

1. Essential reading



Autokorrektur, by Katja Diehl

Mobilität für eine lebenswerte Welt

By Franziska Meinherz (Sociologist)
06 November 2023

With *Autokorrektur* (translation: *Autocorrect - Mobility for a world worth living in*), Katja Diehl's goal is clear: to allow everyone to live well without being dependent on car ownership. In her view, the current car use is a privilege of a minority, to the detriment of the majority. By drawing on scientific research into why automobiles are the dominant form of mobility, and by focusing on the full range and diversity of individual needs and practices, Katja Diehl has thrust into the German public debate the possibility of alternative, inclusive mobility systems that are centred around people, their needs and their well-being.

Advocating for a mobility transition

In recent years, the need for a transition to more sustainable mobility has been widely recognised, but opinions as to which form it should take differ. This is true in Germany, where debates around mobility have entered the political sphere. While the Minister of Transport focuses on technological innovations, activists are blocking roads to demand a speed limit on freeways, and an increasing number of towns are introducing policies to reduce car use in favour of active mobility and to improve community well being. Katja Diehl's book, *Autokorrektur*, is part of this political trend. In it, she calls for "a society that, without further ado, strives to build a mobility that is attractive, pleasant to experience and sustainable". The book's arguments are not new to experts, but they are designed to mobilise the general public on these issues. It charts the evolution of automobility in Germany, and the political instruments that have facilitated it and continue to guarantee its power today. Readers familiar with these issues may find it interesting to learn more about the particular German context, but Katja Diehl's book mainly stands out for its impact on the national debate. It caused a major stir in political and social debates on the future of mobility, a fierce and polarising topic in the land of the car industry. When the book was published, Diehl was immediately hailed as the figurehead of those advocating for a new mobility system, but she also became the target of hateful backlash from those defending the current system.

The author: a mobility expert from the world of communications

Katja Diehl has a lot of experience working in communications and marketing. She also developed a blog and a podcast in which she discusses issues of mobility and female leadership. Over the years, she has become a mobility expert and consultant. *Autokorrektur*, published in 2022 by Fischer, is her first book, and it won the Economy Book Reader's Award. Following its publication, Diehl became political advisor to the Austrian Minister for Climate, Environment, Energy, Mobility, Innovation and Technology, as well as to the Baden-Württemberg Minister of Transport.

Purpose and scope of the book

Katja Diehl's book is primarily aimed at car owners and drivers. In it she asks them the following question: "Do you want or need to drive?" Readers are invited to question their mobility and their vision of the city. Throughout the book, Diehl draws on historical analyses and statistics on mobility in Germany, on figures detailing the economic and political weight of the car industry, and above all on forty interviews she conducted with people from different social backgrounds, some car owners and others not. Based on this, her conclusion is that car mobility is an obligation rather than a choice. She calls for a mobility transition that puts an end to car dependence, thereby offering everyone the freedom to shape their mobility according to their desires. To achieve this goal, she advocates for political solutions that focus on developing alternatives while, simultaneously, imposing constraints on cars.

Autokorrektur is first and foremost a book about urban mobility, since, according to its author, cities are where the mobility transition can be spearheaded, not least because alternatives to private cars already exist there. The challenge today is not to propose new concepts and visions or to develop new technologies, but to overcome the obstacles to their implementation. With *Autokorrektur*, Katja Diehl wants to show that the mobility transition is possible, and to motivate her readers to get involved.

Germany's (auto)mobility policy through the lens of social and gender inequalities

One of the book's main themes is the gendered dimension of mobility. *Autokorrektur* begins with a brief history of automobility in Germany, from the perspective of the role played (or not played) by women. This historical overview intends to show that car dependence is not inevitable; rather it is the consequence of political and economic strategies that can be challenged. Katja Diehl tells the story of two pioneers of automobility: Bertha Benz, the first person to perform a long-distance car trip, and Sophie Opel, who used her late husband's bicycle and sewing machine factory to develop automobiles. Automobility has not always been synonymous with masculinity: this association was built up over the course of history. The book moves on to the history of bicycle and pedestrian mobility as the mobility of the working classes and therefore, among others, of working women. The example of the bicycle demonstrations organised by the suffragettes shows that laws governing the separation of road space implemented when car use grew penalised the mobility of the majority, and in particular that of women.

Diehl also looks back at the rise of automobility in Germany in the aftermath of the Second World War, facilitated not only by paradigm shifts in urban planning inherited from the Third Reich's promotion of cars, but also by the place given to cars in the rebuilding plans for bombed-out cities. Nevertheless, she recalls that the best-selling vehicles of the time were mopeds and motorcycles, while automobiles remained out of reach for the majority of the population.

The rest of the book analyses the recent mobility policy in Germany, which produces and reinforces a number of social and gender inequalities, notably through subsidies such as tax benefits for diesel engine cars, tax deductions for commuting by car and the right to a state-subsidised company car, which primarily benefits high-income earners and men. Automobility, and therefore men's mobility, also profits from public investment policy: investment in German public transport is far lower than investment in the road network, and below that of neighbouring countries. This policy penalises women, who use

public transport more than men. Diehl recalls an argument made in feminist geography and mobility studies

Notes

1 public transport planning is based on the typical mobility needs of men, not least because transport planning committees are largely made up of men ².

While social and gender inequalities are central to Katja Diehl's work, she also highlights other shortcomings of the German mobility policy. For example, company car entitlement slows down the electrification of the car fleet: while more than half of new car registrations in Germany are company cars, the tax structure makes it more advantageous for companies to offer combustion engine models than electric ones.

Katja Diehl also challenges road safety, arguing that we should "restore the principle of road equality" as a key condition for the mobility transition. Readers are invited to view the city through a child's eye. Children have been progressively excluded from streets, and it has become impossible for them to play on sidewalks or move around town without adult supervision due to the dangers of road traffic. As a result, caregivers (especially women) are also penalised. It is therefore necessary to reduce fatal road accidents to zero, which will require a radical change of direction in urban planning. And yet, in Germany, efforts to reduce the number of accidents continue to focus on in-car technological solutions.

Germany, the automobile country

A book on automobility in Germany would not be complete without an analysis of the political role of the automotive industry, which Autokorrektur does not shy away from. The book looks at the political campaign waged by Volkswagen's CEO during the last federal elections to promote legislation that would help its company's strategy, one of the few to focus primarily on producing electric cars in the coming years. Katja Diehl also highlights the many German institutions whose sole purpose is to facilitate exchanges between automotive industry representatives and political decision-makers.

The figures cited are impressive. They provide an insight into the manoeuvres used by German manufacturers to derail the European strategy to phase out combustion engines. Industry representatives quoted in the book acknowledge that German manufacturers' lack of adaptability to a world tending towards greater electric mobility could lead to bankruptcies in this field. And yet, Katja Diehl remains optimistic. According to her, the industry could adapt and offer solutions that would enable the electrification of automobility to be part of a transition towards multimodal mobility systems, in which cars would be shared. This optimism clashes with A. Katharina Keil and Julia K. Steinberger's analysis of the German automotive industry. They conclude that even if German manufacturers were to go electric, the profit imperative would push them to continue down a path that severely limits the social and ecological potential of electrification ³.

Diehl also deconstructs the recurrent argument that one in seven jobs in Germany is directly dependent on the automotive industry. For Diehl, this figure is a political construct, which takes into account a whole range of occupations with little or no connection to the automotive industry, including forestry companies, service stations and infrastructure maintenance. Nevertheless, she insists that a mobility transition can only be achieved with the sector's employees, by offering them alternative jobs that will enable them to put their skills to work in service of the energy transition.

For a mobility that meets the needs of every individual

For Katja Diehl, a mobility transition is only possible if everyone benefits from real alternatives to car ownership, whatever their mobility needs. She therefore conducted forty interviews designed to

understand why people use a car or not, paying particular attention to the diversity of profiles: people who have given up their car for health reasons and find themselves penalised for doing so; people who depend on their car for leisure activities, to get to work, or to juggle the various tasks of domestic life, but would like to make do without it; people who use the car to escape certain forms of discrimination and street harassment; people without a driving license who feel like minors in a society where every adult is supposed to be able to drive; people with disabilities who find it impossible to use public transport; urban cyclists; the elderly, or people living in poverty who live in rural areas and find it impossible to reach neighbouring communities where they can access essential services. Diehl also interviewed a child, inviting him to draw the city as he sees it, and then to draw the city of his dreams. These drawings prompted a conversation between Diehl and the child, who stressed the importance for him of having a park next door, which he can easily visit and where his fox friends live. The child's utopian city combines realistic proposals, such as a better separation between motorists and cyclists (he loves cycling), with more surreal ones such as bridges linking the roofs of all the buildings in the city.

With a few exceptions, Diehl's analysis of these interviews focuses on the mobility needs of different people, on the reasons why some of them depend on cars, and why others, who do not drive for various reasons, are penalised by a mobility system organised around cars. When it comes to the mobility of the elderly, it is worth pointing out that Diehl is not so much interested in their need for mobility as in the dangers generated by them continuing to drive.

A central theme that emerges from many of the interviews, and that Diehl emphasises, is the link between the spatial-temporal organisation of life and car dependency. This is a well-known argument, particularly well covered in the works of Guillaume Drevon and Vincent Kaufmann in the French-speaking context⁴, and of Caroline Kramer⁵ in the German context.

The main conclusion Diehl draws from her forty interviews is that a mobility system in which everyone can satisfy their mobility needs without the need to own a car would contribute to a more inclusive and just society. She also highlights the mobility challenges specific to suburban and rural areas, and argues that it is in these territories that the mobility transition is most urgent.

A useful book for a wide audience, despite some inconsistencies in its arguments and methodology

Autokorrektur has brought into the public debate the challenges of a mobility transition that takes social inequalities into account. As a result, many topics addressed in the book are also the subject of a lot of social science research on mobility, yet Katja Diehl largely ignores this, except in her reflections on the city, for which she draws explicitly and at some length on Leslie Kern's book *Feminist City*⁶. It is unclear whether this lack of engagement with scientific work forms part of a deliberate choice to avoid academic jargon and to give the book a more popular tone, or whether it is due to Katja Diehl's background. Nevertheless, the lack of engagement with scientific literature underlines the book's mission, which is not primarily to describe and analyse current and historical trends in mobility policy, but to contribute to change. Diehl presents analyses to defend the mobility transition as she imagines it.

It is here, however, that we find inconsistencies in the book's reasoning, with a noticeable discrepancy between the issues raised by Diehl and the concrete proposals for the mobility transition that she puts forth. Firstly, she recognises that the rise of automobility has gone hand-in-hand not only with a paradigm shift in urban planning, but also with suburbanisation and a functional separation of space requiring ever more and ever longer trips. In fact, the interviews she conducted led her to conclude that it is the people who live in the countryside who are most in need of a mobility transition. Yet *Autokorrektur* focuses on cities and urban mobility, and the proposals Diehl puts forward in the conclusion are concepts and measures that affect the urban centre, such as the fifteen-minute city or superblocks. Secondly, while she meticulously presents the political and economic interconnections that have built and still contribute to the German automotive hegemony, she insists that change would

be possible if enough people began to see the benefits of a society freed from car dependence. However, this perspective overlooks the power relations that form the basis of the automobility system, and which have been exposed by Giulio Mattioli and others⁷.

Furthermore, while one of the book's real strengths is how it engages with a plurality of mobility experiences and social conditions - something which is still lacking in scientific research - her interview sampling presents methodological weaknesses. Diehl does not specify how she found her interviewees, although, reading between the lines, it appears that she mainly recruited them via X (Twitter). Such a sampling strategy would explain why Diehl seems to have struggled to find low-income profiles or trans people. While she strives to illustrate various mobility needs by giving a voice to those concerned, when she talks about situations of poverty, she draws largely on interviews she conducted with researchers specialising in this field. And when she talks about issues specific to trans people, one of her two interviewees lives in Mumbai, while all the other interviews were conducted with people living in Germany and therefore concern the specific situation in Germany.

Despite these shortcomings, *Autokorrektur* is an excellent introduction to the mobility debates currently raging in Germany and causing major political divisions. The public reception of the book shows how topical and pressing these debates are. Following its publication, Katja Diehl became an in-demand mobility expert for the media and politicians of all stripes. She also became the subject of a hate campaign led by far-right actors that threatened her personal safety. *Autokorrektur*'s ability to reach and engage with a wide audience is clearly the book's strong point, and bears witness to its author's experience in the fields of communication and consulting. By giving a voice to those who are marginalised in the mobility system, Katja Diehl mobilises our moral conscience to help us understand the urgent need for profound change. At the same time, it manages to vigorously dissect the many problems posed by automobility, without ever making those who drive feel guilty. With *Autokorrektur*, Katja Diehl defends a clear political position without seeking to divide, calling upon a form of empathy that invites us to consider the mobility transition first and foremost as a matter of solidarity.

1 See, for example, Tummers, L. (2015). Stéréotypes de genre dans la pratique de l'urbanisme. [Gender stereotypes in urban planning practice.] *Travail, genre et sociétés*, (1), 67-83, and Cresswell, T. (2016). *Gendered mobilities*. Routledge.

2 Scholten, C. L., & Joelsson, T. (Eds.). (2019). *Integrating gender into transport planning: From one to many tracks*. Springer.

3 Keil, A. K., & Steinberger, J. K. (2023). Cars, capitalism and ecological crises: understanding systemic barriers to a sustainability transition in the German car industry. *New Political Economy*, p.1-21.

4 Drevon, G., & Kaufmann, V. (2022). Vers une rythmologie des sociétés mobiles. *Échelles spatiales et temporelles de la mobilité* [Towards a rhythmology of mobile societies. Spatial and temporal scales of mobility], p. 253-259.

5 Kramer, C. (2005). *Zeit für Mobilität: räumliche Disparitäten der individuellen Zeitverwendung für Mobilität in Deutschland*. Franz Steiner Verlag.

6 Kern, L. (2021). *Feminist city: Claiming space in a Man-Made World*. Verso Books.

7 Mattioli, G., Roberts, C., Steinberger, J. K., & Brown, A. (2020). The political economy of car dependence: A systems of provision approach. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 66, 101486.

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication

industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

En savoir plus x

Active Mobility

Active mobility refers to all forms of travel that require human energy (i.e. non-motor) and the physical effort of the person moving. Active mobility occurs via modes themselves referred to as “active,” namely walking and cycling.

En savoir plus x

Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- Cars / motorcycles
- Living environments
- Diversity of lifestyles
- Inequalities

Policies

- Cars
- Ecological transition
- Cities & Territories

Theories

- History



Franziska Meinherz

Sociologist

Franziska Meinherz is Assistant Professor at the Karlsruher Institut für Technologie (KIT). She heads the “Geography of Cities and Mobility” group. Her research focuses on mobility practices, social justice issues related to mobility, and urban and mobility transformations related to decarbonization.

To cite this publication :

Franziska Meinherz (16 November 2023), « Autokorrektur, by Katja Diehl », Préparer la transition mobile. Consulté le 21 November 2024, URL: <https://forumviesmobiles.org/en/essential-readings/15952/autokorrektur-katja-diehl>

Other publications



Can universities learn to leave behind air travel?

Tamara Ben Ari, Parke Wilde



The impact of the teleworking revolution on the growth of megacities (Paris, London, New York)

BVA Xsight



Have metropolitan mobility policies been redefined by the Covid pandemic?

Jean Debie, Juliette Maulat



The combined use of bicycles and trains in the Netherlands: a promising mode of transport in a suitable environment

Javier Caletrío