

Automotive Society

About: Yoann Demoli and Pierre Lannoy, *Sociologie de l'automobile* La Découverte

by *Étienne Augris*

Cars are everywhere. Motorisation owes its success to a product that satisfies individual aspirations, combined with the consumption boom and the appetite for urban transport. But do cars put us on the road to emancipation or alienation?

Cars occupy a central place in our society. This is clear from the importance of car-related costs and regulations in the demands of France's *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests movement) and from the fact that their first demonstrations took place on roundabouts. Strangely, this subject has attracted little attention from sociologists, who have approached it only as part of their studies on cities, consumption and crime.

Yoann Demoli and Pierre Lannoy, sociologists at Versailles-Saint-Quentin University and at the Université libre de Bruxelles, have become very familiar with this subject. Thanks to this understanding, their concise work uses the car as a lens through which to observe society. This information-packed, well-structured little book offers an overview of a century of sociology about cars, primarily in France and the United States.

The mechanisms underlying the spread of cars

The book begins with a retrospective panorama of how cars have spread since they were invented in the second half of the 19th century. They spread downwards, from the wealthiest to the poorest classes, and slowly, despite significant variations between European and American societies (the United States experienced a faster transition from a vehicle for sporting feats, to a leisure vehicle, to an everyday tool). In Europe, this tipping point came during the “Trente Glorieuses”, the three prosperous decades following the Second World War, when motorisation progressed fast.

Beyond the economic analyses that might make the individual look like a passive, fixed agent who is simply part of a group, the authors strive to explain the underlying social factors that drove this spread. The success of motorisation comes down to manufacturers offering a product suited to individual aspirations, aided by the consumption boom, democratic individualism and the appetite for urban transport.

Following in the footsteps of Barthes, who studied the Citroën DS in his *Mythologies* (1957), and of Bourdieu, the authors use the notion of distinction. The values associated with the car in its early days, such as refinement and independence, “made travel a noble activity once more” (p. 24). They then show how “the added social value of this purchase decreased as its price fell and it became more widespread in society” (p. 25). Some consider that the final form of this distinction is giving up cars, which is now associated with symbolic profits.

The journey to an entirely car-centric society in the 20th century demonstrates the capacity of the “road-engine complex” to impose a “supposedly objective technical discourse, which is in fact socially biased” (p. 34). The pervasiveness of this discourse explains many of the current barriers to change. The “automobile bloc”, as Alfred Sauvy called it, integrated the negative externalities, long offset by the positive internal effects (the benefits for individuals).

Colonising imaginations

The motorisation of societies is the result of social, industrial and political conditions, but also of a cultural construct. In keeping with the ideas of Pareto from 1917, the colonisation of the imaginary space is briefly evoked, in a reference to the role of cinema that would have benefitted from some examples. Television (except for advertisements that perpetuate the division of tasks along gender lines) and music are not mentioned. The analysis of references to the Ford Model T in the blues (price and robustness¹) might nuance its negative representations. More recently, in hip-hop, cars have become a symbol of success. The music of certain artists is created primarily to be played in the car, particularly the work of Dr Dre².

The authors offer an overview of car usage, highlighting the ongoing social disparities, despite the vertical and horizontal spread of motorisation and the intensification of infrastructure. They show that social position, sex and age remain important, with choices also influenced by a need to combine different projects (residential, familial, professional) and juggle various constraints. They rightly assert that “an individual’s habits don’t necessarily correspond to their perceptions” (p. 51). The passages on model and colour choice, or on “tailgate militants” are fascinating. As Hervé Marchal says, “a car is much more than a just a commercial product or just a means of transport” (p. 29).

The integration of the spatial dimension into the analysis of societies brings a finer understanding of the debates on the place of cars. The current decrease of car usage in cities goes hand in hand with the continuation, or even increase, of its role in peri-urban and rural spaces. The perceived difficulty of an everyday journey is linked not only to its length and arduousness, but also to whether we experience it as a constraint or an opportunity within the context of a social position and trajectory³.

The transformations of the city seem to be intrinsically linked to the car, from the “walking city”, to the car-centric city, and even the “transit city” of public transport. Cars allow a spatial spread in which various types of territories are connected, each having different forms, social characteristics and functions. The car is

¹ Jean-Paul Levet, *Talkin’ That Talk. Le langage du blues et du jazz*, Kargo, 2003. For examples, see the histgeobox website: <http://histgeobox.blogspot.com/2009/09/181-walter-roland-t-model-blues-1933.html>

² Justin A. Williams, “‘Cars with the Boom’: Music, Automobility, and Hip-hop ‘Sub’ Cultures” in Sumanth Gopinath and Jason Stanyek (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Mobile Music Studies*, vol. 2, OUP, 2014.

³ Catherine Mougenot, “Le problème des migrations alternantes”, *L’Espace géographique*, vol. 14, n° 3, 1985. It could have been enriched by using the works of other geographers, particularly Armand Frémont’s notion of the “lived space”.

a connection, but it is also a way of avoiding social and spatial otherness. SUV owners are a textbook case, with their lifestyle connected to peri-urbanisation and an intensive consumption of space.

The impossible move away from cars

In a recent contribution to the AOC website, the authors expand on their work, by putting the barriers to change in perspective: “Individual desires for a shift come up against spatio-temporal constraints that prevent change”. Incentive-based policies have

“a flip-side: they make it impossible to see or express both deep conflicts in our relationship to cars and disappointing discrepancies, for some, between their aspirations and the real possibilities of reducing their car usage”.

They therefore advocate returning to a political debate, rather than just a technocratic one. They seek to dismantle the mechanisms behind the domination of a narrative that has favoured the very conditions of motorisation, while maintaining a scientific approach based on theoretical reflections and lots of empirical data. Sometimes, these resources are critical, for example Ivan Illich (and Jacques Ellul⁴).

Unfortunately, the book remains limited or vague in its analysis regarding Germany, the United Kingdom and Italy, and about the connections between Ford’s rural roots and his concept of cars as merchandise (p. 8). There are few references to societies outside of Europe, despite the relevance of Japan, China and still little-motorised societies.

Nevertheless, the book is a successful overview. The cover and its motorway (a seemingly unobstructed road to a bright future) are a reasonable summary of certain aspects of the book and the paradoxes of the car. However, the image has a somewhat dubious caption, evoking “rush hour on the M25, Hampshire”, when the traffic doesn’t look especially heavy for this orbital motorway encircling Greater London... which does not pass through Hampshire!

⁴ Jacques Ellul, *Le système technicien*, Calmann-Lévy, 1977

Yoann Demoli and Pierre Lannoy, *Sociologie de l'automobile* (The Sociology of Cars), Paris, La Découverte, 2018. 128 pages, €10.

Related reading

- Jean-Claude Daumas, *La révolution matérielle. Une histoire de la consommation* (France, XIXe-XXIe siècles), Paris, Flammarion, 2018.
- Yoann Demoli et Pierre Lannoy, “Le grand écart de l’automobilisme contemporain : un incontournable terrain sociopolitique”, AOC, 8 March 2019: <https://aoc.media/analyse/2019/03/08/grand-ecart-de-lautomobilisme-contemporain-incontournable-terrain-sociopolitique/>
- Jean-François Doulet (maps by Aurélie Boissière), *Atlas de l'automobile*, Paris, Autrement, 2018.
- Éric Le Breton, *Mobilité, la fin du rêve ?*, Rennes, Apogée, 2019.
- Hervé Marchal, *Un sociologue au volant. Le rapport de l'individu à sa voiture en milieu urbain*, Paris, L'Harmattan, Tétraèdre, 2014.