (83). But still, driving across country eventually puts even him into a peculiar mood and with “Didjah (sic) ever hear of -” (83), the rest of the chapter is spent reading the various stories Speed has to tell.

Dreiser’s description of his experience is a condensed example of what US americans of the time sought to experience by owning, or having access to, a car and taking part in a road trip. The car attracts good natured attention; the fact that it allowed the travelers to drive all the way from New York to Factoryville is significant to the inhabitants. But it is more than an mechanically impressive feat, the unprecedented mobility brought by the car is “magic”, it is romantic (82). Young women look on with wide eyes. Once they are on their way, the road quickly reveals its essence to Dreiser. The “everchanging (sic) panorama” (82), and the road “like a white thread, miles and miles away” (83), paint a picture of being free and independent. This freedom is not merely physical freedom of movement, Dreiser states there is “No tradition, you see, anywhere. No monuments or cathedrals or great hotels or any historie scene anywhere to look forward to” (83). The road trip makes him free from society, free from civilization as a whole. He becomes John Dryden’s “Noble Savage”. That is what finally allows him to perceive the world differently, as he writes “It was all like a song -only- T-r-r-r-r-r” (83). The sound put into words at the end of the quote is meant to be the sound of the car engine.

This exploration of what the road was supposed to mean to people in the context of Individualism, and what it often ended up meaning to the majority of the population, can be

explored by juxtaposing *A Hoosier Holiday* with John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Released in some time later, in 1939, Steinbeck's novel follows the very different road trip of the Joad family. The Joads are driven off their land by the dust bowl, and in the time of the great depression they travel from Oklahoma to California in hope of finding food, work and shelter for the winter. As a poor family of farmers the Joads represent one of the social groups excluded from the luxuries of the romanticized idea of the road.

Early on in chapter 10 pages 114 to 117 show a very different interpretation of the road. Having sold nearly all their belongings to purchase an old truck, the Joads are preparing to leave for California. Before they do, Tom Joad takes a walk through what has so far been his home. When he is done with his "pilgrimage" (114), he sits down and talks to Ma, his mother about the coming journey. Ma expresses hope that they will find good work in California, Tom is doubtful; he has met a man from there who told him living conditions were bad. To the Joads, the road is a means to an end. Even worse, it is an obstacle. Tom states the drive might take "Two weeks, maybe ten days if we got luck" (115). Where Dreiser is eager to take as long as possible to reach his destination, the Joads cannot afford this sentiment. After all, just to make the drive they have sold "every movable thing that might be sold" (114). Being lower class citizens, they could never take part in the ideology of mobility, their social space having been severely cut. Instead, unlike Dreiser they have developed an intense connection to their physical home. Tom "pilgrims" through what is left, "He visited places he remembered" (114), when he is done he sits on the doorstep, conflicted about leaving his home behind. When Ma talks about how it will be in California she says: "maybe we can get one of them little white houses" (116). For these people, who have so little space, the idea of home takes the place of Dreiser's ideology.

*The Grapes of Wrath* throws light on the most pressing problem with the hopes placed on the car, the fact that it was not available to everybody. This fact would be confirmed later by a study in the 1970s which came to the conclusion that: “even in a wealthy community substantial numbers of people are prevented from driving by youth, age, disability, income, recent immigration or simply personal preference” (Mees 37). Just like the first republicans at the time when the US was still a young nation needed to limit the mobility of some social groups to secure their own space, the car too could not grant the same mobility to everybody. Steinbeck realizes that individualism leads to people placing more weight on their own personal needs instead of the needs of society as a whole and the environment.

Transportation via the car is unsustainable. Attempts by urban planners to create infrastructure providing efficient ways for citizens to travel via car are frequently met with a rebound effect. To mitigate the traffic chaos in US American cities, urban planners of the 20th century designed more and more suburbs, stretching the network of roads further out and thus reducing overall traffic (Cervero 206). However, the stretched out road network lead to an increase of time spent traveling to and from work, creating more pollution. Stretching out the road network also lead to the adverse effect of more people per household needing access to a car. A study in Fairfax county virginia between 1978 and 1985 showed that while population only increased by 17%, miles traveled via car increased by 40% (Cervero 206). The idea of reducing traffic by building suburbs rebounded and added more and more cars to America’s roads, leading to more traffic and pollution (Cervero 206). The problem has reached such magnitude, that already in 1992 the UN’s *Agenda 21* for sustainable development urged all countries to adopt programs favoring public transportation (United Nations 60).

The long term issues of excessive reliance on the automobile affect not only the physical world, but also our minds. Poet Darlene Walsh notes in her 2014 poem *Traffic* how the experience of the modern driver differs from what people at the time of Dreiser thought of the road. “Out of my way, this is my road” (5+6) cry the drivers in the poem. *Traffic* showcases the radical individualism of the road, with every driver believing they should be allowed to do whatever they want, whenever they want: “Out of my way, I'm the star” (2). The freedom of the road has made people believe in a freedom of consequence from their own actions, as the driver at the end of the poem expresses incredulity at being confronted with them.

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. (18-20)

The radical individualism examined in the poem, focused on the freedom to act above all else is a result of a process of fragmentation. As automobility increased citizens started to lose the connection to their homes and their communities. This has created what Vance Packard calls “a society of torn roots” (1) in his 1974 book *A Nation of Strangers*. In it, he describes the effect of ever increasing mobility on American communities. “We are confronted with a society that is coming apart at the seams” (2). He too urges us to recover our sense of community to give us more of an idea where we come from and how important our communities are (275+276).

Ever increasing mobility has been made necessary by the need to preserve the power structures in the liberal society of the US. The ideology was called into question when Taylorism first demonstrated its long term issues. Taylorism showed that eventually the individual had to submit to the system and threatened to take away the privilege of economic autonomy many Caucasians had become used to over time. The automobile offered an escape



from what could have been a radical upheaval of society, by offering a new kind of freedom. However, the freedom offered was again a privilege that was never and would never be universally accessible. Other unforeseen long-term problems with excessive automobility have crept up over time. Mobility through the car has been proven to be unsustainable if we want to save the environment. Thus our own ideology has prevented societies from evaluating the worth of different modes of transportation objectively. We need to acknowledge the many long term negative effects of high amounts of unnecessary mobility disconnecting us from our communities and each other. The fragmentation Packard writes about has developed out of aspects of automobility its pioneers did not foresee. Hour long commuting to and from work, frequent moving of residence and migration of companies are all forms of automobility that do not have the liberating effect of what the drivers of the early 20th century imagined. Too little of our current mobility embodies what Dreiser tried to tell us in *The Magic of the Road*. Mobility will not stop increasing, but by implementing strategies such as laid out in *Agenda 21* we can reduce unnecessary mobility fragmenting our communities. A reduction of unnecessary mobility through implementation of sustainable public transportation would also not prevent individuals from experiencing the liberating aspects of automobility. Road trips and travels, making up only a fraction of traffic could still be undertaken. We can then step past the Automobile Age, more conscious of the world around us without doing away with the values the United States was originally founded on.

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