

Leaving the Car Behind

by Étienne Augris

How might societies move beyond car dependency? Dishabituation from cars will require promoting new modes of transport (bikes, trains, busses) and a “mobility license” offering increased flexibility.

Reviewed: Alexandre Rigal, *Habitudes en mouvement. Vers une vie sans voiture*, Geneva: MétisPresses, 2020, 180 p., €20.

As the climate crisis enters a critical phase that is making the negative externalities of our way of life increasingly apparent, social scientists are taking ever more of an interest in investigating the position that cars have come to occupy in our societies. Sociologists, most often in conjunction with researchers from other disciplines such as geography, philosophy, history or psychology, are trying to understand the individual and collective mechanisms that have led us to become an automotive society.

In line with John Urry’s work on mobility, they observe that:

Automobility coerces – it might be thought to be as powerful a structure as any that confronts people... It is perhaps the best example of how systematic unintended consequences get produced as a result of individual or household desires for flexibility and freedom¹.

Given these consequences, researchers have drawn pessimistic conclusions about the global failure of incentivizing or injunctive policies aimed at reducing the

¹ John Urry, *Sociology Beyond Societies. Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century*, Abingdon: Routledge, 1999 (p. 60).

place of cars in society. The geographer Jacques Lévy explains this failure thus: “In fact, a post-car society would be a different society to the one we live in.”²

Why are we so reluctant to change?

The sociologist Alexandre Rigal, who studied in Lausanne (EPF) and Berkeley, belongs to the group of people who want to push things further by exploring possible ways of moving towards a post-car society. As part of his doctorate at the EPF, he took part in the PostCarWorld interdisciplinary research program. As early as 2015, in a review of Thomas Buhler’s work on Lyon³, he deplored the fact that researchers were going no further than observing that a paradox was at play.

In the illustrated book that came out of this research, he sums up this paradox with a question: “How can it be that, having been issued repeatedly with injunctions to change, having become aware of the challenges connected to global warming, individuals seem to change so little?” (p. 9)

Rigal has decided to investigate the mechanism behind this paradox. Attempts to establish systems of “green” taxation, to take just one example, have often come up against fierce resistance from those parts of the populations concerned whose way of life and of production or whose mobilities are highly dependent on cars. In this respect, one of the weaknesses of his enquiry is that it analyzes urban spaces, at the risk of neglecting the influence of geography. Indeed, the problems people are faced with are not always the same depending on the type of space they are navigating (urban, suburban, peri-urban, rural, isolated rural). And the density of transport networks that allow for “light” forms of mobility is also variable here.

In addition, the enquiry was carried out in a country where the average standard of living more easily allows people to be freed from financial constraints. The sociologist is aware of this weak point, since he says of Switzerland that it is a “territory that is more favorable than others to not using a car, in particular in cities” (p. 35).

² Jacques Lévy, “Les au-delà de la société automobile”, *EspacesTemps.net*, 2015. The *EspacesTemps.net* journal, which was founded by J. Lévy, is a partner of the EPF and of PostCarWorld.

³ Thomas Buhler, *Déplacements urbains. Sortir de l’orthodoxie. Plaidoyer pour une prise en compte des habitudes*, Lausanne: PPUR, 2015.

Through his work, Rigal wants to move beyond pessimism. He starts his exploration of how “automotive habits” might be “weakened” by suggesting potential pathways for this. Some of these have been given new resonance by the Covid pandemic and its consequences on mobilities.

Habituation to Cars

Alexandre Rigal offers a stimulating analysis of the question of habits and habituation. Following Berger and Luckmann⁴, he defines habituation as a process, the suffix of which highlights how our learning of it always remains unfinished, even if it is elided (forgetting that we are moving around). He draws a distinction between the initial phase – that of training – to the reinforcement phase: that of habituation proper.

Even though he can draw on quantitative analyses, the author favors a qualitative approach that allows us to identify the levers we might be able to pull to move away from the car-dominated society. He promotes a politically-engaged form of sociology, even if he is careful, during the fifty or so interviews he has conducted, not to entirely reveal these intentions, and not to ask overly leading questions. This is a fundamental aspect if we are going to really understand what leads individuals – social beings – to develop a strong habituation to cars.

For his enquiry, giving the floor to intensive and uninhibited car users is just as important as giving it to people who have learned to do without a car. Putting together the sample using a “contact to contact” method nevertheless raises the question of representativeness. Rigal stands by this decision, as well as by the fact that he has not taken a quantitative approach, on the basis that he is interested in mechanisms of habituation that it would be difficult to identify using purely statistical methods.

The book provides many excerpts of the answers given by his respondents. His concern for authenticity in the way he has transcribed these can be disconcerting, since the hesitating syntax of oral speech is ill-suited to the page.

⁴ P. Berger and T. Luckmann, *La Construction sociale de la réalité*, Paris: Méridiens-Klincksieck, 1986 (1966).

Mobility Licenses

Alexandre Rigal starts with a simple premise: if we can get used to cars, we can also get unused to them. He puts forward an astute analysis of processes of habituation in order to identify the potential weak points within them that might, if taken in reverse, constitute a pathway for change.

This process seems doomed to failure if it is viewed solely as the loss of an object that is viewed as valuable both on a symbolic level and on a practical one, and is associated with freedom. It is sometimes necessary to go through the experience of one's senses to disrupt this habituation, because it is often overlooked, i.e. largely unconscious and internalized. But becoming aware of the negative aspects of something previously unquestioned is not always enough. The moments at which an individual is most likely to change their mode of transport (thanks to their "malleability") are their youth, and when they are moving house.

Together with accidents or family break-ups, these moments logically constitute shocks conducive to a possible dishabituating, which will require training in new ways of getting around (bike, train, bus), ultimately leading to new habituations and a greater "agility" (passing from one mode to another during a single trip). In other words, the author suggests that, in order to escape from this vicious circle, we must set up other, virtuous circles towards new habituations.

One suggested pathway is to weaken the symbolic and ritual value of the driving license by replacing it with a broader mobility license that would formalize the learning of active and light mobilities: "It would thus be access to mobility and not access to a car that would mark the transition to adulthood." (p. 142) In his enquiry, Rigal also explores the connections between mobility choices and political or ideological choices, seeking to establish a distinction between practices and values.

The Victorious Bicycle

In any case, the singularity of individual circumstances renders systems imposed from above inefficient. The factors of change are thus numerous and different depending on each individual, their circumstances and the space within which they move. The sociologist also suggests, amongst other things, reducing the size of cars,

promoting travel as a form of physical activity, putting forward anti-models in order to move away from injunction, and developing places where mobility can be learned within the framework of the social and solidarity economy (self-repair workshops).

There are not, ultimately, that many possible pathways, but the book provides food for thought, and allows us to identify possible levers. This is all the more true given that the car's power of habituation has contributed to profoundly anchoring it in people's practices and imaginations just as much as in space. For years, the latter has been shaped to the needs of cars, before environmental awareness started to challenge this paradigm. But dishabituation turns out to be very complex, and will probably take as much time as the century of habituation...

An essential point in the book, and one that resonates powerfully with the current situation, is the realization, through a sudden change, of the possible and positive effects of dishabituation from cars. Alexandre Rigal recalls moments in the past when traffic was reduced due to a crisis (in 1956 during the Suez crisis, in 1973 during the oil crisis) and notes the importance of car-free days that are regularly organized in various places.

In urban environments, the first lockdown in the spring of 2020 allowed many city-dwellers to realize how their sound and olfactory environment changed as cars stopped driving around. The rise of working from home and the development of alternative forms of distribution could contribute to a dishabituation from cars, even if it is still too early to say.

A survey carried out by the Capgemini consultancy firm in June 2020³ reveals the paradoxical effects of the lockdown (decrease in carpooling and using public transport in some cases). In contrast, bicycles, which Rigal has extensively studied, will probably be one of the winners of the "After Times". In Paris, for example, bicycle traffic increased by 50% between May 2019 and May 2020. When temporary infrastructure that had been set up during the first lockdown was made permanent, this reopened the debate on the respective places of cars and bicycles in the city.

The situation may ultimately turn out to be favorable to light mobilities which, while they have been growing, are still faced with multiple obstacles. Among the

³ Capgemini, "Les mots du jour d'après : mobilité" (2020). My thanks go to C.-A. Boivin for making me aware of this survey.

suggestions made by the French Citizen Convention on the Climate, there are numerous measures aimed at reducing the place and use of cars on our roads.

Further Reading

- *EspacesTemps.net* [special edition on the PostCarWorld project](#).
- Thomas Buhler, *Déplacements urbains : sortir de l'orthodoxie. Plaidoyer pour une prise en compte des habitudes*, Lausanne: PPUR, 2015
- Yoann Demoli and Pierre Lannoy, *Sociologie de l'automobile*, La Découverte, 2019.

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