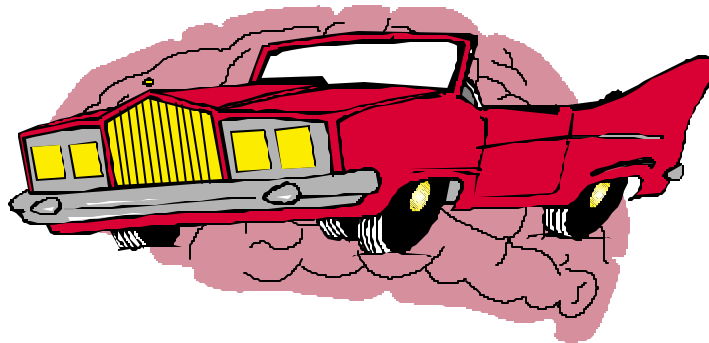


Psychological Pollution

Thinking Beyond Emissions



Social and cultural impacts of automobile dependence

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Cars pollute. It is common knowledge that cars spew air pollution out their tailpipes, and most people realize that water pollution and urban runoff are problems. But few people understand the way that the car influences human behavior and social interactions of humans within their community, even though they witness and participate in these effects throughout their daily lives. Human nature and social interactions are hugely complex, much like ecological systems. However, little thought has been given to these human impacts in the field of transportation planning. This paper will briefly describe some of the ways that automobile dependence impacts American society and the health of its communities. The automobile may not be the sole cause of the social issues that are addressed in this paper; rather the automobile should be viewed as a piece of technology that brings out certain human traits, while repressing others. Many other objects in our modern world can be viewed in this way, but none has had a greater impact on our daily lives than the automobile.

American Car Culture

America, the land of the free is our mantra. Personal freedoms, liberty, the right to free enterprise are ideals of American culture. We are constantly reminded of these ideals through movies, advertisements, television, and many other forms. The car and the open road, more than any other piece of



modern technology, have manifested themselves into the American ideal to the point of extreme excess, to the point of destroying this very ideal that the motorist and his steel companion wish to achieve. America is a land of communities as well as individuals, and the individuality of the automobile is undermining the health and well being of these communities.

In America, the car has undeniably become much more than a way to get from point A to point B. Americans are often described as having a “love affair” with the automobile, but a closer look at motorist behavior suggests something much deeper. The automobile has become a way of life. Transportation planners often fail to realize the significance of this fact as they develop alternative transportation solutions or attempt to reduce the numbers of cars on our streets.

Who is The Motorist?

To begin to understand the root of the problem, we first need to look at the individual who owns and operates a motor vehicle, the motorist. The motorist starts with an ordinary person, a person with qualities both unique to that individual and those common to all humankind. One of these common characteristics is the feeling of superior individuality, also known as the ego. When this ordinary person gets into their car and starts the engine, certain characteristics become amplified. The values, morals, actions, and tolerance levels of the driver can at times be radically different from the ordinary human.

Several authors have theorized that the motorist views the car as an extension of themselves; the driver uses and controls the vehicle much like he uses his muscles for other daily tasks, and many of the tasks used for driving have become subconscious and involuntary. Daniel Miller offers this perspective of the car:

Their humanity lies above all in the degree to which so many of us are socialized to take them for granted, so that we think our world through a sense of the self in which driving, roads, and traffic are simply integral to who we are and what we presume to do each day. (Miller, 3)

Other everyday observations would confirm that car is self, such as bumper stickers or other superfluous hardware frequently added to personal vehicles. Consequently, an attack of the car or a challenge of the car's right of way is felt as a personal attack of the motorist. Consider further that the typical American male devotes more than 1600 hours each year to his car, including actual time in the car and time spent working to pay for the car (Zuckerman 86); that amounts to 18% of his lifetime.

Motorists seem to be ignorant of the actual costs and environmental impacts of operating a motor vehicle. Despite the fact that most people realize that air pollution is a problem, motorists generally refuse to believe that they are contributing to the problem. Motorists also tend to be oblivious to noise pollution and the other impacts that heavy traffic has the local environment. Drivers will regularly cut through a quiet residential street in order to shave a few seconds off of their commute. Outside of the car, people tend to be more sensitive of such impacts, especially if they have to meet face-to-face with the recipient.

Driver Interactions

To the driver, everyone and everything that gets into their way becomes a faceless enemy. Interactions between drivers occur with interpersonal communication limited to honks and gestures, a higher level of communication and understanding is simply not possible with persons enclosed within their personal steel womb. As a result, driver encounters are rarely friendly.



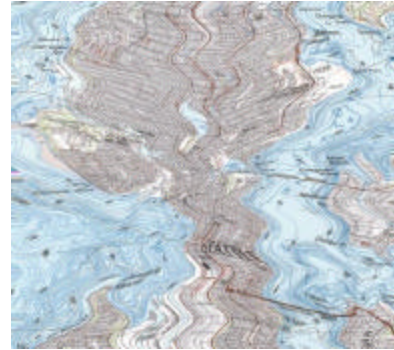
For contrast, consider the typical pedestrian-to-pedestrian encounter. Pedestrians will often greet each other with a smile, or some other form of acknowledgement, especially near the vicinity of their residence. Pedestrians who nearly bump into each other will usually apologize and perhaps even engage in conversation, even if one was clearly not watching where they were going. Strangers will often discuss things like the weather or some nearby peculiarity. The driver, however, feels and acts like she is always right, and conversation between drivers usually only occurs in the event of an accident, which rarely a good way to meet people or learn from their differing perspectives.

Observing the behavior of drivers alludes to a chronic self-superiority complex affecting a distressingly large percentage of the population. It is debatable whether this vehicle-based assertion of ego is the cause or effect of a larger social issue. But considering that the typical suburban American must undergo this transformation every single time he leaves the home, and interacts with most of his neighbors in this fashion, would imply

that the driver mentality has at least some contribution to larger social issues. An analysis of road rage incidents would confirm that there is a larger social problem. (Miller, 59) Also, an individual seeing large numbers of other people exhibiting selfish behavior reinforces similar behavior.

Connections and Places

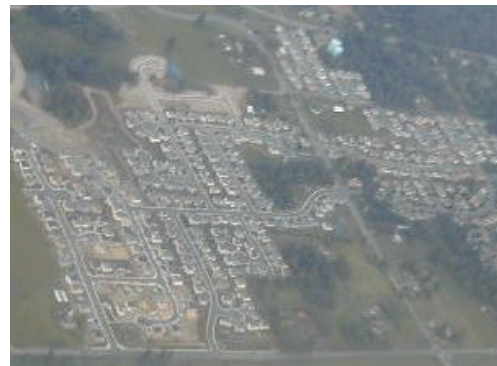
As the motorist drives to and from various geographic places, comprehension of the natural interrelation of these places is lost. This is unlike the pedestrian, who accumulates knowledge of other buildings and natural features as she strolls through the neighborhood, and understands how these features relate to each other. To the motorist, places with easy freeway access seem close, while places reached via slower, lesser roads seem distant, regardless of actual distance.



Also, the motorist traveling on a freeway navigates via huge directional signs, or as he becomes familiar with the route, via knowledge of lane configurations and locations of exits. As a consequence, the motorist has a distorted perception of the natural world he lives in, and loses sight of the way his home, his work, and life, and his society are interconnected with natural processes. This connection of our lives with the earth and its landscapes is “essential for the maintenance our psychic health and well-being.” (Zuckerman, 11-12). The natural environment is also an important source of common experiences for people living in the same geographical area, which strangers can use to relate to one another.

The Land of the Automobile

What we have in most of America is a society of motorists, a population of cars and their drivers, each acting selfishly and making selfish decisions. What happens when cities are built for motorists rather than for people? We get the modern suburb, and all the problems associated with it. Just like the automobile feels at home in the suburb, the driver mentality is reinforced by the land-use characteristics of the suburb. Here in the suburb, macroscale effects of communities of drivers become evident.



The Private Life

A sense of community is very weak in the modern auto-oriented suburb. While this due to many interrelated factors, a dependence of the car is ultimately to blame. Because of zoning laws, large lot sizes, and “desirable” real-estate characteristics, suburban inhabitants rarely live close to services or public amenities. As a result, residents must drive to meet all of their daily needs and activities. Also, the lack of pedestrian facilities

and connections further discourages walking. This is how the suburbanite interacts with her community—as a motorist, interacting with the other community members as a faceless driver with a private agenda. Many suburbanites have never even met the people who live nearby their residence, although most will interact with next-door neighbors out of necessity and circumstance.

Newman and Kentworthy illustrate the effect of increased privatization of lives in suburbs as a result of car use:

In many cities it becomes difficult to do other than lead highly isolated private lives, moving from a private, isolated, suburban home, complete with electronic entertainment (and now even electronic shopping, and electronic work), to a private metal box for transportation to whatever other element of urban life one chooses. There need be no obligation to the city. Thus the public realm of the city ...can become neglected and begin to fall apart. (Newman 316)

In this sense, a suburb is not a community at all.

Fear of the Unknown

Since the suburbanite interacts with the vast majority of their community members as a motorist, they develop a fear of strangers, and a distrust of other people. People who are different from the suburban standard are shunned. And the 10% of the driving age population who do not possess a driver's license are literally left out in the rain. (Webber) The suburb, through physical and social means, excludes those people who cannot drive for reasons of choice, physical disability, or any number of other reasons. The result is a lack of diversity in the suburbs and social segregation within a region as a whole. In her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs states:

City districts will be economically and socially congenial places for diversity to generate itself and reach its best potential if the districts possess good mixtures of primary uses, frequent streets, a close-grained mingling of different ages in their buildings, and a high concentration of people. (Jacobs, 315)

These are precisely the things that are not found in the suburb.

People in the suburbs will often meet for reasons of other shared interests, such as PTA meetings, church groups, or even auto clubs, but these groups are only minimally associated by geography. Suburbanites almost always use their cars to get to such meetings, and may not even know where their fellow club members live. What is lacking in the suburbs is the interaction of people linked only by place, *without* common interests.

Pre-car Neighborhoods

The social and physical impacts of the automobile are not just contained to the suburbs. Older parts of cities, built before motorist dominance, have been ripped apart by freeways. Zuckerman writes:

The city is thus cut into ribbons, destroying the intricate social web which had been spun through the ages since its origin. (Zuckerman, 44)

Because of the direct impacts of the freeways, and the growing driver mentality, those that could flee the old city and into the “safety” of the suburbs did so, and in large numbers. The resulting low demand for real estate in these older areas often caused them to decay from lack of care. This is especially evident in midwestern cities.

But are the suburbs really safe? Jane Jacobs uses the example of Los Angeles, the epitome of suburban culture and driver mentality, to answer this question:

The problem of insecurity cannot be solved by spreading people out more thinly, trading the characteristics of the city for the characteristics of the suburb. If this could solve the danger on the city streets, then Los Angeles should be a safe city because superficially. Los Angeles is almost all suburban... Los Angeles' crime rates are flabbergasting... And this is markedly true of crimes associated with personal attack, the crimes that make people fear the streets. (Jacobs, 40-41)

Other research has shown that personal interactions between neighbors decreases with increased traffic, and when people stop looking out for each other, criminal activity increases. (Appelyard, 35) Although there may be a perception of safety in affluent suburban areas, it comes at the expense of indifference and spiraling crime rates across the region.

Corporate interests

There are obvious direct beneficiaries of the automobile society, such as automobile manufacturers and oil companies. These corporate interests historically have had a strong foothold in American government and have been very influential in political and popular decisions. In addition, automobile manufacturers spend around 5 billion dollars every year on automobile advertising, more than the total spent by government on mass transit (Zuckerman, 88). But it is not just these companies that benefit from automobile dependence, many other corporations also reap large benefits from the psychological effects of the automobile.

The suburb is host to the American monoculture. Throughout America, suburban areas look and act the same. The same burger, the same shirt, the same music, even the same house can be obtained anywhere within the monoculture. The personal mobility offered by the automobile combined with the fear of the different has created an environment where people can seek out the familiar no matter where they are. Large corporations, chains, and franchises thrive in this environment, while small independent and family-owned businesses suffer.

Corporate dominance in a community results in social imbalance. Corporations have little reason to care about the well being of the community, other than its potential for profit. And the resulting monoculture further degrades the identity of a place, and alienates the inhabitants.

Looking for Solutions

The social and psychological impacts of automobile dependence are not simple cause-effect problems, but that does not mean that we can continue to ignore them. As with solving any problem, the first step is recognizing that a problem exists. This is likely to be a difficult process, since Americans as a society are in what psychologists would call the denial stage. Through expanded research and education, society can begin to recognize that cars are tools that can be abused through excessive use. To do this, we must first accept that cars and traffic are not a fact of life.

Another important step toward solving the problem is making efforts to reduce automobile dependence. Great steps are already being taken to promote walkable communities and improve transit service, with the goals of improving air quality and curbing urban sprawl. Adding the goal of improving social interactions can help further promote these efforts.

The easiest way to begin research and find solutions is look beyond America. Countries with progressive transportation policies can be compared to America, and used as examples of good projects and policy. The Netherlands is often cited as having very successful programs for reducing car use, and Dutch cities are known for their excellent public transit facilities.



We cannot place full blame on the car alone for these social ills, after all, the car is just a machine. But by allowing the car to completely dominate our culture, it has become a vector allowing some of the worst of human nature to manifest itself on the planet and its inhabitants, and it will continue to do so if left unchecked.

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