The U.S. car colossus and the production of inequality

Abstract

The contemporary world is one of restless mobilities, radically morphing physical landscapes, baroque technologies, new forms of governance and subjectivity, and onerous inequalities. The automobile provides vivid insight into all five phenomena as well as into their relationship. I ask how the car-dependent mobility system of the United States not only reflects but also intensively generates the inequalities that characterize U.S. society. I propose that “compulsory consumption” and the automobile’s centrality to the current regime of accumulation can help account for this. Theories of inequality and mobility, I suggest, can be adapted to account for the automobile industry’s capture of contemporary life.

The contemporary world is one of restless mobilities, radically morphing physical landscapes, baroque technologies, new forms of governance and subjectivity, and onerous inequalities. The automobile provides vivid insight into all five phenomena as well as into their relationship. Valuable interdisciplinary work emerging from a variety of fields, from urban planning to environmental history and material culture studies, has submitted the car to a rigorous sociological imagination, and anthropologists have begun to join in this work (Lamont 2010; Masquelier 2002; Miller 2001; Moodie 2006; see also Vivanco 2012). Most of the work in transportation studies, strictly speaking, however, has been dominated by a physical and social engineering perspective and has left relatively unexplored the fundamental effects of transit policy and practice on people’s lives and their shaping of the possibilities for social justice. Environmental justice scholars and activists, by contrast, have identified the unequal distribution of harms from car emissions, road construction, and the climate change the automobile has helped cause, even as mainstream environmental thought continues to situate the problems of a car-dependent transportation system in a universalizing frame.

There remains a less recognized but quite massive effect of the car system on the degree and nature of socioeconomic inequality wherever that system has established itself. By the car system I mean the complex that includes the quasi-private and embodied technology of the car, governance practices, changed time–space conceptions, and landscapes of affordance to the car. Ethnographic and journalistic studies of poverty in the United States have described how the fundamental right to mobility is compromised for the nation’s poor (DeParle 2004; Hamer 2011:58–75; Seif 2003). More generally, though, the study of inequality has not focused on the car or mobility as a central element of its production. Instead of seeing the availability of a car as a sign or consequence of inequality, or as a predictable obstacle to advancement, we might see it as, in significant measure, one of its key sources. While many aspects of contemporary capitalism have contributed to the national and global growth of inequality, the car’s impact is distinctive and noteworthy in a number of ways. It effects are important both for well-being in the United States, the most car-dependent nation in the world, but also for people around the globe whose government preferences for the car in industrial policy, infrastructure investments, and tax policies are intensifying rapidly. The car
population explosion has put nearly one billion vehicles on the road today, and the world is en route to two billion vehicles globally by 2030 (Sperling and Gordon 2009).

In this article, I explore the effects of the car system on inequality by reference to both ethnographic research and broader national data on the socioeconomic dimensions of car use. While the ethnographic research I report focused mainly on the compact older city of Providence, Rhode Island, I and several research collaborators also conducted interviews with people at other sites around the country in a variety of places where cars are made, sold, marketed, and used. Participants in our open-ended interviews included car owners, new and used car dealers, emergency medical technicians, mechanics, transportation planners, car marketers and designers in Detroit, and others with intensive car experience and knowledge. We also engaged in observations in traffic court and car sales lots in Providence. While the interviews explored a broad range of participants’ experiences driving, buying, and otherwise living with the car and its effects, those with people in the bottom half of the income distribution clearly revealed how centrally the car figured in financial difficulties and social anxieties. The research also draws on national survey data that indicate how much households at various income levels in the United States spend each year on transportation in comparison with other items (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2013).

This material allows insight into the several significant pathways by which the car produces or amplifies inequality in the United States and, potentially, elsewhere. I argue that the car system not only reflects inequality but also actively produces it, massively redistributing wealth, status, well-being, and the means to mobility and its power. While declining wages, rising corporate control of the state, and rising costs of higher education and health care are also crucial to these redistributions, understanding the car system’s special and deeply consequential inequality-producing processes is key to any attempt to solve a number of problems. Prominent among the problems that the U.S. car system exacerbates are inequality of job access, rising wealth inequality, and environmental degradation and its unequal health effects.

**Theorizing inequality**

In the last few years, increasingly vigorous research and discussion have focused on the roots and consequences of rising inequality in the United States. We have come to understand how that rise results in part from the undoing of the Fordist political-economic bargain that prevailed for much of the 20th century. The shrinking real minimum wage, more-regressive tax policies, state deregulation, the decline of union membership, and the globalization and financialization of economic life have all played a part. Anthropologists have focused astute attention on how urban space has (re)produced exclusion and inequality as it has been increasingly enclosed, policed, privatized, legally re-categorized, and designed and signed in ways that welcome only certain kinds of people (Caldeira 2001; Low 2011; also Gregory 1998). They have detailed how the original theft of land and labor and attendant racial formations in the Americas as well as elsewhere have established the grounds and motive for inequality of human status, wealth, and health (Gravlee 2009; Kauanui 2008; Mullings 2005). Finally, they have focused on how labor’s transformations and new state policies have accelerated the inequality of workers’ burdens and compensations (Collins 2003, 2010; Goode and Maskovsky 2002).

Changes in the car industry can and should now be given a central place in narratives of rising inequality as well. These changes include, among others, a sharp rise in the price of cars and in the profits to be made from car credit (as from financialization more generally) and an increase in how much Americans must or do drive given land use patterns, infrastructure investments (Graham and Martin 2001), and changing cultural assumptions about, and accessibility of, public transit.

Studies of inequality have focused on differences in earnings, wealth, and opportunities (Neckerman and Torche 2007) as well as inequalities in consumption, which research suggests have run a roughly similar course. While the extension of credit has allowed for elevated levels of consumption among those in the bottom part of the income distribution, analysts do not appear to have taken much account, on the household level, of the deeply consequential effects of the necessity of purchasing a car and all its ancillary products. Looking not just at what Americans earn but also at what they must spend gives us a better sense of what rising income inequality has wrought and shows that the burden of U.S. policy preferences for the car must be assessed household by household.

The broadly interdisciplinary nature of the mobilities turn in the social sciences (Sheller and Urry 2006) over the last decade has drawn attention to the study of transportation and movement as an antidote to an overly static approach to a wide range of topics. Within this paradigm, the politics of mobility (Cresswell 2010) or, rather, and more broadly, the cultural-political economy of mobility and its infrastructures (Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012; O’Neill and Rodgers 2012) has begun to be more fully studied. Scholars have argued that we can no longer view the car as simply a utilitarian tool to move humans from one point to another, a tool about which there are simply questions of efficiencies and alternative, more environmentally sustainable modes. Instead, car-related problems—such as traffic congestion, pollution, or automobile-induced inequality—are treated as “byproducts of a means by which society chooses to trade and interact” (Shaw and Sidaway 2011:514) or, more specifically, as the result of how powerful actors...
have captured the U.S. mobility system, sunk public capital into the landscape, locked in automobility, and widened inequality in life chances. Shifts in how urban infrastructure, like that for transportation, has been conceptualized and installed have contributed to what has been termed “infrastructural violence” (O’Neill and Rodgers 2012; see also Graham and Martin 2001). Nonetheless, scholars and activists generally continue to treat access to the car system as the main point at which critical questions of social justice must be raised or to view sustainability as a question for a social world seen as a whole rather than divided by power and interest.

Obstacles to understanding the impact of the car on inequality

Many recognize that changing the car system is key to solving a host of problems. These include (1) climate change, to which the car massively contributes, 6 (2) urban sprawl and other land use patterns that increase driving time, risk, and gas consumption, (3) the public health problems represented by car crashes (which have killed more U.S. residents than those who died in all U.S. wars in the 20th century) as well as by elevated levels of obesity, asthma, and cancer, and (4) the degraded economic viability of communities whose highways are choked with traffic, slowing the flow of goods and people through markets and making sustainable local economies less possible (Lutz and Fernandez 2010). These problems have been recognized in part because they are visible to academics, journalists, and the wealthier, on whom they directly impinge.

At the same time, neither popular nor scholarly analysts have examined how the car system affects wealth distribution in the United States even as poverty scholars detail how the lack of a car or driver’s license afflicts and limits those who directly impinge. At the same time, people we spoke with commonly assume that the car is a great leveler, a crucial tool for crafting the American Dream of equal opportunity. In this schema, everyone, rich and poor, black and white, male and female, has the same power, mobility, and rights behind the wheel. Everyone is also theoretically subject to the same speed limits and other road rules, department of motor vehicle fees, and gas prices, and everyone can use the public roads to get to their job or get their goods to market. But once people have availed themselves of this equalizing tool, their efforts put them in a more or less luxurious car that marks their success or failure.

The third obstacle to recognizing the relationship between the auto and inequality lies in the normalizing processes that shape responses to the more ubiquitous and long-standing aspects of everyday life. After disappearing as social phenomena by the mid-20th century, the car and its legitimating discourses reappeared as inevitable and unchangeable aspects of the world. This is especially remarkable given the dynamism of each new model year (Facebook access on a touchscreen! Electric plug-into-the-garage capacity! Eight cup holders!). Fundamentally, driving draws on a deep-seated liberal individualism and “reproduces [its] metaphors of autonomy, individualism and toleration” (Rajan 2006:122; see also Paterson 2007). Similarly, many Americans see the oil that moves the car (or the coal that mostly moves electric cars) as a simple (if disappearing) natural resource rather than a more complex sociopolitical object (Mitchell 2011).

Compulsory consumption and the political economy of the car

We might consider mobility systems along with education or racialization as significantly generative of stratification rather than simply derivative of those more traditional factors, even as they are entwined with them. Theoretically, inequality has been identified with differentials of wealth, or differences in how much households accumulate, via income and inheritance, and with differences in cultural
capital, status, or stigma, or the cultural and legal distinctions and values allocated differentially by notions of race, ethnicity, gender, age, and sexuality. Each of these foundational elements of inequality has been shaped by the emergence of the car system as the centerpiece of the U.S. political economy.

The political-economic landscape of the auto is everywhere: It includes, most obviously, the producers of cars and oil and the state, which supports those corporations via tax policies, subsidies, bailouts, and responsiveness to industry resistance to significant regulation. It also includes auto finance companies and the legal apparatuses that structure permissible car loan interest rates and facilitate repossessions, car dealerships, the car insurance industry and the laws requiring the purchase of coverage by all drivers, gasoline stations and their emergence as mini-malls and lottery-ticket sales centers, parking garage companies and their relationship to urban form and finances, car repair businesses, the asphalt plants and road construction companies that thrive on state department of transportation contracts and have increasing power to determine highway spending priorities, the police and other public emergency workers who clear the road of wrecks and human bodies on a daily basis, and so on. This political economy churns out product and the ancillary services needed to use that product. It has also produced the ideological assumption that the car is the preeminent engine of economic growth and well-being: This basic assumption has been “legitimizing the car’s expansion, enabling [it] to become perhaps the symbol of progress for most of the twentieth century” (Paterson 2007:92).

On the production side of each of these elements of the car industries is a tale of the reproduction of class and the hidden and visible injuries of class. Here, however, I focus on the routes to inequality inherent in the consumption and use of the car. This focus is important because the contemporary U.S. lifeworld is one in which the car has become an item of what can be called “compulsory consumption.” Except in a few transit-dense cities like New York and Boston, most U.S. individuals or households cannot function effectively without a car. For a variety of reasons, the availability of a car is now among the most crucial factors determining whether someone is employed or not (Ong and Miller 2005:53). Because the car is by far the most expensive commodity that most people purchase and maintain, its ownership and use has the most significant consequences for wealth distribution and for how much money is available to households for food, health care, education, and other needs. Because the car has become crucial to the ability to get to work and because its regulation has become crucial to sifting out noncitizens from public spaces, it structures lifeworlds and life chances.

Auto-induced pathways to inequality

The ethnographic work and survey material described here suggest at least five automobility-induced pathways to inequality. These pathways represent the intersection between the complex, risky, and privatized technology of the automobile, the distribution of costs and risks between households and the state, and the power of the car and oil industries to shape state mobility and tax policies, among other factors. They represent the multiple social processes by which the car system redistributes wealth.

Private and compulsory consumption of a costly means of mobility

The first pathway is via the privatized expense of the car and related services, which drain significant resources from households in the bottom quintiles of income distribution. The car system requires significant private capital inputs from each household, alongside tax payments for the public funding of infrastructure and other externalized costs. The substantial expenses incurred in most households to own and operate a car are often underestimated by those who bear them given how many different types of expense there are. They include the cost of the car itself and its loan financing; gasoline, insurance, and parking costs; registration and other government fees and taxes; and repair expenses. The average annual household cost of transportation is nearly $9,000, with most households owning two automobiles. This puts the cost of mobility substantially higher than the cost of food. The 2012 Consumer Expenditure Survey showed the bottom quintile spent roughly $3,400 and the next quintile $5,500 annually on transportation, which represents 34 percent and 20 percent, respectively, of household post-tax income (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics).10

The struggles of one man in Providence, a line cook in his thirties, to stay mobile show how easily those numbers add up. He described how he was able to save to buy a used car for $6,500. He then had to pay $500 to register it, and he estimated that he paid $200 a month for gas and $80 a month for insurance. He figured additionally that he had spent $2,000 on repairs over the last four years of ownership. For this man, then, operating expenses alone come to nearly $4,000 a year. On a near-minimum-wage job, he has sometimes had to negotiate with his landlord to postpone his rent payment.

The impossible choices these kinds of car expenses force onto lower-income people are evident in Erica’s account. A 21-year-old worker at a Providence restaurant, she has owned several very used cars so far in her life. Her father bought or gave her two of them, and she absorbed the costs of operating and repairing them with her earnings as a cashier. She needed her first car to make the 45-minute commute to the community college she attended close to
her rural New York home. When she moved to attend college in Rhode Island, the car went with her but eventually gave out completely. She sometimes used her boyfriend’s car to get to campus but often missed class (and clashed with him) when his schedule did not mesh with hers. But what finally caused her to leave school was lack of funds: The extensive repairs and gas and insurance costs, along with parking fees, left her without tuition money for the following semester. In a final denouement, her car’s lapsed registration led to its being towed to a police impound. Erica did not have the $217 first-day fee to retrieve it or the money to reregister it. In the end, though, she concluded that

it was awesome to have a car. I felt like, kind of a step higher. Because walking and biking fucking blows. Whenever I am walking or biking, and I’d much rather be driving to work than doing this. I look at everyone in a car and I’m thinking as everyone passes by I just think you are so lucky, you are so lucky, you are so lucky. I really want that. [Then when] you get that car and you feel like “I’m finally here, here I am.” It’s great to have it, and then like as these debts pile up and you realize how much it’s costing you, you kind of ignore it because this is what I have now. This isn’t an option anymore to just not have this.

A variety of factors—the emotional appeals, the carry-on imperative, and the necessity of getting to work or school—pressed Erica into car indebtedness and car trouble.

The personal financial burden cars impose has grown rapidly over time in the United States. Just 10 percent of household income went to transportation in 1960, a figure that nearly doubled over the following 50 years (Bernstein et al. 2005:4). In that interim, to accommodate the automobile, communities were increasingly built in sprawled-out patterns, helping to double the number of miles driven in passenger vehicles, thereby increasing driving costs; public transit investment and availability declined or degraded sharply; the average car became more luxurious and expensive; and larger and longer period loans were marketed to car buyers, driving up financing costs.

The costs of car ownership and operation often make up the largest single category of expenditures in the household budget for those in the bottom part of the income distribution. Not only is the percentage of their income that goes toward cars much larger than it is for the better-off but aspects of their absolute costs can also approach those of people with higher incomes. While the lowest-income group owns older and less valuable cars, their costs of ownership and use are usually higher as a result of paying more for repairs, traffic fines, and fees, for loans from predatory lending establishments, and for insurance coverage. Low-income car owners pay higher car insurance premiums than more affluent owners for the same coverage on the same make and model cars (Brobeck and Hunter 2012). The recession that began in 2007 worsened the situation: With the sharp drop in new-car purchases, tens of millions fewer cars were funneled into the used-car market, raising the price of used cars substantially. At the same time, Washington’s response, the Cash for Clunkers program, took even more used cars off the market, raising prices still further.

Shopping for a car disproportionately exposes vulnerable people from the bottom quintiles to exploitation and fraud. In the course of fieldwork, I accompanied an Israeli woman in her late twenties (who had immigrated to the United States as a graduate student at my university) as she looked to buy a used car. She had a yearly income of approximately $20,000 and no credit history, which led a dealer at the first lot we visited on the weedy edge of Providence to let her know, after a little research, that she did not qualify for a car loan. Someone like her, he said with disappointment in his voice, who did not appear in credit service records, was considered a “ghost” and, so, a risky bet. We moved on to the more centrally located used-car lot of JD Byrider, a chain that operates stores close to lower-income neighborhoods in about two dozen states. It is one of many used-car dealerships called “buy here, pay here” lots: The company sells cars as well as their financing rather than using outside banks or other outfits for loans. My companion and I both recognized the store’s bright blue and orange logo from its cheerful TV ads and settled into its waiting room, cleaner and more expansive than the last dealer’s. When an upbeat avuncular salesman came out to the waiting room, he was quick to try to establish a relationship with the young woman and to introduce a positive image of what car ownership could mean to her, quicker than he was to take her to see his cars. He touted what he loves about his job, which is his ability to help people with poor credit scores: “We help you establish a good credit history.” When people do so, he said, they can then go on to get a new car or even a home mortgage. He concluded with a flourish, “I always tell my customers: ‘If you buy a new car, you have to come here and show it to me.’” We eventually made our way outside to the lot and jotted down some prices, all greatly inflated: A five-year-old Hyundai Accent with almost 100,000 miles on it, for example, was priced at three times the official blue book value. This high pricing allows JD Byrider to sell cars by panning some of the loan costs into the base price of the car, in this way avoiding running afoul of state usury laws, which limit how much a dealer can charge buyers, including “high risk” customers.

This kind of discrimination in pricing and financing is endemic across the thousands of used-car transactions that are made each day throughout the country. This phenomenon is not unique to the market in cars—one can find rent-to-own sofas for twice the price of a straight sale, higher prices at local convenience stores that serve as the only accessible food stores in many
neighborhoods, and payday loans with effective interest rates as high as 900 percent (Williams 2005). But because the car is by far the most expensive consumer item most will purchase, its impact is that much more significant. Because the car is an item of compulsory consumption and because the poorer consumer often only begins shopping when his or her car has stopped operating and tomorrow’s workday commute looms, buyers in the bottom quintiles of income are in a weak position when they approach a dealer.

The car system impoverishes in at least two other ways. In the interest of public safety, a number of states have instituted mandatory vehicle inspections, and virtually all have regulations that allow ticketing of vehicles in certain kinds of disrepair. These inspections and regulations predominantly catch flaws in the deteriorating cars of the poor. The Rent-a-Tire chain is one business that thrives in this environment, offering the opportunity to pay by the week for a set of tires. Its customers often come in just before the deadline for their car inspection, at which time some significant tire tread must be in evidence. A full set of tires can cost over $2,000 by the end of a rental agreement’s 52 weekly payments. Much more ubiquitous are stores that offer car title loans. These businesses capitalize on the fact that the car is the main or only form of significant wealth for the relatively poor. Most people in the lowest income quintile have no savings accounts and no home equity, but 65 percent of their households have a car or cars with a median value of $5,800; the median net wealth of all households in that bottom quintile is just $400 more than that (Bricker et al. 2012:17, 47, 49). The car title companies loan money on the value of the car by taking possession of its title as collateral and charge exorbitant interest rates. The scale of the marketing and the use of these kinds of loans among the poor is indicated by the data from just one state: Investigators found that 931 such storefronts were operating across Tennessee in 2004 and that they had repossessed the cars of 17,000 people.13

Repossession dogs the many people in the bottom quintiles of income for whom job insecurity and car loans often intersect, and it results in loss of whatever car equity they have amassed. We interviewed one Providence man in his early forties who anxiously described his ongoing attempts to deflect a repossession. He had put down $9,500 on a then-new 2005 Ford F-250 extended-cab pickup, covering the substantial $38,500 remainder with a 9 percent interest loan. He thought he could afford it given his good income as a tractor-trailer driver. Four years after the purchase, however, he still owed thousands on the vehicle and had fallen behind on the payments when he lost his job. In the meantime, he had gotten work as a cab driver, but was considering whether to pay his monthly child support or make the pickup loan payments. In a final twist, he also held out hope that he might be able to pay off his remaining debt with the potential settlement from a crash he had been in a separate vehicle.

Another irony in this first pathway to the production of inequality through the car system is that, as the most significant form of wealth possessed by the bottom quintile, the automobile is a depreciating asset. While those in upper quintiles, of course, also have cars losing value in their driveways, they more than balance the loss with the appreciations of their savings or stock portfolios. The financial math at the bottom is all subtraction, with hundreds of dollars or more of car value disappearing each year.

Whatever the struggles car ownership brings, however, lack of a car altogether makes job options much more limited. One recent high school graduate living in Providence described how he had been offered an assistant manager job at a Circuit City store in the nearby suburb of Seekonk, Massachusetts, but he ultimately could not accept the job because he had no way to get there, with Rhode Island bus service stopping at the state border. Even where transit exists to link people and jobs, the costs of mobility can still be challenging. One young man I spoke with was trying to get to and from a minimum-wage job in an Atlanta restaurant kitchen without a car. For a while, he lived in a sprawling part of the metro area where bus service was virtually nonexistent. On the many days when his roommate (whose parents subsidized his car) could not drive him to work, he arranged with a cab driver to pick him up before his shift began. At $8 plus a $2 tip per ride to ensure a regular pickup, it took him nearly the first two hours of every workday to clear his one-way transportation cost. He later moved downtown and could buy a monthly Metro pass for $95. Even then, his earnings from the first dozen or more hours of his work month went to pay for transit to and from the job.

Compulsory private consumption of a high-risk technology

The second pathway to inequality that the car system generates is the result of the combination of the car’s technological sophistication and complexity and the fact that it is privately owned: this makes it a high-risk and high-uncertainty item in people’s lives. A special kind of tool that almost everyone must buy, its risks include mechanical breakdown or crash damage and legal troubles that emerge from misoperation or lack of maintenance. It is also a form of private wealth that is much more liable to confiscation—through theft or repossession or impoundment—than other forms of wealth. So the main form of wealth of most households at the bottom represents their largest risk as well.

Increasingly complex and sealed engines make it impossible for most people to fix their cars themselves. One of every three households in the United States had unexpected substantial expenses that put them in financial difficulty in a recent year; one quarter of them were car related (Pew Research Center 2007). This means that car repairs financially
plague 8 percent of U.S. households in an average year—most of them in the bottom quintiles. While not comparable to medical costs, car repairs are expensive: A new clutch can cost $700 and simple brake pad replacements $200. In a crash, the $1,000 deductible must be covered before any repairs are made, and the bare-bones insurance often held by those with low incomes does not include coverage for theft.

The risks associated with car ownership often lead to cascading losses, such as job loss or further indebtedness. Conversely, “adverse events” such as job loss, divorce, and illness often amplify inequality (Western et al. 2012:346–349), often mediated through their impact on automobility. Divorce in a single-car household leaves one partner without, and loss of a job can mean loss of one’s car (although, in crisis, many make car loan payments before those for mortgage or rent).

Governing access to automobility

A third pathway to inequality is through state governance of access to automobility. A welter of relatively heavy fees, fines, and taxes are levied on those who use cars, and those burdens fall more heavily on the poor. They do so both proportionally but also absolutely as a result of the greater likelihood that the poor will drive without insurance, license, registration, or equipment in regulation shape. Through most states’ limiting of licenses and car registration to citizens and documented residents, moreover, car governance has become a fundamental route to creating second-class status for immigrants and limiting their mobility for jobs and health care. It is not overstating the case, in fact, to suggest that the car system represents the most central and immediate way the state and its policing and regulatory arms appear before and shape the lives of residents and in a manner that sharpens inequality.

As Hinda Seif has pointed out, the driver’s license is a key site of struggle for the undocumented, and the problem has only intensified with antiterrorism surveillance prerogatives taken in the wake of 9/11, anti-immigrant political activism, and “a revolution in information technologies [that have] transformed the ability of the state to enforce its laws against undocumented immigrants” (2003:3–4). In rhetoric that suggests both racial anxiety and the car’s centrality to physical and social mobility, anti-immigrant activists in California have focused on the driver’s license as a “breeder document,” access to which must be denied if the undocumented are to be prevented from getting jobs, checking accounts, or housing (Seif 2003:5).

This struggle is evident in the life of David, who came to the United States from Guatemala for work in the early 2000s, married, and had three children. For a number of years, he moved around Providence on bus and bicycle, but the bus did not operate into the early and late hours he often had to work at his restaurant jobs. When his friend was stabbed and robbed riding a bike home late one night, David became intent on getting a car. He finally saved the thousands needed but, because he has no residence papers, he had to ask his brother-in-law to put the car in his name. After an additional $500 for sales taxes and registration, David still could not get an operator’s license and so drives in constant fear of being pulled over, having his car confiscated, or being arrested and deported. He tries to limit his driving to essential trips, lamenting,

Everybody is human. Everybody needs to work. We came here for a reason. Poor countries, you can’t even support yourself. In my case, I came here when I was 16 years old and now I have a family. I got to drive them. And the way it is, it’s just not me. It’s millions of people driving like that, scared all the time, afraid to do things. Not able to enjoy your kids, take them to the beach. We have a house and everything but we are not comfortable. We just worry. Every time you go out, first thing you think about is that: are you going to get pulled over?

In this and other ways, the car system becomes a significant route to criminalization of the undocumented and the poor.

For the documented poor, life with the car often entails a constant struggle with state regulation and fees. Traffic court in Providence is peopled primarily by the working poor and struggling middle class, whose stories before the judge demonstrate the state role in redistribution through the car system. One man was found driving without insurance, like upwards of 75 percent of car owners in some poor neighborhoods. He was fined $200, had his license revoked, and had to come up with an additional $151 to reinstate it. Another man had been stopped for defective brake lights and was then found not to have a current vehicle registration. Beyond his court fine, he would have to pay $250 to reinstate it. One young woman had acquired enough unpaid parking tickets (in a city that required all cars to be off the street at night, even those of residents of apartments with no driveways) to have lost her license and registration. Finally, one woman in her thirties had come to court to pay off a ticket for driving with a missing plate, the fine for which had swollen over time to $325. After appearing before the judge, she explained that she had a nine-year-old ticket to pay for driving without insurance, whose $76 monthly premium she had lost the ability to cover. Moreover, her license had been suspended when she failed to pay the two tickets promptly, and so she had given her car to a sister. For the last nine years, she had been taking the bus, most recently for a total of four hours a day, first to get her children to school and day care and then to get to each of her two jobs, as a retail clerk in a mall and as a cashier at an Au Bon Pain café in another part of town. With license reinstatement and registration fees, she would need about $1,000 to get back in a car, all before buying one. She had only been able to come
into court to start paying her way back into driving because she had just received a tax refund.

**Health inequalities of the car system**

While everyone who drives or bikes or walks near a road bears some risk of being a victim of the car’s lethality (the global death toll in 2010 was 1.24 million [WHO 2013], and the U.S. toll in 2012 stood at 34,000 [U.S. Department of Transportation 2013]), an auto-dependent system is more dangerous to those of lower income, status, and power. They are more likely to be what traffic safety people call “vulnerable road users,” that is to say, to get around on foot, by bicycle, and in vehicles in which they are less likely to have or to use child safety seats and seat belts. Moreover, many car crashes are occupational hazards associated with lower-paid work in agriculture, forestry, ground transportation and delivery services, mining, and construction (U.S. Department of Transportation 1996).

Race as well as class, as always, makes a difference in susceptibility to car-related health problems. African Americans and Latinos are less likely than whites to own vehicles and more likely to live and work in high-traffic urban areas, where they are injured and killed in car crashes at higher rates. African Americans make up 13 percent of the population but 19 percent of the pedestrians killed by vehicles (Ernst 2004). Black and Latino children die in cars at higher rates than do white children (Baker et al. 1998). More generally, the car system is entwined with racialization processes of the United States, via discriminatory policing of the roads and through apartheid-like transportation subsystems in which buses in many areas carry people of color, light rail and airlines carry whites, and proportionally more car drivers are white (Hutchinson 2000). These processes shape not only mobility but identities as well.

Car crash survivors suffer injuries that are often permanently disabling, including spinal cord injuries, brain trauma, multiple and complex fractures, and crushed body parts. An estimated 200 thousand of the 2.5 million people hurt in crashes have such serious injuries (Evans 2004). Most incur substantial medical expenses and indebtedness on account of both uncovered medical costs and lost workdays or jobs. These burdens are especially heavy when the survivors are already financially vulnerable. Some significant proportion of bankruptcies in the middle class are the result of these losses, which often radiate through the family as someone leaves work to take on the caretaker role for a seriously injured relative.

Other health effects of the car system impinge more on those in the bottom quintiles as well. Vehicle exhaust’s effects on air quality and health kill an estimated 35 thousand people a year in the United States and are most strongly felt by those living within 500 yards of major roads (Lutz and Fernandez 2010:171–174). People residing inside major road corridors are at higher risk of heart and lung disease, childhood cancers, brain cancer, and leukemia, and the class composition of the neighborhoods in such corridors tends strongly to the poor (Houston et al. 2004; Savitz and Feingold 1989). In a transit-deprived, car-dependent environment, the poor also have less access to medical care: Lack of transportation, in one study, accounted for one in five individuals foregoing needed health care (Lui 2006:12). Finally, some portion of the higher infant mortality rate among minority and poor populations can be accounted for by the location of highways near their homes and their homes near highways (Wilhelm and Ritz 2003).

The focus in state efforts to manage car safety has been both behavioral (driver error) and technocentric (car safety equipment), shifting over time in the United States from the driver to the car as the locus of responsibility to protect (Jain 2006; see also MacLennan 1988). As Mark Lamont (2010) and Ellen Moodie (2006) have pointed out, neoliberal regimes of governance overdetermine this focus in car safety campaigns and attempts at legal redress. Lamont (2010) compellingly argues that the global car safety campaign that the UN and World Bank have waged in the global South has hived off the developing world as having a “different kind” of public health problem than the developed world has, one treated more as a problem of bad governance (corruption in road building, ineffective licensing practices, etc.) and of individual behavior (uneducated and unsafe drivers, etc.) in a public health context that further naturalizes automobility itself. In the United States, safety campaigns suggest that security on the road will result above all from access to technically better (and more expensive) versions of the commodity in question (newer, safer cars, infant car seats or better car seats, better-engineered roads), the removal of unsafe cars from the road through police enforcement and inspection regimes, and better self-regulation (e.g., less drinking and driving).17 As Sarah Jain (2006) argues (contrary to the assumption that technologies will have invariant and natural effects), automobile injuries are unevenly distributed and variously constructed over time.

**The car as the centerpiece of a regime of accumulation and its beneficiaries**

The first four postulated pathways to the auto’s production of inequality are lenses centered on the redistributive and governance effects of the purchase and use of a car on the bottom quintiles. To identify the fifth and most fundamental pathway is to shift the focus to those who accumulate wealth via the car system. With the aid of unremitting state support over the course of a century, car and oil corporations emerged at the center of a regime of accumulation that directs massive amounts of daily spending by all car owners and users, directly and via the tax system, to a small
number of people and groups at the very top of the U.S. economic system.

Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy (1966:129) identified the invention of the automobile as an “epoch-making innovation” that enabled unprecedented capital investments and profits to be made, not only from the sale of cars, the materials to make them, and gasoline to run them but also from the highway construction, real estate, and insurance industries that received new life from the car. This regime has been a long century in the making and sustaining, with a car company, of course, lending its name to the new mode—Fordism—of regulation of relations between government, producers, financiers, and consumers that made mass car sales possible. The car, as midcentury analyst Peter Drucker wrote, “is to the twentieth century what the Lancashire cotton mills were to the early nineteenth century: the industry of industries” (Paterson 2007:93).

Cars and oil are now capitalism’s principal commodities, with car financing more recently overtaking car manufacturing itself as a source of profits, in keeping with the advance of financialization more generally. Six of the top ten largest corporations in revenues in the United States in 2013 were car and oil corporations (CNN 2014). Over 4.3 million workers were employed in just the core occupational groups of the auto industry in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). These workers’ households, however, are most likely to be in the bottom three quintiles of income distribution and to spend significant percentages of their car industry incomes on automobility. The political-economic history of the industries that make and profit from the car system is the history of major ruptures in access to safe mobility and financial security and sharp increases in inequality. While the U.S. and global car industry now struggles with significant production overcapacity and declining demand in the United States, growing markets elsewhere and massive new investments in finding and selling cheap oil to run those cars proceed apace.

The car and oil industries are positioned at the core of contemporary capitalism’s redistributional mechanisms via three routes. The first is directly through the sale of cars, gasoline, tires, insurance, and so on, to millions of households, revenues then funneled into payments to their executive employees (e.g., $11.4 million to General Motors’ Mary Barra in 2014) and company profits ($45 billion to Exxon Mobil in 2013) paid out to (mostly already wealthy) shareholders. Other car industry corporations with high sales, profits, and executive pay include Geico and Progressive insurance companies, auto component makers Firestone and Keystone Automotive Industries, and car dealers like CarMax and JD Byrider.

The second redistributional route is through the tax and subsidy system. A long history of federal and state legal and political decisions have redistributed money from the lower quintiles upward in support of the car system. The Chrysler bailout in 1979 totaled $3.8 billion in current dollars, while the 2009 General Motors and Chrysler bailouts cost $30 billion. The oil and gas industries were estimated to have won $3.6 billion in tax incentives in 2005, and fossil fuel companies receive $10 billion each year in federal subsidies of all kinds, by conservative estimate (Environmental Law Institute 2009). The last decade has also seen the rise of political discourses that support the notion that gas and oil exploration, including extremely destructive and risky forms of extraction, grow the U.S. economy, prevent U.S. wars to protect foreign sources of oil, and protect U.S. citizens’ standard of living against the extortions of foreign oil cartels.

The third route by which wealth and power are redistributed via automobility is through changes in the governance and construction of everyday experience. Many scholars have noted how the car continually re-creates individualized, mobile subjectivities (Paterson 2007; Rajan 2006; Seiler 2008; Urry 2004). It can be argued that the valorization of the car as an expression of national identity—of Americans as a people who love individual freedom and opportunity—has helped create the mobile labor force and resistance to the social welfare state that distinguishes it from many other modern states. As Illich (1974) noted as well, the higher speeds produced by intensive automobile energy use create inequality of mobility and access. In fact, low- to moderate-income drivers drive half the number of miles that the top quintile does (Brobeck and Hunter 2012). In addition, the U.S. interstate highway system, which James Howard Kunstler identifies as the “largest public works project in the history of the world” (1993:107), has reshaped subjectivities and practices on a major scale. And it infamously created more racially and class-segregated unequal landscapes in virtually every city through which it was constructed.

As already noted, the governability and criminalization of the poor and the undocumented is intensely accomplished through the car system. All Americans, however, meet the state face to face primarily through their department of motor vehicles or a traffic stop (with police exposures going far beyond this in poorer and minority neighborhoods). The requirement to buy insurance, register one’s property, get a photo ID to operate that property, and submit to police stops has been accepted by a populace that would balk at a national identity card and that is widely recognized as comparatively and increasingly antistatist. One of the most significant but least recognized aspects of the remaking and empowering of the state in the United States in the 20th and 21st centuries has been the regulation, taxation, and infrastructural affordances provided by all levels of government around and on account of the private automobile.

Widely circulating claims about the centrality of the car and oil industry to the U.S. economy’s health (qua growth)
are ideologically shaped and serve to buttress state and popular support for industry subsidies and preferences. As Matthew Paterson (2007) argues, it is widely assumed that people who reach the middle class “naturally” desire cars and that cars are natural engines of progress through their economic generative effects. Economists Uri Dadush and Shimelsh Ali (2012) have formalized this assumption, arguing that car ownership be treated synonymously with entering the middle class in developing economies. The car was not only the commodity around which capitalist markets developed but it was also the means by which consumption in other major forms such as “[suburban] houses and the things to put in them” is thus enabled, and which occurs in a manner which starts off appearing as ‘freedom,’ but increasingly becomes a necessity” (Paterson 2007:108–109). Expanding car credit and a mushrooming culture of consumption helped bridge the crisis of overproduction in the car industry. The mobility of the car consumer has also entailed the ability to use the car to consume other things, from household goods and fast food to leisure experiences, as evidenced by the fact that peak car use in most U.S. communities is Saturday midday rather than during any work commute hour.23

Conclusion

What is being done about this set of problems? Communities have organized around the notion that mobility is both a human right and an issue for which concepts of both sustainability and social justice are at the core (Wellman 2012). The Los Angeles Bus Riders Union brought a landmark lawsuit against their city in 1994, making municipal investment in transportation a civil rights issue and pushing equity transit planning into government discourse across the country. In Los Angeles and many other cities, local activists have been arguing that state transportation investments have favored not only the car but also whiter suburban rail service over the bus services primarily used by people of color and the poor (Bullard 2003; Garrett and Taylor 1999). Those investments, they have argued, have created less just communities, which would change with more equitable representation on transportation boards and with changed subsidy balances that would allow more affordable bus fares and more frequent service into poor and minority neighborhoods. Activists have also mounted livable wage campaigns to deal in part with the reality of the costs of mobility.

Freeway revolts—organized resistance to highway building, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, and often in lower-income areas—have been frequent and often successful. Organizations bent on redirecting public efforts away from car investments and toward more people-friendly transit and public streets and spaces have also been active and successful in many areas. Bicycle riders—organized in heterogeneous movements to reclaim parts of public streets from the automobile for safe riding—have become surprisingly visible in urban politics and political identities in a number of cities large and small, including New York, Portland, Chicago, Albuquerque, and Minneapolis (Vivanco 2012; Wray 2008). These are movements that at least indirectly counter the redistributational effects of the car.24 The problem of car ownership itself and its inequalities (as opposed to the relation between modes of transit and the inequities it reveals) have registered in fewer ways. Nonetheless, antipoverty, civil rights, and consumer organizations have sued and lobbied for improved regulation of the car loan, sales, and insurance industries’ extractive practices while, in a more limited vein, civic organizations have tried to provide older cars and to cover some operating costs for those who cannot afford them. The consumer and environmental movements more generally, however, have been focused on questions of car safety and car emissions in ways that have tended to ignore questions of inequality or to emphasize them too little. It is the union movement and minimum-wage movements, livable-streets advocates, and transit-riders unions that have been most visible and effective in pressing for infrastructural and transit justice or for the more fundamental redistributional changes necessary to empower those who would press for them.

These efforts must face the fact, nonetheless, that the car and oil industries, perhaps more than ever, have the ability to write the laws that would regulate them, channel the public investment in roads that makes their sales possible, and shape the public, mediated discourse that defines their interests as synonymous with those of “the economy” as a putative whole. Alongside or even in opposition to the goals of the variety of social movements just mentioned, other as yet uncharted changes may point to the more powerful route to transformations in the degree and type of justice in the U.S. transportation system. As Mimi Sheller warns, “It may not be advocates of sustainability who drive the transition in [the car system], but more pervasive market forces assembled around personal entertainment, information and communication technologies, as well as surveillance and security” (2011:26) that do so.

While this research has focused on automobility in the United States, public questioning around inequalities of mobility has accelerated in many other places, often at the same time that, in those places, the car industry—multinational and local—has radically ramped up production and sales, public investments in roads at the expense of other investments have increased, and traffic and auto fatalities, particularly among poorer pedestrians, have skyrocketed. The mass protests of 2013 in Brazil, for example, began around bus fare increases that were not simply symbolic of “more important issues” but at the core of the problem of equality of access to cities and their resources.
More fundamentally, scholars have identified the fallacy of treating sustained or growing levels of consumption—of cars or any commodity—as a necessity for the health of a system of production, the prevention of unemployment, or the amelioration of inequalities (Martinez-Alier et al. 2010; Schumacher 1973). Future research on the redistributational politics and economics around the car in the United States and many other global contexts, particularly in those rural areas where the car system may have its most inequitable impacts, might begin by undermining this fallacy. Doing so will be crucial for rewriting the futures of both mobility and equality and for articulating the range of normative outcomes that can be pursued.

Mobility can be seen as not primarily about more, better, faster, or even simply greener movement for all but, alternatively, about “ways of moving less, or at least differently” (Shaw and Sidaway 2010:514, contra Cresswell 2010), and certainly with more equity between those who move. The normalization of the car as a positive invention that delivers unmitigated benefits to individuals and to “the economy” imagined as a whole and as a modern and efficient solution to the problem of mobility has prevented us from seeing the normal problems of inequality it creates. It has blocked the view of its centrality to accumulation and to the legitimation of contemporary capitalism itself. It has prevented our seeing the car, as Peter Freund and George Martin (1996) so cogently put it, as “the commodity that is eating the world,” some worlds more devastatingly than others.

Notes

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1. This literature has examined the car’s comprehensive shaping of the physical and highly gendered socioeconomic landscape (Fink 1988; Freund and Martin 1993; Jain 2005; Kunstler 1994); its relationship to the modern state and subjectivity (Rajan 2006; Seiler 2008); “transport regimes” (Virilio 1986), and national identities (Edensor 2004); its emergence as a modern technology in social and legal contexts (Kirsch 2000; Jain 2006; Ross 1995); its centrality to capitalism and mass consumerism during the 20th century (Cohen 2003; Paterson 2007); and its relationship to environmentalism’s histories (McCarthy 2007). Automobility has been framed as a “machinic complex,” a broad assemblage of human practices, public spaces, regulatory institutions, and representations (Urry 2004), and so represents an important emerging field for understanding human-object relations.

2. John Urry originally defined the car system as that “self-organizing autopoietic, nonlinear system that spreads world-wide, and includes cars, car-drivers, roads, petroleum supplies and many novel objects, technologies and signs” (2004:27).

3. The sample of interviewees was gathered opportunistically, and the interviews focused on driving history, car ownership history, attitudes toward driving and cars, experience with crashes, and cars’ financial impact. Interviews with people in traffic court focused on the incident or incidents that brought them to court, and interviews with car salespeople focused on their perceptions of what car buyers want, on the products they sell, and on how they sell them.

4. The precipitous rise of rates of incarceration in the United States is a key element of this spatialized and racialized route to inequality.

5. An excellent and comprehensive treatment is provided by Paterson 2007. There has been much scholarly attention, of course, to the question of changes in the mobility of labor, capital, and ideas and their relationship to inequalities of various kinds, but there is not space here to consider the relationship of the automobile to this literature.

6. The car’s contribution to climate change is on the increase, numerically and proportionally: “For the EU-27, transport’s share in these [CO2 emissions] figures rose from 19% to 25% (+0.2 Gt). In the USA … in the period 1990–2008, transport’s emissions rose by 22% … Road transport is responsible for most emissions in transport in 2008—93% of all emissions by transport in the EU-27 and 86% of those in the USA” (Schwanen et al. 2011:993–994).

7. This assumption continues to operate despite the widespread and heavy use of financing to put a vehicle in one’s driveway. Exceptions can be found in some of the wealthier enclaves of transit-rich cities like New York.

8. This tale includes the production of transit services and the various kinds of investments in providing mobility services. Bullard 2003, Garrett and Taylor 1999, and Wellman 2012 have demonstrated how that process has produced further racial and class inequities.

9. The concept was used by Ivan Illich in his radical “Energy and Equity.” In accounting for how much time people must allocate to get where they need to go, he questioned the speed and efficiency of the car system by noting that “what distinguishes the traffic in rich countries from the traffic in poor countries is not more mileage per hour of life-time for the majority, but more hours of compulsory consumption of high doses of energy, packaged and unequally distributed by the transportation industry” (1974:10).

10. Over 95 percent of these costs are to own and operate cars and trucks. These figures, based on self-report, appear to be underestimates (Brobeck and Hunter 2012:4).

11. The price nearly doubled, controlling for inflation. In 2013, the average purchase price of a new car reached over $31,000.

12. Some portion of that value, an amount unavailable from existing data, is leveraged by car loans. Those in the second-lowest quintile also have a significant percentage of their wealth tied up in cars. Cars owned in that quintile have a median value of $9,300, and the quintile’s median overall wealth is $25,600. Rates of car ownership have changed fairly dramatically over time in the bottom quintile (Spilerman 2000).

13. This 17,000 represents 7 percent of all the vehicles on which those companies had made loans that year, or about a quarter of a million cars (Tennessee Department of Financial Institutions 2006).

14. Impoundment is very common in poor and working neighborhoods. It can be the work either of public entities, as when the police seize a car for failure to pay parking tickets, or, increasingly, of private companies. Squads of commercial tow trucks now troll apartment-complex parking areas in many cities and take cars for infractions defined by the complexes’ own codes and interpretation of official codes. In the waiting room of one towing company in Atlanta I visited, the assembled waiting to reclaim their vehicles included a distressed low-wage office worker with her baby. She had scrambled for several days since the impoundment of her car to collect the cash needed to retrieve it and to get a ride from a friend.
to the lot where it sat, ten miles around the beltway from her home. She was charged $120 for the tow and an additional $30 ($10 a day) for “storage.”

15. Although risk pooling (Western et al. 2012) via car sharing can mitigate the problem, it can also put more people at risk of job loss if the shared vehicle fails or is confiscated.

16. Many people see the car as a safety device. Despite living in a city with a high walkability rating, Erica, for instance, did not consider it “walkable in any sense especially for a girl.”

17. The very significant investments in safer roadways and cars—straighter and wider lanes and roads, stronger guard rails, ABS brakes, stronger side door protections, and so on—have profited the road and car industry more than the driver. This is the result of both risk compensation (e.g., people driving faster on roads that feel safer) and crash incompatibility (the foiling of safety innovations with the advent of new state regulations allowing car makers to treat sport utility vehicles as equivalent to cars; the result is that bumpers no longer meet bumpers and fortified doors where they should and that heavier cars demolish lighter ones).

18. Beyond their direct product advertising (which tops revenue in any other product group), these companies often run ads that claim their profits are well distributed through stock ownership and retirement funds. Nonetheless, 81 percent of all mutual fund value and 89 percent of stock wealth are owned by the top 10 percent of U.S. households (Kinnickell 2006).

19. There are 4,278,000 workers in auto and tire manufacturing, road and bridge construction, car dealerships, auto driving schools, auto rental companies, gas stations, and parking lots. Fifty-one thousand people work for towing companies alone and 791,000 in auto repair and maintenance. The median income for a road construction worker was $29,000, while tow-truck drivers start at $22,000.


21. Hannah Appel (2012) articulates a sharp vision of the framing work done by the oil industry to make it appear to float above the social order (as of automobility) on which it profits and so avoid resistance to its practices.

22. Illich (1974) suggested that the higher speeds afforded by automobility are only apparent. Factoring in the amount of time required to work to pay for those higher speeds in individualized transportation, average speeds drop closer to that of bicycling.

23. Traffic peaks nationally at 1 p.m. on Saturdays (Liss et al. 2001).

24. This outcome has occurred despite what Luis Vivanco (2012:95–96) has pointed out is a prevalent “technological determinism” that treats the bicycle and bicycle infrastructure as a simple, apolitical route to a change in mobility systems.

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