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walking from
the carMIKE FEATHERSTONE, NIGEL THRIFT, AND
JOHN URRY (EDS)*Automobilities*

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Social and cultural research related to issues of human mobility has enjoyed a recent surge of interest. Psychological research, based on a focus on individual personality with some consideration of social norms, has been central in road safety and has informed policy for some time. Meanwhile, transport issues have been approached from a planning perspective based on instrumental needs and functionality. Mobility research is bringing together the wider issues of human mobility and its emerging forms, the limitations and implications of attachment to the private car and most importantly, addressing and investigating the symbolic and cultural dimensions of automobility. The book *Automobilities*, edited by Mike Featherstone, Nigel Thrift and John Urry, focuses on the particular popularity and attachment to car travel and, while it employs some of the latest post-modern thinking relevant to mobilities research, nevertheless keeps sight of policy and planning implications. Social researchers are not only considering the ambiguities and complexities of experience involved in mobility, they are also getting their hands dirty, as Jörg Beckman puts it, in being involved in transport politics.¹

Social research has begun to impact significantly in fields such as transport and road safety, extending the investigation of car use beyond functionality. A recent edition of the European journal *Transportation Research Part A* focused on the benefits of travel beyond a means to an end and thus looked at some of the symbolic or meaningful aspects of car use.² The papers in the edition challenged the assumption that 'travel is a disutility to be minimised', which is the basis of most policy, planning and

models of travel.³ Exploring the 'positive utility' of travel involved adding to the list of reasons for travel—adventure-seeking, exposure to the environment and physical exercise, amongst others—and modeling the purpose of travel to include liking for travel.⁴ Steg identified instrumental, affective and symbolic motives, and found that affective and symbolic motives were a stronger influence on use of the car for commuting. Policies intended to reduce car use would do well to focus beyond the instrumental advantages of car use.

Other papers in this journal edition looked at information gain as a component of utility for travel (Arentze and Timmermans), a typology of excess driving (Handy, et al), the contribution of travel to physical exercise (Mackett et al), the economic valuation of travel time (Hess et al) and changes in the use of travel time (Lyons and Urry).⁵ These papers, on the whole, have added dimensions to the way in which travel and car use are viewed from a policy perspective. While in some of the papers the symbolic reasons for car use are considered complementary to the instrumental rather than implicit, social research can nevertheless be seen here to complement the abstracted engineering and rationalist models of travel that dominate in policy. These additional aspects are important, but they do not necessarily challenge the assumed neutrality of the car as a technology and the meanings implicit in the car itself and the systems that facilitate its use.

Automobilities brings together a collection of essays that explore cars as a technology in combination with drivers and other significant

aspects of culture that contribute to the prevalence of cars (unlike analyses that look at cars and drivers as separate entities). The essays in *Automobilities* enter into the arena of transport research with new perspectives, employing a range of recent social and cultural theoretical developments to highlight the implicit meanings of cars and car use as an integral part of car systems themselves. Mimi Sheller and John Urry had previously challenged the underlying neutrality of the car in sociological research and outlined a range of ways in which cars and car networks have significantly shaped social life.⁶ Urry, in his chapter in *Automobilities*, further highlights the 'system' of automobility and how the petroleum fuelled car and the petrol system became 'locked in'.

Urry's emphasis in the book however is on alternative thinking, and he thus outlines potential post-car patterns of mobility indicated by six technical-economic, policy and social transformations that in their 'dynamic interdependence' (33) might bring about new systems of mobility. These include not only new forms of fuel from electric to hydrogen and methanol fuels, and new materials for car construction making cars lighter and needing less powerful engines, but also 'smart-card' technology. The information transfer involved in the 'smart-card' could help to de-personalise cars—making them more like 'portals' via systems that use the same means of paying for the use of a car as for use of a bus or train. Cars are also being de-privatised through car sharing, car clubs and car-hire schemes, particularly in Europe.

The recognition in transport policy that merely providing more roads on the basis of predicted usage only increases car dependence is noted, as are alternatives being developed, including computer-mediated intermodality, integrated public transport, cycling and pedestrian facilities, and advanced traffic management. Meanwhile, communications including the internet, are creating 'hybrid mobilities' and potentially reducing the need for travel. Urry optimistically entertains the possibility of a tip in consumer demand and other factors that will create new systems of mobility. While attachment to the internal combustion engine powered private car is going to take some time to erode, it is important that alternative possibilities are being imagined and developed. Those outlined by Urry are not only being entertained, they exist in meaningful forms that are already having an impact on the way mobility is being thought about. A new system is likely to emerge in unpredictable ways nevertheless, Urry warns.

The ways in which car travel is lived are central to a number of the essays in the book. Though such essays can appear to be defending car use, they result in traditional ideas of car travel and car systems being redefined. Nigel Thrift, drawing on and exploring de Certeau's phenomenological account of walking in the city, reworks it in relation to changes in spatial organisation and forms of mobility through the car in his exploration of *driving* in the city. Walking may seem purer than driving in a sense important to de Certeau, but much walking now, Thrift points out, is to and from the car. At

the same time the car itself has also changed significantly, incorporating many developments in software and ergonomics—thus changing the experience of *driving*. Merriman's discussion challenges Marc Augé's categorisation of motorways as non-places and considers the social interaction involved in travelling on the M1 Motorway in England.⁷

The car as a shaping force in itself is further explored in Tim Dant's account of the assemblage of driver-car as a form of social being that produces a range of social actions associated with the car. Through the idea of 'affordance' he examines the car as offering both mobility and motility as spontaneous and independent movement. As an affordance, the car has a real physical resistance that has shaped and is shaped by human action. The concept of affordance contributes to considering the car/human relationship and the ways in which, as material object, the car nevertheless shapes human relations. Dant's analysis shows that drawing on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology allows a more effective encapsulation of the car-driver assemblage as an embodied experience whereby intentions are inscribed in the car.

These chapters relate to experiences of cars and driving from a range of perspectives though none of them draws on empirical research. The research that road safety tends to draw on is often statistical and the variety and depth of experience is excluded. Sheller points out in her chapter on emotionality and the car, that it will not be possible to move on to other forms of mobility until the attachment to the car is understood in all its complexity. The

micro-level preferences of individuals, she says, can be connected to 'the meso-level aggregation of specifically located car cultures, and the macro-level patterns of regional, national and transnational emotional/cultural/material geographies' through an emotional sociology of automobility.⁸ A radical transformation of the car and road system is not possible while the focus is on the individual, excluding an understanding of the symbolic and emotive dimensions of the car on social and cultural levels. Sheller notes that the 'agency' that is important here is not based in a single actor but 'distributed through the whole complex affective economies of the social and material worlds'. (236) Research cannot afford to be focused on individuals in isolation from vehicles, traffic, and location in space and time, though experiential detail is necessary.

Jörg Beckman's chapter, centred in actor network theory, redefines the concepts of mobility, motility, hybridity and safety, picking up on the ambiguity of mobility as also involving immobility. The car both enables and disables and is partly defined by its opposite. Thus mobility relies on immobility. This is not just a close relationship as in Paul Virilio's 'rushing standstill' in which speed does not come without inertia, it is a relationship of domination, following Zygmunt Bauman in which the mobilisation of some is the immobilisation of others.⁹ Beckman demands that transport research and policy become more reflexive, able to consider the ambiguities and consequences of transport policy.

In taking into account states of mobility between mobility and immobility such as the

net-surfer and the escalator-rider, Beckman proposes the concept of the motile hybrid (82) and frames motility as 'the ability to be mobile without performing movement'. The car-driver as a new form of actor incorporating intelligent systems providing 'assistance' makes the digital car the 'avatar of hybridity' (Thrift, cited in Beckman 83) for Beckman. This motile hybrid is privileged with the apparent independence and capacity to escape, disengage and withdraw from the 'messy reality of complex traffic'. (88) At the same time this heightened sense of independence is eliminated, substituted by isolation, Beckman argues, involving coercion into an existing social structure, that of automobility.

The intelligent assistance that is incorporated into the motile hybrid is intended to increase safety and reduce crashes. Beckman draws on a notion of safety as immutability, and considers how ideas of the motile hybrid change the way the system is thought about. It is not entirely clear in Beckman's analysis, however, on what level abstract notions such as immutability operate. Are they idealisations that lie behind the ideology of safety or conceptual tools used to deconstruct more traditional thinking?

Questions related to the impact of the mobility of those who can most afford it on those who can least afford it require some empirical substance so that they can be illustrated in context and addressed. The greater mobility of wealthier nations no doubt impacts on the mobility of poorer nations and even within most countries the mobility of some groups is enjoyed at the expense of others. Methods of theorising and demonstrating this

would be beneficial, but this needs to be fleshed out in more specific detail than Beckman gives it here.

Other chapters show the car as a 'cultural process' stamped with national identity (Edensor), having histories (Koshar) and identifiable ages that form cultural logics (Gartman). Inglis explores the discussion amongst intellectuals of the car as a contested symbol of modernism. Dimensions of the car and the significant impact of the car on human experience, cultures and the eras that are shaped through it, are explored with much enthusiasm for the car. Nevertheless, many contributors apply new ideas of history, material objects and consumption as well as identity as it is formed within a context of cultural materiality.

The book makes an important contribution to social and cultural research, producing new transport research in which the focus is moved from wilful individuals to the broader issues that are not controlled by autonomous individuals and from the single object, the car, to the systems that create and support it, including systems of meaning related to mobility. By considering the complex relations between car-human hybrids, new technologies and the road environment itself, the essays give new forms to research in the area of mobilities. New frameworks for empirical research will need to emerge out of the new framings to allow them to be informed by the varied and complex concrete experiences of those hybrid entities created by current and emerging systems of mobility. New ideas beyond the car begin to take shape and to have some substance, suggesting that maybe we will be able to walk away

from the car eventually, with a new way of being human—in imagination at least.

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