PANDEMIC AUTOMOBILITY

Patterns of Crisis and Opportunity in the American Motor Culture

INTRODUCTION

The car is not only a machine. It is a socially active non-human agent that binds social practices of individual and collective mobility with a pre-existent collection of values, discourses, and symbols that purport to legitimize socially prevalent ways of setting one's body in motion. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, one may observe that the car is an agent of morphogenesis; that is, a vehicle of social change that facilitates transformations of cultural institutions, social structures, and systems of interpersonal relations:

The automobile has changed the lifestyle of the average American more than any other 20th-century technological innovation, with the possible exception of television. The social and economic changes ushered in by the motor car have not only modified our daily routine but also altered the fundamental nature of personal relationships and the social institutions in which we interact. (Berger, 2001: 143)

The car is viewed as an agent of change, introducing movement, flexibility, and mobility to the otherwise immobile structures and sociality systems. Following Neil Postman, one could observe that the extensive use of motor technologies exerts a transformative effect on the system of American society. It changes the structure of human interest (the objects people are concerned with), the system of American culture (i.e., symbols and values that enable articulation and communication of ideas), nature

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of community understood as an area of interaction, communication, and development of distinct concepts (Postman 1993). In other words, the car has become an embodiment of modern American civilization: "to speak, as people often do, of the impact of the automobile upon modern society makes little more sense, by now, than to speak of the impact of the bone structure on the human body" (Marx 1997: 981).

However, the impact of automobility on the social tissue is far from being a purely linear one. The invention of motor vehicles defined the mobile character of modern society. Nevertheless, as a principal product of industrial modernity, the car also took a significant role in the transformation of institutions, structures, and lifestyles of industrial civilization, facilitating the transition of industrial modernity into late modernity in which the essential inventions of industrialism, chief among which is the car, are put into question and criticized as dangerous by-products of excessive technological modernization (Burzyński 2020).

This article traces the recursive character of automobility from a perspective of cultural crises and traumas that accompany motor culture development in the USA. The American automobility system has been caught in the treadmill of ideological criticism that defined the current role of motor vehicles in forms of political activism and cultural criticism. The initial years of the Covid-19 pandemic seem to have brought restoration to the original character of motor culture with its defining features of individualism, freedom, opportunity achieved through mobility. The article focuses on the pre-vaccination period in the Covid-19 pandemic and refers to it in terms of social distancing technologies and practices conceived of as the most effective mechanisms of pandemic management prior to the era of mass vaccinations. In this sense, the outbreak is a collective trauma that quite unexpectedly restores the original meaning of the car as a vehicle of ontological security, bringing the physical and emotional integrity of human body back into action.

TRAUMAS OF AMERICAN AUTOMOBILITY

The discourses of trauma and vulnerability have become indicative of various attempts to make sense of revolutionary transformations of social systems in the twentieth century.

The notions refer to an unnerving experience of defenselessness, out-of-placeness, anxiety, or confusion experienced in the wake of mass-scale processes whose sense and direction remain uncertain or contingent (Sztompka 2004; Furedi 2006). Collective traumas are disturbances of social order, motivating specific categories of people (typically marginalized minority communities) and entire institutions or organizations (e.g., the motor industry) to assume the discourse of being vulnerable as a default response to experienced contingencies and risks. Such was the case with the 1973 oil crisis and its impact on American automobility's social system. The oil embargo of 1973 affected the American automobility market, metamorphosing the country's automotive industry system and exposing its vulnerability to European and Japanese corporations. "Foreign automakers gained an even stronger foothold in the American market after the oil embargo of 1973, which sent gasoline prices soaring and placed a premium on the small, fuel-efficient cars that Japan and Germany had been producing for years" (Gartman 2004: 186). The American motor industry responded by introducing post-Fordist forms of lean management and prioritizing economic marketability over engineering ingenuity, which decreased the quality of the market offer. Instead of being a machine extension of the American dream, the car has merely become an economically optimized element in the network of considerations relating homeland corporations to international market fluctuations.

The first oil shock was a painful experience of converting the American dream of V8 automobility into a more humble European ideal of an economical car. More importantly, however, the crisis paved the way for an intensification of critical tendencies towards viewing the original paradigm of American automobility as a self-contradictory and environmentally perilous idea. The Motor Vehicle Air Pollution and Control Act (1966), which regulated the emission standards for motor vehicles, and the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act (1966) defined new safety and sustainability standards for newly produced automobiles, disturbing the original understanding of steel and petrol automobility and introducing the first wave of environment-friendly solutions. Likewise, the Department of Transportation Act (1966) paved the way

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for the further institutionalization of safety and sustainability regulations by founding the United States Department of Transportation with an aim to implement and coordinate policies that regulate the national transportation system towards the norms of economical use and environmental sustainability.

The ideals of mass automobility associated with the idea of Fordist production soon became obsolete, leaving the American society in anomie in the wake of critical evaluations of early industrial car cultures as a self-contradictory amalgam of consumption and environmental degradation, mobility and congestion, freedom, and dependence on other participants in traffic. "The roads of advanced capitalist countries become battlegrounds for limited space, where tensions flare in ugly incidents of road rage. When the culture promises drivers effortless speed and escape, any impediment becomes intolerable" (Gartman 2004: 192).

The traumatic significance of the crisis could be regarded in terms of an ideological shift, a movement from the narrative of progress to the discourse of crisis. Consequently, the development of automobility after the 1973 crisis was deprived of its original momentum, leading to the proliferation of risk-related considerations concerning economic sustainability and safety measures. An additional collection of economic risks was added by the shift in consumer demands towards post-Fordist automobility, which forced manufacturers to increase their market offer within a rigid spectrum of limitations dictated by oil prices, safety regulations, and sustainability measures. These transformations paved the way for an idea of post-automobility, a meta-narrative binding economic, environmental and socio-technological considerations under the umbrella perspective of criticizing early industrial motor cultures.

THE DOCTRINE OF POST-AUTOMOBILITY

The abovementioned changes lead to disillusionment with traditional automobility, paving the way for the idea of post-automobility, a discourse unnervingly focusing our attention on the downsides of motor cultures. More specifically, the idea of post-automobility stresses the reflexiveness of motor cultures; that is, the confrontation of technological innovations and consumer

demand with contingencies and risks that cannot be bracketed off in the current system of science:

> But as automobility threatens its own foundations, it opens itself up to iterative processes of reflexivity, that is to say self-reference, self-awareness, self-monitoring, self-interpretation and self-criticism. From this reflexive cycle, the car arises anew, once more able to sustain its own (re)production—automobility as a never-ending spiral, fueled by its own contradictions. (Beckmann 2005: 83)

The doctrine of post-automobility is an all-pervading political ideology that responds to social, economic, and environmental problems caused by the very success of mass automobility. The car is both a blessing and a curse: it is a "solution to most Americans' transportation needs. However, its very success has generated serious problems—most notably, congestion, pollution, and energy inefficiency—that need to be addressed by public policy" (Dunn 1999: 40). The doctrine is risk-centric in a way that it focuses on how contingencies are politically used to indicate populations at risk (i.e., pedestrians, cyclists), and channel moral outrage against the groups of supposedly privileged perpetrators (i.e., motorists, petrol-heads, automotive industries).

John Urry, for instance, outlines a scenario that subsumes sustainable solutions in the field of energy consumption, environment-friendly materials, and massive de-individualization of car transportation (Urry 2004). Post-automobility scenarios offer a range of infrastructural solutions, fostering a symbiotic community of motorists, cyclists, and pedestrians who share urban and suburban spaces. When successfully combined, these inventions are in a position to exert a genuinely systemic change leading to the establishment of a 'post-car' society (Burzyński 2020). A new impetus to the doctrine of post-automobility was added with the implementation of the 'Society 5.0' strategy. Prized as a human-centric, super-smart society, the model involves the tight combination of physical space and cyberspace to produce a sustainable society in which people's needs are effectively satisfied by the intensification of online communication (e.g., in the form of distance learning or distance teaching, for instance) at the expense of traditional transportation. Needless to say, the Covid-19 pandemic is nowadays a major factor

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fostering an accelerated implementation of solutions introduced by the pre-pandemic model of 'Society 5.0.'

THE DRIVING BODY

A sociological understanding of trauma typically focuses on structural and cultural aspects of the social crises. One can, therefore, refer to attitudes, ideologies, or legal regulations that define the traumatic sense of (post)automobility. However, one cannot forget that the notions of trauma, vulnerability, risk, or uncertainty carry an explicit emotional meaning, channeling our observations on the embodied emotional experiences. The methodological shift from inter-personal phenomena (e.g., language, ideologies, discourses, forms of legal regulation) to intra-personal experiences (e.g., drives and reflexes, emotions and feelings, temperament, illness, and disease) paves the way for our interest in embodied experiences and sensations as visceral elements of individual agency and subjectivity. "We have bodies, but we are also, in a specific sense, bodies; our embodiment is a requirement of our social identification so that it would be ludicrous to say "I have arrived and I have brought my body with me" (Turner 1996: 42). One's embodiment is thus a necessary precondition to understanding the individual's involvement in automobility practices as driven by emotional sensations, the person's medical condition, or his/her temperamental predispositions.

Therefore, one is encouraged to see the entire system of automobility in terms of emotions and entire emotional geographies (i.e., correlations of geographical locations with human emotions), rendering a corporeal sense to automobility. "Cars are above all machines that move people, but they do so in many senses of the word. Recent approaches to the phenomenology of car use have highlighted 'the driving body' as a set of social practices, embodied dispositions, and physical affordances" (Sheller 2004: 221). In this particular context, the driver is conceptualized as an emotional agent who is characterized by "particular aesthetic orientations and kinesthetic dispositions towards driving. Movement and being moved together produce the feelings of being in the car, for the car and with the car" (Sheller 2004: 222). Consequently, the motor vehicle is conceptualized in an overtly phenomenological

manner, stressing the visceral character of driving as an activity that involves several cognitive, emotional, and kinesthetic sensations that contribute to the formation of a peculiar *Lebenswelt* of the driving body. Such a methodology has led to interpretations that bind cars, drivers, roads, and roadside locations under the common denominator of emotional geography showing the spatiality and temporality of emotions, especially in their relations to mobility (Davidson and Miligan 2004).

As opposed to the structural-cultural interpretation of trauma, which lays stress on the negative role of car cultures in the accumulation of such public goods as the natural environment, public and individual health, or social tissue of metropolitan areas, the emotional-sensational interpretation of trauma points to the role of automobility in forming and sustaining the driver's sense of ontological security. Defined as a person's basic system of psychic integrity establishing a "protective cocoon" of sense and security against external contingencies and insecurities, ontological security could be understood in terms of bracketing off risks and dangers of the outside world (Giddens 1991). In this way, ontological security is an emotional mechanism that helps to reinforce the integrity of one's self-identity by managing anxiety related to the presence of imminent or distant dangers:

Emotional cultures and their ethics are deeply intertwined with material cultures and technologies. When cars become associated with feelings of protection, security and safety (as emphasized in advertising of the 'family car'), their use may provide parents with a sense of empowerment in the face of a generalized feeling of insecurity. Technologies of protection enable risk (and fear) to be managed by driving 'correctly' rather than by not driving. (Sheller 2004: 230)

Driving one's car becomes an instrument for managing anxiety, and the motor vehicle becomes the protective cocoon of ontological security in the literal meaning of the term. Understanding the role of individual motor vehicles and entire car cultures from a perspective of embodied emotions may be seen as a methodology to fully understand the situation of American automobility in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The highly marketable promise of having one's existential insecurities bracketed off is a factor that seems to replace monetary and purely practical considerations.

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This is especially typical of the increased demand in SUVs, cars that are more expensive and less practical when it comes to their everyday use. In this case, managing one's anxiety is converted into the sheer marketability of getting a car that is big enough to offer its driver a towering and comfortable vantage point, transforming insecurity into an illusion of authority and control.

COVID MOTORS, OR BRINGING THE ORIGINAL SENSE OF AUTOMOBILITY BACK

The Covid-19 pandemic is a major traumatic event of global scope. The breakout has already disrupted public and private healthcare systems, national economies, and labor markets, effectively undermining the affected populations' expectations concerning wellbeing, health, and future prosperity. Apart from the actual number of fatal cases, the pandemic has disintegrated the sense of ontological security as experienced by millions of people who live in affluent, well-organized, and therefore predictable, societies of the West. Given the ubiquity of horrific images available in the media, media representations alone are sufficient to make an impression that severe and imminent health risks are now impossible to be effectively bracketed off. When approached from an academic point of view, the pandemic has motivated a number of research projects oscillating around the conception of risk society, conflicts between public health and economic growth, loosening of social ties due to social distancing, and the migration of social, recreational and occupational activities to the cyberspace (Ward 2020).

Given the holistic impact of the Covid-19 on all spheres of social life, it is little wonder that the outbreak has also exerted a profound influence both on the socially acceptable patterns of using motor vehicles, as well as entire motor cultures. The trauma of Covid-19 has created structural conditions that emphasize the role of individual automobility in keeping a person's ontological security intact, thus highlighting the emotional character of driving (and passengering) and the significance of entire emotional geographies associated with our coping with the virus.

The pandemic seemed to have altered some tendencies associated with post-automobility, which before the event looked irreversible. For instance, the pandemic has revealed an increase in the number

of motorists willing to perceive automobility in traditionally individu-
alistic terms. According to the Capgemini global survey, as quoted
by the *Detroit Free Press*, one can observe a growth of interest
in individual car ownership among American costumers of less than
35 years of age, which indicates a reversal of post-automobility
trends among younger people who were less likely to be interested
in owning a car due to their preoccupation with digital technologies,
and their interest in spending free time online, rather than by being
engaged in automobility-related activities (Phelan 2020). Simultane-
ously, a majority of surveyed Americans admitted that they would
be less likely to use public transportation in 2020. Interestingly,
the tendency seems to be on the rise, as the respondents' increasing
number expressed the lack of confidence in public transportation
systems in the foreseeable future. The return to individualistic
driving is even more observable in the case of carsharing facilities.
The overwhelming majority of surveyed Americans are afraid to use
raid-hailing and carsharing services: as many as three quarters
of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with carshared vehicles'
sanitary condition.

Images representing social distancing, masked crowds, drive-thru
testing sites, and drive-thru vaccination clinics show a psychological
context for the abovementioned preferences. Unnerving as they are,
the images point to individual automobility as a social distancing
mode and pandemic management. The car is becoming a machine
of refuge, "a moving private-in-public space," as John Urry aptly
calls the capacity of cars to transgress the traditional boundaries
between private and public spaces (Urry 2006: 22).

We might indeed re-conceptualize civil society as a civil society of quasiob-
jects, or 'car-drivers' and 'car-passengers.' It is not a civil society of separate
human subjects who can be conceived of as autonomous from these all
conquering machines. Such a hybrid of the car-driver is in normal circum-
stances unremarkable as it reproduces the socio-technical order. (Urry
2006: 24)

The hybrid of car-driver defines pandemic citizenship as it re-
conceptualizes mobility in essentially medical terms. Nowadays,
owning cars is not a sign of environmental irresponsibility or igno-
rance. Likewise, it is not a sign of one's refusal to acknowledge
the importance of public goods, public spaces, or the entire gospel

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of civil society defined by communitarian values and mutual morality. Having a car is again a straightforward moral decision, but this time the choice could be valued as an act of public accountability. Owning a moving private-in-public space is a step towards the accumulation of public health as traveling by car facilities disease prevention through social distancing.

The outbreak has medicalized an idea of the car-driver, re-expressing it in overtly biomedical terminology and putting the very core of automobility into a network of hygiene and sanitation practices (Conrad 2007). As a human-machine hybrid, the car can now be viewed as a technological extinction of the human immune system whereby the bodywork becomes the outer protection of the human body itself. However, the quality of ontological security is not, as it were, enframed in the bodywork alone. The notion is rendered a new meaning in a more complex system of pandemic automobility in which the car is the central node of a network of healthcare technologies and services. The typically American invention of drive-thru sites and services (many a time ridiculed as a characteristic of the nation that compulsively sticks to auto-mobility) constitutes a social-technological network that forms the emotional geography of confidence and security during the pandemic. Drive-thru vaccination clinics are believed to alter the overall trajectory of the Covid-19 outbreak as the majority of Americans perceive them as safer and more convenient (Smith 2021). "Such car-environments or non-places are neither urban nor rural, local nor cosmopolitan. They are sites of pure mobility within which car-drivers are *insulated* as they 'dwell-within-the-car.' They represent the victory of liquidity over inhabiting the 'urban'" (Urry 2006: 22, emphasis added). The victory of motor liquidity over the rigid density of urban spaces is, at the same time, the triumph of unrestricted mobility over the dense urban population, which by definition is a significant space of viral transmission.

IN PLACE OF CONCLUSIONS:
THE EPIDEMIOLOGICAL TRANSITION OF AUTOMOBILITY

The trauma of pandemic has restored the original sense of automobility as practices that uphold one's sense of ontological security against the reality of ubiquitous health risks. Partially, this

shift of perspective is determined by cultural-structural factors, chief among which is a disruption of well-entrenched modernization tendencies linking health-related considerations to economic development and the society's technological sophistication. Such is the case with the concept of epidemiological transition. The notion is concerned with a cause-and-effect relationship between socio-economic modernization (as measured by gross domestic product per capita, quality of welfare institutions, development of medical technologies) and general epidemiological tendencies. Coined by Abdel Omran (1971), epidemiological transition describes a shift from societies in which infectious and parasitic diseases are the primary source of health-related concerns to societies in which major sources of premature deaths and other health anxieties are attributed to the increasing prevalence of chronic and degenerative diseases (e.g., cancer, cardiovascular diseases, autoinflammatory diseases).

The doctrine of post-automobility is based on the assumption that traditional car cultures are co-responsible for the massive prevalence of chronic conditions associated with the outbreak of civilizational hazards. Following the grim logic of epidemiological transition, modernization is not a factor that fosters general wellbeing and public health: it merely motivates a change in the spectrum of experienced health concerns. As predicted by Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky's (1982) seminal essay, hazards are selected and prioritized by the public according to their capacity to evoke moral outrage and cast blame. Although mobility is a primary factor of disease prevention as it increases the accessibility of medical professionals and reduces the estimated arrival time of medical intervention, the car became modernity's whipping boy as a material symbol of the destructive powers of industrialized capitalism. Likewise, automotive pollutants are seen as a form of industrial poisoning that most conspicuously justifies the need to reduce mass production volume in developed economies, including American society. To put it otherwise, the car is a major source of concern for developed societies that believe that mass-scale disease prevention is no longer an issue of mobility, but it depends on our capacity to eradicate health risk factors that reside in the very core of industrial civilization.

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This situation changes with the Covid-19 pandemic. Of course, the outbreak does not seem to have reversed changes associated with epidemiological transition: prosperous populations still suffer more from non-communicable and chronic diseases, but Covid-19 attracts more substantial attention from the media, politicians, and the public due to the pandemic's sheer intensity and its devastating impact on the system of healthcare. Under the pandemic circumstances, when the prevention of communicable diseases has won the public's attention, the car is no longer the main culprit responsible for making our lives more miserable and shorter. When the public shifts attention from chronic to communicable diseases, the motor vehicle becomes a remedy, facilitating social distancing, individualization, and access to medical services. "Movement itself became a measure of hope; the road itself seemed to offer new possibilities, of work, adventure, romance. *The Grapes of Wrath* tells the story of hope and opportunity traveling along perhaps the most famous of roads, Route 66" (Urry 2006: 27). This is even more true during the pandemic: movement becomes a sign of security, liberation for spatial-temporal restraints, and legal regulations. Obviously, in this case, automobility is not only about physical movement as if one was trying to outrun the pandemic. Given the embodiment of motion, being in the run is also a matter of emotional and kinesthetic sensations, a sense of taking refuge from the immobile world of quarantine restrictions, hospital beds, and sanitary isolation. It evokes the uniquely American image of Route 66 and its emotional geography of hope and opportunity sought amidst the land of despair. This geography of hope and opportunity is now brought back and dispersed across the disease-stricken nation's streets and highways.

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