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Consuming Automobility

A discussion paper

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Personal consumption and sustainable development

The private car has long since ceased to be primarily a mode of transport for utilitarian journeys (above all, travel to work). Travel to work journeys are a decreasing proportion of total car journeys, cars are increasingly individual cars not “family cars”. To own a car is to be a full social adult, with the concomitant power to access anywhere in space. The car (and increasingly the mobile telephone) become part of the technological extension of individuals. Personal consumption as the right to go anywhere is both increasingly central to personal identity and environmentally unsustainable.

Loosely framed by the paragraph above, this discussion paper explores various aspects of car-related consumption. The central argument is that there is strong, but problematic, divide between efforts to understand the car as an object of personal consumption, and more general theories of automobility, which concern the car in use.

Introduction

Wherever you look, you can find figures documenting a quite astonishing exponential growth in human mobility in the 20th century. Martin Kroon notes that there are 500 million cars in the world, with over a billion predicted by the year 2015 (Kroon 1996); the SceneSusTech literature review (p20) refers to the fact that the number of vehicles in OECD countries has doubled from 1970-1990; and others catalogue the growth of car ownership; of distance travelled per vehicle; of distance travelled per capita; and of associated energy use and CO2 emissions (Schipper 1997, p2).

All this represents a really significant spiralling of consumer activity so where do cars and mobility fit within social scientific analyses of consumption practices and how might we make sense of specifically car-related types of “personal” consumption? Rather than focusing on the environmental implications of such trends I want to concentrate instead on alternative ways of conceptualising car-related consumption and in the process, highlight a tension between approaches which focus on the car-as-object and those which consider the car-in-use. Ideas and theories relating to the car-as-object appear to have a history and a disciplinary orientation unlike those employed in understanding the car-in-use. This gap between typically individualistic and typically systemic explanations arguably limits our capacity to understand the dynamics of demand so tangibly illustrated by the figures quoted above.

Car-related discussions and analyses of *space*, for instance of “distant intensive infrastructure” (Boge 1997); urban planning and the distribution of activities and destinations, are only rarely linked to studies of the way in which people organise and manage *time* (See Beckers (1997) on the customisation of time, and the concept of time rights, or Zerubavel (1981) on “hidden rhythms” of social life). This represents a further hurdle when it comes to thinking about how cars fit into contemporary society.

In the final section I offer some ideas about themes we might want to develop in order to get a better grip on precisely how the private car is embedded in the social structure of particular societies (SceneSusTech workplan) and what it means to

consume automobility. I'll begin, however, with some observations about the car as an object, concentrating especially on how it is sold, on its characteristics as an item of consumption, and its place within the sociology and psychology of acquisition.

The Car as Object

Car salesmen have a somewhat sleazy reputation¹ yet they, together with television and media advertisements, car magazines, and WHICH reports (consumer guides), have a role in guiding potential consumers through the now bewildering maze of "choices" with which they are confronted.² A brief, and totally unsystematic, review of current car advertisements in the UK press underlines the importance of the car as an object, that is as a commodity which has a range of quite clearly identifiable features. These include a set of technical qualities - the small writing at the bottom of the advertisement for the Citroen Xsara coupe (Observer 12 April 1998) lists its price, a performance figure of 0-62mph in 8 seconds, power steering, sports suspension, engine size etc. Yet the advertisement conveys far more than a series of technical details about speed and safety.³

[Pictures of Xsara and Saxo]

The car as an object of desire

In this example, and in the case of the advertisement for the Citroen Saxo (same date), it is simply impossible to ignore the importance of sex as a sales narrative. As if the image was not enough on its own the Saxo advertisement spells out the connection: "Saxo is a scent of the unexpected, a sensual expression of yourself, your dreams, your Okay Okay, it's a car. But a very attractive one.." The Xsara story points in much the same direction: titled "This Summer's Fashion Icon", the text continues.. "Gorgeous, flowing lines for the outer layer. With something positively provocative underneath." Citroen's generic slogan, "Nothing moves you like a Citroen" again reinforces the emotional draw. Diekstra and Kroon (1996) also describe the car as an "object of desire and vehicle of happiness" and note the significance of erotic imagery, power, and speed, in car magazines and promotional material.

The car as home

Of course, sales stories follow other narratives as well. Pitches which position the car as a home or an office seem to be increasingly important, in part because of the development of related technologies such as mobile phones and car fax-machines and the incredibly rapid introduction of air-conditioning first as an optional extra, but now provided as standard in 42% of UK cars. A recent advertisement for a Mazda 626 is titled "Take your home comforts out on the road for just £13,975" - and it is true, the car does resemble a living room complete with stereo system, climate control, and comfortable seating. The advertisement continues: "At Mazda we believe you shouldn't have to give up home comforts when you go out. So we've put more in as standard. The 626 Hatchback, for example, has intelligent air-conditioning to ensure your cosy interior stays just the way you want it. A drivers' airbag and a superstrong safety cage - which as reinforced pillars and roof structure - are there to help you relax

in the most demanding of conditions”. Models in the USA may even have a “dashboard diner” - i.e. a place to put your food and keep your drink safe and upright.

The significance of the car as a semi-private space, a space for putting on make up, for watching the world go by, and for carrying the feel of home into potentially unhomey spaces, or as a replica of the social-spatial hierarchy of the family environment (parents in the front, children in the back) is again wrapped up in these images. Blurring the domestic boundaries even further, some owners treat the car almost as a member of the family, giving it a name, an ascribed “personality”, and assuming it has needs of its own, including a garage for a “bedroom”.

These first few images can be interpreted in different ways. For the moment, their purpose is simply to illustrate some of the features - erotic appeal, comfort and privacy, autonomy and security, identity and image - which psychologists and market researchers have pointed to in explaining the popularity of the car and peoples’ resistance to abandoning this mode of transport even when policy makers, economists and environmentalists demonstrate that the risks and costs outweigh the benefits.

The social properties of the car

Talk about the ideology of automobility, the car culture and the car as an icon of freedom of movement (Crist 1996) suggests that cars have all kinds of social as well as psychological properties. The SceneSusTech work programme notes that “to own a car is to be a full social adult” and its true that the acquisition of a driving licence is now something of a rite of passage.⁴ But it is not just the ability to drive which is relevant for it is also important to be able to drive the “right” kind of car.

Quoting from a recent article in the USA *Car and Driver* magazine, Wilhite and Lutzenhiser point to tensions between the increasing specialisation of cars - the single family car is, for instance being replaced by a range of car types - the car for shopping, the car for the rugged week-end, the car for running about town, the car for the teenagers and so on - and the competing demands made of a single vehicle which should not “be “flashier” than the cars of the owners’ superiors in the corporate hierarchy, nor should it be too “sporty”, since it must convey a serious image and be large enough to occasionally transport four persons from “three-martini lunches” to the golf course - in executive style” (Wilhite and Lutzenhiser, 1997, p5).⁵

The final advertisement which I want to consider, simply says: “Tip: waste six of the seven seats occasionally”. Here we have a deliberately multi-purpose vehicle capable of carrying half a football team yet also able to speed sleekly through the open landscape. Wilhite and Lutzenhiser talk about escalating demand and the “need” for ever larger vehicles (in the USA) in terms of “social loading”. As they explain, cars, like certain other consumer items, are over- sized just in case that extra space, or that extra capacity, or that extra speed is needed. As such they are designed to minimise the risk of social failure and cope with a wide range of social and technical demands. In environmental terms, the snag is that what starts as being “extra” becomes normal, and new demands emerge.

[VW Sharan]

This example is instructive in thinking about how people choose between one car and another (i.e. what are their car “needs”, how those are defined and engendered, and how luxury becomes necessity)⁶ but it also puts the wider escalation of car consumption in context. As such it goes some way toward explaining the proliferation and specialisation of options.

Auto-discrimination

Pursuing this theme, it is important to recognise the car’s role as a differentiating device within (and as part of) a highly elaborated system of social distinction. In certain corporate contexts company cars typically provide a precise indication of position within the social hierarchy of the firm. More generally, makes and models carry all sorts of social meaning - consider, for instance popular stereotypes of the Skoda driver, the Volvo type, and so on. Following Bordieu, Loren Lutzenhiser has had a go at plotting these possibilities (for the USA case) on a grid of financial and cultural (Lutzenhiser 1996).

[Loren’s picture]

It is not necessary to subscribe to a total lifestyle theory of consumption to recognise that the type of car on the forecourt might have something in common (in terms of image, identity and status) with the type of house which lies behind. The claim that “for many people, the superior qualities of their own machine over those of their neighbours and other road-users no longer has to be proved on the road. The car itself ... radiates superiority” (Diekstra and Kroon 1996, p3) is intuitively persuasive, as is the notion that in this as in other ways (for instance, the valuing of safety or even fuel economy and efficiency) peoples’ views of themselves are reflected in the cars they buy.

Car consumers

These examples give a feel for the sorts of arguments which have been offered for the psychological and social significance of the car as a consumer item. The first group focus on the relationship between the car and personal identity and the psychological functions which the car is thought to fulfil. Others point to the cultural manufacturing of meaning and to the way in which cars figure in the creation and management of social difference and distance. Such approaches help make sense of why certain consumers pick one car not another (in the second hand as well as the new market) and to some extent they also explain the escalation of automobility - in terms of psychological dependence, or through reference to notions like “social loading”, and fashion.

The practical implications of these rather general observations clearly varies from one context to another. For example, comparison of the symbolic significance of cars in Turkey, Denmark and Norway (Ropke 1998; Ger and Belk 1996) suggests that in the Turkish context *any* car will be a significant status symbol (there are, after all, only 28 cars per 1000 inhabitants) whereas in Denmark (where there are 380 cars per 1000 inhabitants) it is the make and type which counts.

Such social and economic considerations also influence the nature and management of other car connected types of “personal consumption”. As car-owners know only too well, initial cost represents only one aspect of car related expenditure. Manufacturers’ design decisions have implications for reliability and obsolescence and for the possibility (or not) of amateur tinkering. So-called “intelligent” cars “demand” servicing at approved garages at regular intervals and are programmed to “tell” their driver when this is necessary. Other more primitive models are still amenable to treatment with a standard toolkit but whatever the level of black-boxing, cars lock their owners into particular systems of care and maintenance.

The division of labour and expert knowledge between designer/manufacturer, paid garage mechanic, driver and hobbyist also depends on the way the car fits into a specific domestic environment of finance, DIY expertise, interest in customising etc. In some settings, for instance, in rural County Durham, it is quite common to find men spending whole week-ends beneath their cars or engaged in a seemingly endless process of repair, maintenance or improvement. Economic pressures and the need to save on garage bills are likely to be critical for at least some of those boiler-suited week-enders. But by implication, a lot of people enjoy fiddling with their vehicles, reading car magazines or watching television programmes on the subject. To judge by the range of Christmas gift wrapped packages of sponges and car-shampoo, even caring for cars can count as a pleasure.

Though embedded in complex systems of meaning, the cars we have been considering in this first section are curiously static assemblies of metal and plastic - the fact that they also constitute a means of transport has not been especially important to their analysis as items of personal consumption. Ideas about the relationship between cars and freedom; between speed, power and excitement; or simply the fun of driving make rather more of this link, but even here the reference is to a somewhat abstract interpretation of mobility. Its certainly not about getting from A to B.

Evaluation of the relative merits of cars as compared with other forms of transport bring this issue to the fore. Diekstra and Kroon quote a German author, writing in 1902 about the flexibility of the car in contrast to the train which “subjects us to a timetable, makes us the prisoners of a schedule drawn up by someone else, shuts us up in a cage that we cannot even open, let alone leave if we wish to... Anyone who calls that travelling might just as well call a military parade a walk in the woods” (1996, p2). Liniardo’s (1996) historical review of car culture in the Britain emphasises the importance of an ideology of the open road, speed, and the freedom to explore the natural charms of the countryside. Even today, advertisements generally show cars in the open countryside, not stuck in urban traffic jams. Tellingly, one slogan which does acknowledge the possible presence of other vehicles - “The car in front is a Toyota” - does so in a way which suggests that the Toyota is especially well equipped to escape from the rest. Though the image of freedom is undoubtedly important, the following discussion of the car in use tells a rather different story.

For the moment, it seems that as soon as the driver shifts into first gear, the car accelerates beyond the reach of (at least some) theories of “personal consumption”. This is not to suggest that there are no relevant ideas to draw on its just that the practicalities of driving and the enterprise of mobility are not readily conceptualised

in the same terms as those used to make sense of the attractions and appeals of cars as consumer objects.

The Car in Use

Before getting bogged down with what it might mean to consume mobility it is instructive to reflect on some of the other forms of consumption required to get that car down the driveway. Petrol is clearly a key ingredient though one which seems to lack any symbolic significance in its own right.⁷ Supermarkets have become petrol stations just as petrol stations have become supermarkets, but filling up is still a funny kind of shopping. Paying for tax discs and insurance feels more like administration than acquisition, again suggesting that the car-in-use involves a curious blend of conspicuous and inconspicuous consumption (Shove and Warde 1997).

Destinations and distances

But with this blend in place, the car at last begins to move. So where does it go to, and why? Even if we stretch notions of consumption to accommodate mobility, it is unlikely that this is best represented as a “personal” process. People do not just move around at will (Shove and Lutzechner 1996) and as we might expect, discussions about mobility are frequently bound up with debate about the evolution of urban geography, the split between work and home, the changing structure of domestic life, anxiety about child safety and so on. This suggests that it is not just the sites of activities which are on the move. The type of activities which people engage in (spending time in work-related roles, different expectations of childhood and play, new forms of more organised leisure, changing meanings of the “week-end”, Sunday opening hours, and so on.), and the time involved with each may also be in a state of flux - though perhaps at different rates in different societies. (OECD 1997). These processes in part account for the making of places and the distribution of destinations like home, work, school, etc.

Though important in the language of policy making and statistic gathering (transport analyses frequently distinguish between journeys “to and from work”, “family/civic”, “social/recreational” and “other” (Schipper 1997)) this vocabulary of purpose may not match the experiences of the drivers and passengers involved. Doing driving (and talking about driving) involves paying attention to the exact route, as well as distance and time of day, and to the way all three factors influence the experience of travelling between actual places whatever the purpose and whatever the generic classification of origin and end-point.

Time, travel and technology

While drivers may not share the analysts’ classificatory framework it is clearly relevant to consider the structuring of destinations (or activity sites) and the ways in which they are linked via individual trajectories through time and space. The distinction between mobility and accessibility is crucial but what is still missing is an anchoring of these spatial themes in terms of an analysis of the ordering and

management of time in everyday life. Though challenging any simple cataloguing of purpose, people deliberately construct multi-functional journeys, stopping for shopping on the way home from work, or calling in at the laundrette on the way out to dinner. The car often plays an important part in this juggling and scheduling of daily life. Philippe Crist suggests that “peoples’ modern lives constantly demand effective use of their time, and the more effective they become, the more activities they seem to find time for. Since modern society values efficient time use, the car is seen as an important tool for individual time management strategies, especially for individuals with large or complex activity patterns” (1996, p3).

Though usually left out of statistical analyses of transport patterns, choices about different modes (bus, car, train, bike etc.) may be as strongly related to the management of time as they are to distance and space. “Travel behaviour is derived from activity patterns and, within these, most individuals are focused on *time management*... A majority of individual travellers say they seek freedom of activity, choice and flexibility. However, they are also sensitive to the predictability (or lack thereof) of congested transport systems, as a factor determining their free time”, (OECD Sussex report, p15). New questions arise when we focus on the relationship between time and travel. The challenge of managing personal time schedules relates to the need to be at particular places at a particular times and so to the density and sequencing as well as the location of social “events”.

Of course the technologies of transport themselves influence the distribution of destinations and the possibilities and time-costs of mobility between them. In considering the sociotechnical shaping of cities, Paul Rosen notes that cars have “cut travelling time and hence have allowed the development of suburbanisation” (1996, p3). Expectations of “normal” mobility have changed accordingly, and car-commuters are, for instance, likely to be locked into a daily routine of journeys any one of which would have had the status of a special expedition in an earlier era.

Organised “freedom”

However “normal” the arrangement has become, the way in which commuters become locked into obligatory routines of work and travel requires further investigation. The notion that the daily “tides” of traffic in and out of towns represent a form of freedom is especially problematic. In considering the concept of more or less “distant intensive” infrastructures, Stephanie Boge, (1997) makes the following observation: “Although most people relate mobility by car with advantages and freedom some developments seem ridiculous. Distant intensive infrastructure like the single family home, large supermarkets and other big economic units lead to a distant intensive lifestyle where the quality of life is decreasing: children cannot walk to school alone any more, commuter travel times are increasing, also the time which has to be spent for shopping... But most people cannot imagine how life would look with less mobility by car.” In this paradoxical situation more freedom means less choice, for it seems that cars simultaneously create precisely the sorts of problems which they also promise to overcome.

This duality of freedom and constraint takes other forms. Once he had his mottled paws on the wheel of that shiny red motor car, toad (of toad hall) was totally exhilarated by the prospects of a life on the open road (Grahame 1994). Yet it is only

an open road which offers such thrills. Traffic congestion brings that excitement to a grinding halt as, in toad's case, does any kind of failure or problem with the vehicle itself. Being too heavy to push very far and often too big to get out of the way, a broken-down car is a total liability. More than that it is likely to have dumped its hapless driver in an awkward, inconvenient and dependent position (see AA advertising). Of course even working cars have their limitations in this respect. They can't stop (safely) just anywhere, there is often a car behind, and if there are no lay-bys or convenient turning spaces for miles there is no option but to go on and on. Similarly it can take hours to recover from a wrong turning on the motorway or from getting lost in an anonymous, and usually depopulated, tangle of unfamiliar urban ring roads.

Infrastructures of “choice”

Though more flexible than trains, cars nonetheless require roads of a certain width⁸ and quality and they have come to depend on urban street lighting as well as parking spaces. For the purposes of this discussion, the important point is that the construction of these facilities generally involves a process of collective not personal consumption. There might be instances in which townspeople view the building of a bypass as a matter of civic pride, seeing the road itself as a kind of status “object” which they would like to acquire for themselves. In these instances we might even see the road as a consumer item. Yet the acquisition of this kind of infrastructural hardware is more usually dominated by complex relations between levels of local and national government, and typically justified with reference to national and local plans, theories of inward investment, and arguments about economic development. In other words, road building is not usually thought to involve the construction of a finite object by a few identifiable “purchasers”. Instead it belongs in a more obviously political realm of planning and transport policy.

To summarise, observations about the expansion of automobility typically focus on questions of infrastructure, collective decision-making, and the dynamics of socio-technical inter-dependency (e.g. transport systems and the management of time and space). Critical issues include those of density and congestion; roads and parking; accessibility and mobility; the design of urban form and the structuring and distribution of social activity. Relevant choices are filtered through a cast of institutional actors including urban planners and local and national transport authorities whose decisions (and of course the decisions embedded in existing infrastructures and urban systems) shape the daily experiences of individual car-users. This then is the scale, and these the terms in which the car-in-use is represented and conceptualised.

The car as consumer

In democratic societies, city authorities and planners are responsible for making decisions on behalf of their local communities. Though the relationship is a bit more distant, there is a sense in which car-users are still the ultimate consumers of the road systems provided for them. Yet the paragraphs above suggest that discussions of the car-in-use are essentially about the *production* of an infrastructure - including roundabouts, traffic-lights, car-parks, policemen etc. - which makes car use possible.

In an everyday sense we know that, these systems are designed *for* cars and lorries, not for people. For example, rules of highway design are based on the anatomy and physiology of the car: its weight, its width, its possible speed, its rate of cornering and so on. More abstractly, it is possible to argue that it is the car, not the urban community, which dominates discussion in planning meetings and which is the real focus of attention. This conceptual twist allows us to see the demands which cars make as consumers not only of land (as Freund and Martin note, “transport modes drive land use patterns” (1994), a point illustrated by the claim that 50-65% of land in Los Angeles and Minneapolis is devoted to the car)⁹ but also in terms of fuel and a variety of other services required to keep them running. In another sense still, cars “consume” the very populations they serve: as we have already seen, they eat up time, they steer people towards different sorts of lives, they structure everyday routines, and they dominate the management of time and space. Rather than seeing them as a “technological extension” of individuals, it is perhaps better to view them as Frankenstein-like devices which structure and constrain their “users”, and which “live” in a sort of symbiotic - but perhaps unequal relation to their makers.¹⁰

Concluding Comments

In this discussion paper I have considered a range of ideas about people as consumers of cars - the importance of cars as objects of desire, as quasi-home environments, as markers of identity and status etc. Such cultural, social or psychological approaches only rarely acknowledge the fact that cars also function as a means of transport. Whether framed in terms of urban geography, political analysis, social theory, or environmental discourse questions about the car in use tend to be pitched at a rather more abstract level, focusing, for instance, on themes of accessibility or mobility in general. In such discussions, the car itself appears as a kind of consumer, making demands and imposing “its own” constraints on planner, commuters and pedestrians alike.

One of the challenges for the SceneSusTech project is to generate ways of thinking about the car-system which take due account *both* of the object and its use, and which also re-unite the analysis of space and time. What seems to be missing is a theory of the car in use which is grounded in the day to day experiences of car users and which connects individual practices to the collective concerns of mobility and accessibility. This is not just another way of saying that the individual benefits of car consumption generate problems at the collective level. Though that might be the case and though it might be an important theme, especially for economic and policy analysis, there are other questions to consider with respect to the relationship between individual ownership (personal consumption) and the (environmentally unsustainable) flow of traffic.

Four seem to be especially interesting.

If the car is constituted by the meanings attached to it *and* by where it can go and what it can do, we need to know more about how these aspects lock together. What are the routes by which cars become “normal” in different societies - what are the individual and infrastructural characteristics of different levels of car ownership and mobility and, critically, how do these co-evolve? Or in terms of one of the examples

used above, what are the social processes through which Turkey (with 28 cars per 1000 inhabitants) might become Denmark (with 380 cars per 1000 inhabitants)?

What happens when ownership and use are de-coupled? Car pooling schemes involve the collective management of “private” cars. Though such systems do not necessarily reduce mileage, they have environmental benefits in that fewer cars are involved. They also complicate that interface between owning and using. Sure enough, a study of an Oslo car-pooling collective found that some members felt an odd sense of “non-identification”, contrasting this with their previous, more personal experience of driving and choosing their own cars (Wilhite 1997).¹¹ An Austrian scheme offers a range of different models, allowing members to pick the identity they wish to project for the day. The persistent social “problem” of admitting that the collective’s car was not “really theirs” even if it was “really them” is nonetheless revealing. Though relatively rare, these schemes are interesting in that the car, stripped of some of its other meanings, is re-defined as a mobility service. As well as filling a gap in modes of passenger transport and blurring the often unhelpful distinction between public and private systems, such arrangements make us think again about what it is to have and drive a car. Company car schemes also separate ownership from use, yet the driver has full-time use of the car and, as already noted, the style and type of car is often carefully selected to match the driver’s status. On both counts company cars have more in common with those which are owned than those which belong either to a car sharing co-operative or even a rental company.

Though only partly developed here, it would be interesting to build on the idea of the car as a consumer. Rather than talking about the car as something which offers “the right to go anywhere” we might think instead about the kind of society which the car enforces. Such an approach would, for instance, help articulate the social and technical demands which cars make and the rigidities which this imposes on the total car-system. As well as highlighting the link between headlight design and street lighting, or the factors which determine the number and distribution of petrol stations, such an approach opens the way for a range of speculative thought experiments. Can the car’s demands ever be met? What are different forms might equal “levels” of car dependency take? and are there different ways of meeting the car’s needs?

How do cars fit into (and/or create) the ordering of everyday life. What is missing here (as far as I know) - but what the project might usefully provide - is an ethnography of the car-in-use which concentrates, especially, on its role as device which individuals use in the management of their own and others’ trajectories through time and space (along with their luggage). Not only does the car (sometimes) reduce the time taken to reach a particular destination but it also makes it possible to determine the *timing* of that journey. In this respect it represents one amongst other “convenience devices” - that is devices, like the mobile phone or the fridge freezer - which allow people to juggle competing demands and navigate through (increasingly?) tightly scheduled lives (Warde, Shove and Southerton, 1998). Better knowledge of how cars are actually used (which probably does not involve analysis in terms of ready-made headings like journeys to work etc.) would allow us to spot processes of substitution - for instance where phone calls replace car journeys - and understand the micro-structures of space-time management.

Notes for the SCENESUSTECH work programme.

Some of these ideas have specific implications for the development of parts of the SceneSusTech work programme. For example:

1.1.6 It would be useful to disaggregate “car dependency” and think more about what that means, what different forms it might take etc.

1.2.2 Though clearly relevant to collect “basic” data, it would also be interesting to reflect on the different meanings of accessibility in different cultures, and to think about the headings which car users adopt in classifying car uses and journeys.

2. The idea of the car as consumer would be especially interesting to pursue when examining the political process surrounding the design and management of urban transport systems.

2.1 In thinking about the car and other forms of transport, it would be good to take account of the time-related qualities of each, and of how people juggle between different transport systems in ways that may relate to their strategies for juggling time. For instance, how important is “waiting” and what does it mean to “wait” or have planned journeys disrupted in different circumstances.

2.2 The notion of reviewing the perceptions and priorities of different actors, road engineers, manufacturers, traffic wardens etc. could be undertaken in ways that also revealed something of their relative power and the different linkages and inter-dependencies between each.

3.1 Again issues of time would be worth exploring, plus, perhaps the idea of inviting people to talk about their car histories, i.e. histories of ownership and of use.

3.2 What is interesting here is the evolution of expectations both of mobility and accessibility. What is it that people now expect to be able to get to. How have expectations of long and short journeys changed over time?

4.2 Reference to transport systems of the imagination could be really worthwhile. For instance, how far into the future do people think: 10 years, 100? Equally, what scope do they think there is for changing infrastructure - can we imagine the equivalent of a new rail network or canal system? Are we, rather, stuck with an existing infrastructure and only facing the challenge of making better use of it?

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Notes

¹ ref. to Robin Segal, an American researcher who did a brief ethnography of car sales people - rsegal.@netcom.com; also note that car salesmen have a strange role - they push potential customers through a sales-selling narrative without much reference (or knowledge of) the object itself. There is a chain of garages in the USA which sells cars without car-salesmen, on the grounds that buyers find the sales process unpleasant and would rather have a cheaper car. It would be interesting to know how this strategy works.

² Olle Hagmann, 1993 and Marit Hubak Karlsen 1992 - work on car advertisements find refs. to these cited in Philippe Crist's paper.

³ Its odd that these two conflicting features should be listed side by side!

⁴ In environmental terms, its interesting to wonder what would happen if age limits were radically altered - if you could only drive over the age of 40, or if you had to stop driving when you reached 50 etc.

⁵ It is worth noting, that an increase in the range of models, engine sizes and styles on offer has gone hand in hand with an increasing standardisation in terms of production techniques and component parts. Though it is now possible to tailor colours, trim, accessories, options and gadgets to suit the "needs" of individual customers, there is also a sense in which all cars are "the same" and in which working parts, assembled

in factories all over the world, are ever more inaccessibly black-boxed beneath the bodywork: car air conditioning systems are, for instance produced by only four companies around the world.

6 Rick Wilk found the following quotation from Zsa Zsa Gabor in *Nation*, 15.4.98, p7: "A limousine is not an acquired taste - you get used to it immediately".

7 Boycotting Shell might be an exception to this general pattern. Yet there is no such thing as fashionable petrol (is there?) and in any case, once in the tank its pretty invisible.

8 It would be interesting to know about the width of the road. I assume its standard all over Europe. I also assume that it, and then the width of the car, bears some historic relationship to the width of a horse and cart. - on the face of it there is no reason why cars couldn't be long and narrow with passengers in a row one behind the other (as old style racing cars used to be).

9 e.g. p23, SceneSusTech lit. review, ref. to OECD 1996: 20, 65% of land paved for transportation purposes in Los Angeles and Indianapolis/ figure of 372m2 per car or 3x size of the average home - but where are these figures for?

10 Arguably, freezers "behave" in similar ways - see Shove and Southerton, 1997

11 This study invited drivers to describe their "car-history" - ie. to describe the sequence of cars they had owned, when and why they decided to change cars and what models they had chosen over the course of their car-owning careers.