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Taking on America's car culture



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This talk is about emerging cultures of mobility, and I want to think about why in the United States we seem so fixed in car culture and what I call “automobility”. It can be very disheartening that it seems like we’ll never change and that we have this system which some call a “dinosaur system” based on fossil fuels. On the other hand there does seem to be some hope that there is the beginnings of a transition, so I wanted to think about where the possible openings of a transition starting are, and where it is leading, how we will change and when that change will take place.

So what are the prospects for new cultures of mobility in the United States? Of course we know that the United States in a way is behind some other countries in terms of using more fuel-efficient vehicles, and the landscape itself is more dominated by cars than many European landscapes. I started thinking about this dominant culture of automobility and how it’s kind of built into our forms of where we live, our dwellings, our neighbourhoods, but also our patterns of familial life, of friendship, of networks, of how we connect with people, how families move around and join up with each other. So car cultures are not just about a transportation choice, but they have all of these dimensions of affective or emotional resonance because we think of them as a way to keep our children safe or a way to help our grandparents get around. So the

choice to drive a car is not really a rational choice, it's part of these emotional ties and these networks of sociability. It's also a kind of embodied sensibility that's embedded in our whole way of life in the United States, so it's very hard to say "you should just ride a bike" or "try walking" because the car is so closely linked to these whole modes of life, these ways of living. How can we change that without deeper cultural shifts?

The stubborn stability of automobility

I looked back a little bit at when there have been efforts to change our car culture in the United States, and one example is in the 1970s. We had a law, nationally, to reduce the speed limit from 70 mph to 55 mph on national highways, and that law reduced the number of crashes and fatalities.

It increased the fuel efficiency of our overall fleet of cars nationally, but the law was introduced because of the oil crisis and the rise in prices. When that subsided under the presidency of Ronald Reagan, the law was overturned and we went back to raising our speed limit again. We forgot the lessons of the oil crisis, and in fact we briefly had smaller cars but we went back again to larger cars. What's happened is we've also developed technologies that make cars more fuel-efficient, so instead of driving a smaller and more fuel-efficient car, we took those technologies and we said "we can make a bigger car now; we'll make a bigger, faster car but it will be a little bit more efficient than the old bigger car". So we ended up sort of counteracting any good that could have come from any of those policies. I call that the stubborn stability of automobility: it won't go away.

We've also had opportunities for people to ride bikes more, and there's been promotions of bicycling and building more bike infrastructure, but in many US cities it created what some people call "bike wars", which are wars between bicyclists and drivers, or wars between bicyclists and pedestrians.

A lot of people don't like the bicyclists and they don't want the bicycle infrastructure, and it's really only very recently that there's been some sort of major changes on that front in cities like New York. To some extent in Philadelphia it's starting to happen, but it's taken very active municipal government and policy-makers to promote these kinds of changes, and it still seems like a very uneven transition.

Transition demands experimenting with change at different levels

I wrote about some of these issues in a chapter in a book called “Automobility in Transition? A Socio-Technical Analysis of Sustainable Transport”. It’s edited by René Kemp, Geoff Dudley, Frank Geels and Glenn Lyons. In this book we use what’s called “multi-level transition perspective”, and I want to just talk about that a little bit because for me it’s a way of understanding the complexity of why things are difficult to change. In the multi-level perspective we start with a niche level, which is everyday experimentation with alternative mobilities. We have people trying to do things like walking more, or cycling, or transitory interdevelopment, promoting what are called complete streets or liveable cities. There are many movements in the United States that are trying to do all of those things, but the niche level is just kind of local, and it’s small and it doesn’t affect the system as a whole.

The next level is what we call the regime level. The regime is where you have these more dominant interests which are both the industries and things like car-makers, oil refiners, oil-drilling companies and also government, and how those are kind of locked into a sort of existing regime that’s institutionalised, and that’s harder to change. So you might be able to change the individual and give them alternatives and new technologies, but how do you change the regime-level culture, which is more locked in?

Lastly, above that we have what’s called the landscape level. The landscape level changes even more slowly. These are things like resources, energy, access to oil, climate change, the large geological processes, but also I think of all of these levels being cultural. So you can have the sort of everyday practices of embodied movement at the niche level, and then at the regime level you can have how things are culturally framed, what the ways are of understanding and contesting different cultures of mobility. At the landscape level we have these kind of master discourses, these things that guide our understanding of mobility, and those change very slowly. For example the idea that mobility equals freedom is hard to change; you can’t make that go away. Or that we need to value things economically, or rationally to make decisions. Those are the kind of landscape-level cultural frames. So culture in this view is not just a tool, it’s not just a kind of resource that’s used by actors, but it’s also a performative part of how our environment and our technology is materialised. It’s kind of an embedded culture built into our world and it’s built into our understanding of the world.

A desire for change

So looking back then at the United States, we have surveys that show how Americans get to work, for example commuting: 77% of people in these surveys from the US Census Bureau drive alone in a car to work - 77% , that's a huge percentage. Another 10% carpool, less than 4% use public transportation, 2 .5% walk to work and only 0.4%, I think it's up to 0.5% now, bicycle; so a huge amount of people driving alone, still.

Yet when they do some surveys of American voters, for example recently a Transportation for America survey found that 66% of the people surveyed wanted options besides driving, and 58% favoured spending more on public transportation, 51% were willing to have their taxes increased to improve mass transit and 82% said that the United States would benefit from an expanded and an improved transportation system such as rail and buses. It seems like there is a push for change, there are people who would like things to change, but 73% said they currently feel they have no choice but to drive as much as they do. So despite our desire to change we feel we have no choice; we feel we're stuck in this mode.

What are the possible openings, what are the ways of changing this? People have envisioned different ways to go about this and there are movements of non-governmental organisations, like the National Complete Streets Coalition, Transportation for America, Smart Growth America, the Streets Blog, and the Liveable Streets Initiative. These are all groups who are promoting different ways of thinking about transitory interdevelopment, making walking and bicycle-friendly communities a priority and changing the way we develop our cities. In my own city in Philadelphia there have been changes happening. The citywide plan for 2035 includes complete streets, intermodal stations, new and extended transit lines and also the idea of smart highways and changing the way we use mobile communication technologies to guide traffic. So those things are changing but we also seem to need a more radical change, and I see two directions that this is starting to happen in the United States.

Scenario 1: On demand mobility

One example is from the MIT Media Lab, who have created what they call a "mobility on demand" system. This would be for an inner-central city area, and it involves small electric vehicles that would be shared in a network system. It would be both motorbikes and small cars that actually fold up when they are parked, and you can fit them into a small space. Then there'd be a sort of network car-sharing system, or vehicle-sharing system, to access these vehicles. I think one vision is that we'd have high-speed rail connecting our cities and then have these kinds of shared mobility-on-

demand systems inside the cities. That's one future scenario.

Scenario 2: Intelligent highways could take control of driving

But the other future scenario that seems to have more support in the United States, including backing from the Department of Transportation, is an idea of what are called "intelligent highways". On these intelligent highways we would basically give up control of our cars; we would still be in our private vehicles, but the control of them would be given over to the highway itself and there would be an automated driverless system. A lot of research money is being put into these driverless, automated highway systems, which is a dream that goes back to the 1930s. All through the 20th century there's been the dream of the automated highway but we're getting closer to it, we're getting closer to the technologies that will enable both the vehicles and the road infrastructure to basically take control of driving. Where I see that leading is that we will then no longer associate driving a car with freedom because we won't be on the "free and open road", driving along in the desert. Instead we'll just be in these controlled systems, and in fact many of the control systems are military technologies. The military is heavily invested in creating driverless vehicles, things like drones we see already flying around, but they want to bring that down to the road system.

So my conclusion is that what might actually lead to the transition in our mobility system is not green or sustainable transformations, and a sort of movement towards walking and bicycling, but it may actually be these new technologies that bring in new forms of governance and control of mobility. They might have unexpected outcomes, and other ways in which they are culturally problematic that are different than the problems we have now, but may not be such a desirable solution, ultimately.

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