

The Death and Life of Automobile Mobility? Between Resistance and Change

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This double issue of *Flux* investigates automobile mobility. It looks at the shifts and continuities in the automobile system put in place over the last century, considering change both in uses and in public policies.

THE AUTOMOBILE AT THE HEART OF AN ENVIRONMENT IN FLUX

In September 2018, we called for articles on automobile mobility in metropolitan areas, almost sixty years after the publication of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (Jacobs, 1961), a major work challenging car-centric urban planning. To echo Jane Jacobs as she looked into the way automobile traffic was eroding the city and its urbanity, our idea was to question changes in the automobile system in the face of technological and societal changes and environmental concerns. The intention was not to come to any decision on the “death” in automobile mobility. Despite a lull at the turn of the 2000s in the number of miles travelled (Goodwin, 2012), the car still accounts for the majority of daily trips in many European metropolitan areas (Focas, Christidis, 2017) and reinforces socio-spatial inequalities (Fol, 2009). Nevertheless, are we seeing a change in mobility practices, which could ultimately lead to a change of paradigm or, on the contrary, a reinforcing of the automobile system?

Through this call for papers, we hoped to shed light on the issues surrounding automobile use, the resulting externalities and the public policies that are dealing with it in metropolitan contexts where, both in North and South, more and more initiatives come from the private sector, making the governance of automobile mobility more complex.

Since the call was launched two years ago, the context in which this discussion is taking place has seen some upheavals in France as a result of several events: the approval of the Mobility Orientation Law (LOM); the reduction of maximum speeds to 80 km/h on the national road network, since increased again to 90 km/h in some places; social movements like the “Yellow Vests” (“*Gilets jaunes*”), which originated in calls for demonstrations against increases in fuel

prices, or the strikes against pension reforms which slowed, or even shut down public transport; or the Covid-19 pandemic which has resulted in a historic slowdown of motorised travel. These events have served as a reminder rather than a revelation of the ambivalence of the role of the car in our societies. While the LOM has recognised the major role of the automobile in our daily journeys, at the same time it encourages us to make a modal shift to public transport and cycling for environmental reasons; according to the Yellow Vests, the need to use the automobile in suburban and rural areas represents excessive costs; the massive strikes boosted car use, increasing congestion when public transport was at a standstill; the Covid-19 pandemic gave rise to ways of “doing things differently” (especially by not travelling at all), while individual means of transport ensured that social distancing was possible.

Ultimately, the acceleration of events has merely served to strengthen the automobile system, which has taken advantage of its predominant role acquired over the last century and has adapted effectively to contextual changes. The articles in this double issue on automobile mobility thus highlight the ambivalence of the role of the car in our uses and our policies.

FROM USES TO POLICIES: STUDY OF THE DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF THE AUTOMOBILE SYSTEM

The twelve contributions in this double issue, consisting of eleven articles and one joint interview, illustrate the diversity of disciplines addressing the automobile system: from sociology to geography, and including history, planning, political science, IT, and law. Various methods are used (interviews, embedded log books in vehicles, statistics, modelling, documentary analysis), and the study areas are diverse: from French-speaking Europe (France, Belgium and Switzerland) to North America (Quebec) and Africa (Senegal).

The articles take two main directions: one concerns changes in automobile use and associated values; the other looks into the development, organisation and planning of mobility and regions.

The first five articles, supplemented by an interview on carpooling, deal with automobile mobility from the point of view of use. An essential piece of automobile equipment, the driving licence, remains an important rite of passage into adulthood: Patrick Rérat and Lucas Haldimann show that the observed drop in the rate of driving licences among young Swiss people is due more to them delaying taking the test, rather than deciding not to take it. Once they are equipped, car drivers' practices become entrenched in routines, which persist despite disruptions to the automobile system. Using log books and commented journeys, Joël Meissonnier and Cyprien Richer observe that a longer journey time due to traffic congestion is not necessarily viewed as negative by motorists, even becoming a refuge for some, a moment when they are able to decompress. Nor does the increase in environmental concerns call the automobile into question, even though it is one of the main producers of negative externalities. According to Yoann Demoli, Matéo Sorin and Axel Villareal, car use and its intensity can be explained for the most part by contextual factors, linked with the density of the place of residence, people's position in the life cycle and their level of income, with environmental

values having only a marginal influence. By analysing the processes by which households do away with a car, Leslie Belton Chevallier and Joseph Cacciari highlight the extent to which giving up car ownership can potentially be a stigmatising factor for individuals and households. The text by Lourdes Diaz Olvera, Didier Plat and Pascal Pochet proposes a different approach to car use based on data from a survey carried out in Dakar. In the capital of Senegal, the car remains a rare possession, something owned mainly by the wealthier social categories. However, use of a car reaches beyond the circle of city-dwellers with access to a car at all times. Shared car use in Dakar is reminiscent of carpooling initiatives in countries in the North. In a joint interview (1), Jean-Baptiste Ray shows that carpooling provides important local mobility potential and contributes to the renewal of car uses, while Éléonore Pigalle calls for a critical assessment of the promotion of carpooling.

The rest of the articles in this issue are grouped around the themes of development, planning and mobility policies. In a retrospective analysis, Frédéric Héran discusses the all-pervasiveness of the car, meaning the priority given to automobiles over all other modes of travel and in all circumstances. The car is central to mobility policies in the major cities in the Northern countries. By comparing policies applied in Brussels and Paris, Jean Debrie, Juliette Maulat and Sandrine Berroir conclude that there is a standardisation of alternative policies to the car with strong incentives to switch modes of transport but few constraints to limit car use. These governmental issues are also found at the local level. Studying the development of districts around railway stations in the Montreal region, Florence Paulhiac-Scherrer and Blandine Vernier reveal how managing parking represents a challenge of coordination between transport and planning stakeholders, and also with property developers and the population. More broadly, Jérôme Laviolette, Catherine Morency and Owen Waygood observe that in Quebec, automobile mobility is continuing to grow and planning documents and infrastructure projects are not consistent with a reduction in car use, despite recognising car dependency and the associated issues, especially environmental. The French example echoes this observation. Patricia Sajous, Paul Salze and Valérie Bailly-Hascoët show that although the regulatory “landscape” is in place for reduced car use, the car remains key in the uses and the policies that are implemented. The automobile system is then transformed to cope with the requirements of sustainability. Concluding this issue, the essay by Gabriel Dupuy recalls how the car has become essential for life in territories that motorists have gradually redesigned (Dupuy, 1995). According to his analysis, solutions that would make it possible to escape dependency by redefining car-free territories lead to dead ends. Thus it is the car itself that must be called into question, by focusing on the development of the autonomous vehicle, for example.

CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THIS ISSUE

The articles in this issue agree on two main contributions. First, car use remains socially and spatially differentiated. Second, an ambitious form of public action will be required if we are

to be able to reconsider the place of the automobile.

SOCIALLY AND SPATIALLY DIFFERENTIATED USES

Ownership and use of a car bring people within the predominant norm of automobility (Urry, 2004). However, automobile mobilities are still characterised by some significant gender differences: more young women do not have their driving licence (Rérat & Haldimann), are “afraid” of driving (Belton Chevallier & Cacciari) and have less access to a car (Diaz Olvera, Plat & Pochet). This gender difference is combined with a social class difference. Young people from families where the financial situation is considered good are more likely to have a driving licence (Rérat & Haldimann); households without a car are often poorer than households with a car (Demoli, Sorin & Villareal). The lines blur when cultural capital is involved. When the level is high, less value is placed on the car (Rérat & Haldimann). A high value placed on the car is prevalent among the working classes both in Europe and in Africa (Diaz Olvera, Plat & Pochet). In France, the driving licence and access to a car have an insurance function, especially in working class households who live outside the urban centres (Rérat & Haldimann; Demoli, Sorin & Villareal; Belton Chevallier & Cacciari), which is reinforced by daily routines (Meissonnier & Richer). This long and early socialisation regarding the car means that having a car is not a subject that needs to be debated and not having one is unthinkable (Demoli, Sorin & Villareal), thus stigmatising those who no longer have one (Belton Chevallier & Cacciari).

There are still some very clear regional differences, especially between city centres and suburban or rural areas. Urban sprawl reinforces car dependency while alternatives to the car in less densely populated areas are lacking (Dupuy; Sajous, Salze & Bailly-Hascoët; Meissonnier & Richer).

PUBLIC ACTION TESTED BY THE AUTOMOBILE SYSTEM

After decades of car-centric policies (Héran), the hegemony of the automobile appears to be losing momentum, in the face of increasing environmental concerns both among users (Demoli, Sorin & Villareal) and the public authorities (Lavolette, Morency & Waygood). However, the authorities continue to design their mobility policies around the automobile (Héran; Lavolette, Morency & Waygood; Sajous, Salze & Bailly-Hascoët). They encourage the requalification of central areas and switching to other modes of transport, but without restricting car use (Debie, Maulat & Berroir; Paulhiac Scherrer & Vernier). Confronted with these policies, users adapt, without necessarily giving up the car (Meissonnier & Richer).

Changes in automobile mobility are part of a continuum that can be described as path dependence (Briggs, Webb, Clevo, 2015) or schizophrenic paths (Banister, 2008). In other words, we find ourselves in a situation where the negative externalities are identified, the issues are known, especially those associated with global warming, alternatives to the automobile

exist, but where the system continues to function as it has done for decades, with no real actions that will change the situation. Urban policies that seek to constrain the car are ambiguous because at the same time they reinforce its role (Sajous, Salze & Bailly-Hascoët).

To find a solution, public action has a key role to play: at neighbourhood level where a collaborative management approach can introduce more sustainable parking (Paulhiac Scherrer & Vernier), at city level where ambitious political support can oppose any structured resistance from motorist associations and interest groups (Debrie, Maulat & Berroir; Laviolette, Morency & Waygood), and at global level where ecological transition issues must be considered as a whole (Héran). Effective regulation of automobile traffic is only sustainable if there are good quality alternatives to the car, adapted to the users, the scale and the areas under consideration.

Although we are currently in a phase of “death” in policies promoting the private car, we are still in a phase of “life” in the practices and positive values associated with this means of transport. More than ever, it is essential to challenge the place of the car in our societies and in our regions.

(1) The interview is only available in the French version.

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