

More Cars, Less Community?

How automobile dependence weakens social capital, and what can be done to revive this precondition for healthy democracy

by Malcolm M. Kenton

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Dr. Jonathan Gifford

George Mason University

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For many, the automobile is a symbol of freedom and independence. Yet the use of cars as by far the dominant form of transportation engenders a type of individualism that rejects more than a modicum of public engagement, particularly avoiding encounters with all but a select group of one's fellow citizens. A car does offer freedom of mobility (the ability to be able to get to various destinations on one's own schedule), but only offers this in a context where an entire network of infrastructure, legal and social conventions, and ancillary services has developed around automobiles being the dominant form of daily travel. Automobility — this system of infrastructure and services brought about by the proliferation of automobiles in developed countries — has propagated the notion of freedom as mobility (where driving itself become an an expression of one's will).¹

The way that automobility has shaped the built environment to facilitate speedy and unobstructed travel by car (generally at the expense of convenient or safe travel by other means), while offering motorists a sense of independence, has created its own form of dependence. Urry comprehensively defines automobility as a system wherein the automobile is the quintessential manufactured object, the major item of individual consumption (after housing), the predominant form of 'quasi-private' mobility, the single most important cause of environmental resource use, and the central object of the dominant culture (central to conversations around what constitutes 'the good life'), and the center of a powerful complex consisting of technical and social linkages with many industries.²

When nearly all the time people spend in places other than home, work, stores and recreation areas is spent in their cars, people are less likely to come into random contact with their fellow citizens except in places of their choosing. The rich cultural exchange that occurs in the public realm is thereby degraded, resulting in greater misunderstanding and mistrust between fellow citizens. Many scholars and observers of society maintain that this results in a less robust

¹ Sciler, Cotten. *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009, p. 6.

² Urry, John. "The 'System' of Automobility." *Theory, Culture and Society* 21, no. 4/5 (2004): 25–39, pp. 25-26.

democracy as citizens are less likely to be exposed to people with backgrounds, viewpoints and perspectives that differ greatly from their own. “[C]ars are ideal vehicles for egoism,” Conley and McLaren observe, “as each driver’s wants, frustrated by everyone else trying to achieve theirs, weaken solidarity with non-car users of the road and occupants of different types of vehicle.”³

This paper explores the literature on the definitions of democracy and the norms and values that define a democratic polity, as well as literature on the social effects of automobile dependence and what Böhm et al. term the “automobility regime.”⁴ Based on examining these texts in relation we will attempt to assess the extent to which car-dependent societies are compatible with democratic ideals, and then discuss an approach to reestablishing a common concern for the physical shape of our communities as a way of reframing the car as one of a host of viable travel choices.

Characteristics of democratic societies

The encyclopedia definition of democracy is “literally, rule by the people.”⁵ But the practice of self-governance by a polity depends on the breadth of that polity, in its great diversity, mutually agreeing to participate with each other in the act of governance — at least in the most minimal sense. And it is empirically evident that in order to participate with each other, people must come in contact with each other.⁶

In order for a polity to voluntarily engage with each other in the process of democratic governance, each person must agree that he or she each has something to gain from doing so. This understanding of the benefits of collective self-government can be termed democratic values. “The dependence of the stability of a democratic system of government on its legitimacy and therefore on the extent to which people subscribe to the democratic values behind it, is a

³ Conley, Jim and Arlene Tigar McLaren. *Car Troubles: Critical Studies of Automobility and Auto-Mobility*. Farnham, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2009, p. 8.

⁴ Böhm, Steffen, Campbell Jones, Chris Land, and Matthew Paterson, eds. *Against Automobility*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006: Introduction.

⁵ Dahl, Robert A. “Democracy.” *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, July 19, 2014. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/157129/democracy>.

⁶ The extent to which electronic communication is an adequate substitute for in-person contact is a subject of great debate, but for the purposes of this examination, we shall assume that some degree of in-person contact is necessary for the mutual self-governance of a diverse group of people.

persistent issue in the literature on democratic government and political culture,” declares Thomassen.⁷ Of course, democratic societies feature an inherent tension between individual liberty and political equality,⁸ and one’s views on the social effects of automobile dependence may depend on the end of that spectrum on which one places the most weight.

Psychologist Miklikowska cites Dahl’s defines democratic values as principles “that allow distinguishing between democratic and nondemocratic process such as e.g. equality, impartial justice, universal suffrage, or freedom of expression.” “[T]he majority support for these norms is a *sine qua non* of a democratic state,” Miklikowska adds.⁹ The predictors for democratic values that she identifies which are most affected by the degree to which people come into contact with diverse others are “interpersonal trust,” “openness to experience” and “empathy.”¹⁰

Social capital and the physical shape of communities

Leyden uses the term “social capital” to describe “the social networks and interactions that inspire trust and reciprocity among citizens.”¹¹ “[E]mpirical linkages have been found among social capital, the proper functioning of democracy, the prevention of crime and enhanced economic development,” he continues.¹² From surveys conducted in Galway, Ireland in 2001, Leyden concludes that the more walkable a neighborhood is (based on its density and mix of uses, and on the degree to which its residents consider it to be walkable), the higher its level of social capital (based on the degree to which residents know their neighbors, participate in politics, trust others, and take part in social activities outside of the family and close friends). “This relation suggests that walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods are better generators of social capital

⁷ Thomassen, Jacques. “Democratic Values.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior*, 1st ed., 1:418–34. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 419.

⁸ Ibid, p. 424.

⁹ Miklikowska, Marta. “Psychological Underpinnings of Democracy: Empathy, Authoritarianism, Self-Esteem, Interpersonal Trust, Normative Identity Style, and Openness to Experience as Predictors of Support for Democratic Values.” *Personality and Individual Differences* 53, no. 5 (October 2012), pp. 603-604.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 605.

¹¹ Leyden, Kevin M. “Social Capital and the Built Environment: The Importance of Walkable Neighborhoods.” *American Journal of Public Health* 93, no. 9 (September 2003): 1546–51, p. 1546.

¹² Ibid.

than are modern, car-dependent suburbs,” Leyden declares.¹³ (He does admit that his survey methodology may fall victim to selection bias: to some extent, people who are more trusting or sociable to begin with may gravitate towards more walkable neighborhoods.¹⁴)

Bare offers the following summary of urban sprawl’s effects on social cohesion:

Recent literature [...] notes that the pursuit of the suburban dream has had an extremely negative impact on social cohesion in the United States. Whereas central city living has forced at least proximity between different social groups, the suburban revolution has bred a new culture of segregation and disassociation among groups and individuals. Authors note a decreased sense of community, less volunteerism, slackened charity donations, lower voter turn-out, and a weakened social bond between rich and poor.¹⁵

Political scientist Putnam blames suburbanization and sprawl for ten percent of the decades-long decline in social capital that he identifies, attributing half to a generational change in attitudes, and also assigning some culpability to electronic entertainment (primarily television) and to pressures on time and money (the degree to which people worry about their financial situation, rather than their actual income level).¹⁶ Putnam makes a strong declaration of how this trend affects the character of American politics, saying that popular government without social capital becomes:

a kind of plebiscitary democracy: many opinions would be heard, but only as a muddle of disembodied voices, neither engaging with one another nor offering much guidance to decision makers.¹⁷

Despite attributing only ten percent of the social capital decline to it, Putnam comments extensively on the effect of car culture on American political culture: “In round numbers the evidence suggests that each additional ten minutes in daily commuting time cuts involvement in community affairs by 10 percent. [...] In fact, [...] commuting time [...] is more important than almost any other demographic factor. And time diary studies suggest that there is a similarly

¹³ Ibid, p. 1549.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 1550.

¹⁵ Bare III, Thomas Benton. “Recharacterizing the Debate: A Critique of Environmental Democracy and an Alternative Approach to the Urban Sprawl Dilemma.” *Virginia Environmental Law Journal* 21 (2002): 455-501, p. 469.

¹⁶ Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000, p. 220.

¹⁷ Ibid, pp. 341-342.

strong negative effect of commuting time on informal social interaction.”¹⁸ Extending this to how car dependence shapes neighborhoods, Putnam adds “it is not simply time spent in the car itself, but also spatial fragmentation between home and workplace, that is bad for community life.”¹⁹ He includes historian Kenneth T. Jackson’s observation that “our lives are now centered inside the house, rather than on the neighborhood or the community. With increased use of automobiles, [...] the social intercourse that used to be the main characteristic of urban life has vanished.”²⁰

Latimer and Munro maintain that the car’s being treated as as a substitute for face-to-face encounters in the public realm comes not merely from the use of cars, but more so from people’s attachment to them. “The pressing issue,” they posit, “is how driving intermittently effaces, and interpenetrates, other cultural systems, such as those built around conversation, the home, the mobile phone, and the computer.”²¹ While automobility, seen in this light, appears anti-social, it is also seen as an essential enabler of family life,²² albeit one that comes at a significant cost. There are not only the direct costs of fuel, maintenance, insurance, etc., but also the tremendous statistical risk one takes when driving compared to other means of travel. The cost to human life stemming from the annual carnage on the nation’s roads is comparable to the entire death toll of World War I.²³ Almost certainly, fewer lives would be lost in the course of daily travel if auto-oriented development patterns of the last 70-odd years had not left many denizens of developed countries — the United States, Canada and Australia in particular — with few other efficient means of getting around.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 213.

¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 213-214.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 211.

²¹ Latimer, Joanna and Rolland Munro. “Driving the Social.” In op cit. Böhm et al., p. 34.

²² Ibid.

²³ Gresser, Edward. “Traffic Accidents Kill 1.24 Million People a Year Worldwide; Wars and Murders, 0.44 Million.” *Progressive Economy*, July 16, 2014. <http://progressive-economy.org/2014/07/16/traffic-accidents-kill-1-24-million-people-a-year-worldwide-wars-and-murders-0-44-million/>. (using National Highway Traffic Safety Administration data): “An annual U.S. rate of 33,000 deaths (which includes 2,700 teenagers) is six times the annual number of deaths to HIV/AIDS, double the annual deaths to murder, and comparable to the casualty rates for the Korean War or World War I.”

Do cars and freeways ‘fence us in?’

In the United States, the motto “don’t fence me in”²⁴ is embedded in the culture. Some trace this back to the opposition to a foreign authority that birthed the American Revolution; the common American mindset does harbor an intense resistance to those who attempt to tell people how they should live their lives. Yet, so many Americans accept being all but fenced in by freeways and arterials across which passage on foot is, if not prohibited, generally dangerous, or at least unpleasant. Furthermore, choosing to walk in many places causes one to be looked down upon by passing motorists. Rajan turns the common notion of less driving meaning less freedom on its head: “[In late modernity,] freedom is a compulsory constraint, it must be exercised along designated modes, and automobility is its major expression which (re)produces normalizing behavior in the name of progressing individual liberty.”²⁵

The American democratic ideal, however, also encompasses the right to carry out effective protests and to use civil disobedience to stand in the way of government or private actions that one deems unjust. Considering this, Rajan’s observation on the 1992 Los Angeles riots ought to be food for thought. “The network of roads and freeways facilitating automobile movement is too extensive and well structured to suffer significant damage from any kind of onslaught,” she explains. “Not only are there no specific locations that could be easily targeted even in a carefully planned insurgency, the results of any intended disruption of automobility would be harmful to the perpetrators themselves,”²⁶ as they too are largely reliant on cars.

Mitchell carries the observations of Putnam, Latimer and Munro, and Rajan further and uses recent court decisions concerning individuals’ right not to listen to certain kinds of speech as evidence that Americans are coming not only to expect privacy in public space (as a driver does

²⁴ This was the title of a popular song written in 1934, lyrics by Robert Fletcher and music by Cole Porter.

²⁵ Rajan, Sudhir Chella. “Automobility and the liberal disposition.” In *op cit.* Böhm et al., p. 123.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

in his/her car on a public road), but also not to expect publicity there.²⁷ Democratic decisionmaking, Mitchell maintains, “depends on the existence of spaces and forums to which everyone has access.”²⁸ It provides a ‘space of engagement’ within which [individuals come] to recognize themselves.”²⁹ As the build-out of wider roads, bigger parking lots, and other auto-oriented infrastructure diminishes the quality and quantity of these public spaces, he argues, we lose that which “shapes modes of engagement, the visibility of alternative politics, and the possibility for unscripted (that is involuntary) interactions.” He raises the question of whether one is truly free, in the sense of being able to freely form his or her own opinions, if others are denied the possibility of changing his or her mind as each person becomes more physically isolated.³⁰

Another way that car dependence reinforces itself, excluding alternative ways of traveling and inhabiting public space, is that the design of the road system to facilitate speedy travel leads motorists to travel farther. This leads to spread-out development patterns as people choose more disparate places to live and work, which in turn locks them into spending a lot of time behind the wheel, in a vicious cycle. Those who are forced to bear the negative consequences of this state of affairs include low-income people, for whom the costs of purchasing, fueling, maintaining and insuring cars constitute a significant burden.³¹ The automobility regime also largely prevents those too young, too old, or too physically disabled to drive from getting around independently. They are instead dependent on others (often friends, family members, taxi or limousine drivers or paratransit systems) to chauffeur them.³² Does automobility make these citizens more free?

²⁷ Mitchell, Don. “The SUV Model of Citizenship: Floating Bubbles, Buffer Zones, and the Rise of the ‘Purely Atomic’ Individual.” *Political Geography* 24, no. 1 (2005): 77–100, p. 81.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

³¹ Roberto, Elizabeth. “Commuting to Opportunity: The Working Poor and Commuting in the United States.” *Transportation Reform Series*. Washington, DC: Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program, February 2008. http://web.stanford.edu/group/scspi/_media/pdf/key_issues/transportation_policy.pdf.

³² For an example, see Kerschner, Helen and Joan Harris. “Better Options for Older Adults.” *Public Roads*. Washington, DC: US Dept. of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, April 2007. <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/publications/publicroads/07mar/03.cfm>.

Defenses of automobility

Lomasky, a libertarian philosopher, presents the case that automobility is an inherent social good because it increases autonomy and self-direction, which he maintains are necessary for people to act and be treated as ends in themselves.³³ He maintains that this good that automobility enables outweighs the bad in its effects on society. “[T]he overwhelming popularity of the automobile is itself *prima facie* evidence that from the perspective of the ordinary American motorists, the benefits of operating a motor vehicle exceed the concomitant costs.”³⁴ While that may be true in terms of the self-interested calculation that each individual makes, when viewed on a societal level, when every individual feels that his or her only viable choice is to use the most energy and space-intensive form of transportation,³⁵ then everybody is worse off.

Lomasky seems to argue that automobility and democracy go hand-in-hand. He says automobility promotes and enables “freedom of association, pursuit of knowledge, economic advancement, privacy, and even the expression of religious commitments and affectional preference.”³⁶ He also claims that access to “near and distant pleasures” is “far more open and democratic than it was in preautomobile eras.”³⁷ Again, Lomasky’s perspective seems limited to the individual without regard to whether the outcome enhances the cohesion and shared values of the society at large.

The automobile does indeed permit people greater privacy in what are otherwise public places, as discussed earlier. But democracy requires a fine balance between privacy and public engagement. By being able to choose to be private while traveling, we avoid a greater degree of public contact. By allowing each person to decide “with whom one will not live,”³⁸ automobile

³³ Lomasky, Loren E. “Autonomy and Automobility.” *The Independent Review* 2, no. 1 (Summer 1997): 5–28, p. 7.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³⁵ National Transportation Statistics 2012. Washington, DC: US Dept. of Transportation, Research and Innovative Technology Administration, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, 2014. http://www.rita.dot.gov/bts/sites/rita.dot.gov/bts/files/publications/national_transportation_statistics/html/table_04_20.html. This is based on average energy intensities (BTU of energy used per passenger-mile), which for cars is based on the average American vehicle occupancy rate of around 1.4 people per vehicle.

³⁶ *Op cit.* Lomasky, p. 8.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

dominance more easily allows people to segregate themselves and refuse to expose themselves to ideas that challenge their own. Not to mention that if one's personal preference is to live in a denser, walkable neighborhood where driving isn't such a necessity, automobile dominance makes fewer of those kinds of places available. The normative value attached to the familiar car-oriented development patterns makes it difficult for developers seeking to create denser, more walkable places to gain financing.³⁹

“By traveling through, around, and within a place [by car],” Lomasky submits, “one comes to know it in its particularity.”⁴⁰ The car does allow people to choose which experiences they wish to have, and by that, what knowledge they wish to gain. Public transportation and walking, on the other hand, force you to come into contact with the unexpected. Thus, one is likely to gain greater knowledge of a place on foot, and by sharing trains and buses with its residents, than one obtains by picking and choosing what roads to take or where to stop the car.

Lomasky calls the car “the quintessential range extender,”⁴¹ and “the vehicle of self-directedness par excellence.”⁴² However, a robust transit network extends one's range as well, and the bicycle is more directed by the user than the car, as the user is physically powering the vehicle as well as steering it. The desirable outcomes of economic advancement and the expression of religious and affectional preference that Lomasky identifies would appear to be just as easily obtained in an environment where walking, cycling, and public transportation predominate. This universe of non-auto travel alternatives has simply been undervalued and underinvested in for so long in the United States⁴³ that most are unaware of its possibilities. Lomasky seems to ignore the historical factors that led to the withering of viable alternatives to driving.

³⁹ Pivo, Gary. “Walk Score and Multifamily Default: The Significance of 8 and 80.” Fannie Mae, October 1, 2013. http://www.fanniemae.com/resources/file/fundmarket/pdf/hoytpivo_mfhousing_walkscore_122013.pdf. P. 3.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 19.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 20.

⁴² Ibid, p. 25.

⁴³ Baxandall, Phincas. *A Better Way to Go: Meeting America's 21st-Century Challenges with Modern Public Transit*. Washington, DC: U.S. PIRG Education Fund, March 2008. http://www.uspirg.org/sites/pirg/files/reports/A-Better-Way-to-Go-vUSPIRG_2.pdf. pp. 35-38.

In the early 20th century, both automobiles and fuel became abundant and inexpensive, while tight fare and rate regulation and passenger-unfriendly management attitudes hobbled railroads and transit systems. These twin forces led elected and appointed officials to enact policies that encouraged cities and towns to spread out and suburbs to grow.⁴⁴ This made walking less convenient and attractive, and left transit systems unable to efficiently serve disparate residential and commercial centers. As Bare puts it, “Subsidies promoting automobile dependency and suburban development combined with a general encouragement of non-urban development through land use policies all contribute to a consumer preference for suburban living.”⁴⁵

If democracy thrives on citizens being able to exercise independent judgment and free association, and these traits are developed in childhood, then current trends do not bode well for future generations of empowered citizens. Duany, Plater-Zyberk and Speck detail the effects of the car-dependent suburban lifestyle on America’s children. They describe “the ‘cul-de-sac kid,’ the child who lives as a prisoner of a thoroughly safe and unchallenging environment. [...] Dependent always on some adult to drive them around, children and adolescents are unable to practice at becoming adults.”⁴⁶ They also list as victims teenagers deprived of anything meaningful to do in their neighborhoods, the elderly who cannot age in place and are segregated into isolated communities,⁴⁷ the urban poor who are forced to pay more for transportation to access low-wage jobs, and commuters who wind up wasting so much of their “free time” stuck behind the wheel.

Maintaining expansive road networks drains taxpayers’ money from state and local governments’ coffers, often forcing cuts in areas such as education, again disadvantaging

⁴⁴ Goddard, Stephen B. *Getting There: The Epic Struggle Between Road and Rail in the American Century*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994, chapter 7.

⁴⁵ Op cit. Bare III, p. 459.

⁴⁶ Duany, Andres, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and Jeff Speck. *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream*. 10th anniversary ed. New York: North Point Press, 2010, p. 116.

⁴⁷ The retirement home is a concept unheard of prior to the 1950s.

children. That's far from the only cost we all pay for the automobile's dominion: "The typical American family spends four times as much on transportation as its European counterpart, even though gasoline costs four times as much in Europe."⁴⁸ Holtz Kay expands upon the negative balance sheet: "Roads cost as much as the mortgage on a house, more than our groceries."⁴⁹ "In New York, the total [estimated economic costs of roads] doesn't include estimates for the damages from traffic accidents, congestion, pollution and noise, which are put at \$23 billion a year," she adds.⁵⁰

Moving beyond car dependence

In his oft-cited treatise, "The Tragedy of the Commons," Hardin concludes that the only solution to problems arising from the unrestricted use of a common resource by a growing group of people is "mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon."⁵¹ In this case, when one considers the common resources in question to be land (particularly in metropolitan areas) and the transportation system (the finite amount of land in places where people want to be that can be devoted to transportation rights-of-way), the analogy to Hardin's analysis is clear.

Public support for mutually coercive tactics to reduce car dependence, such as increased direct fees for road use and parking, is best attracted by framing the issue in terms of widely shared values, rather than in terms of each individual's private interest in reduced congestion and pollution or in moving to a more urban place. If the latter type of appeal is employed, to follow Hardin's argument, it sends the message that 'you all should go live in more urban areas to let the rest of us enjoy less crowded sprawling suburbs.' Instead, advocates of a shift away from car-oriented sprawl must talk about how the outcome would give us all more of what we enjoy. "Freedom is the recognition of necessity," Hardin concludes, "and it is the role of education to

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 126.

⁴⁹ Op cit. Holtz Kay, p. 118. Presumably, this figure is per taxpayer per month or year.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 124.

⁵¹ Hardin, Garrett. "The Tragedy of the Commons." *Science* 162, no. 3859 (December 13, 1968): 1243-48. doi:10.1126/science.162.3859.1243, p. 1247.

reveal to all the necessity of abandoning the freedom to breed.”⁵² We may replace ‘breed’ with ‘drive alone’ and this admonition remains apt.

Since population density is the primary aspect of the built environment that is correlated with the rate of automobile ownership and use, ultimately a reduction in the general reliance on automobiles in the car-dependent developed nations will entail a shift back to denser communities — which is the way human settlements were shaped for millennia until car ownership became widespread starting in the 1920s. More density does not have to mean everyone lives in downtown high-rises. The “streetcar suburbs” that grew from the 1880s to the 1930s offer a model for a walkable, more human-scaled pattern of development that still provides residents with detached homes and yards, or spacious rowhouses, along with easy access to all the opportunities that a city has to offer. Another model is the traditional American small town, consisting of a small street grid centered around a train station, where residents could walk to a Main Street that served most of their shopping needs and where many residents could find employment.

Research on Hong Kong’s low rates of car ownership indicates that “[t]he success of public transport is aided by the density of population, but does not result directly from it. Public transport [in Hong Kong] is comprehensive, frequent, integrated, of high quality and is fairly cheap, with the result that car ownership is not an inevitable desire or expectation.”⁵³ While Hong Kong’s small size and historic high population densities certainly help in this regard, Cullinane traces this outcome more to the semi-autonomous municipal government’s proactive policy decisions: “Strict controls on parking and the high costs of motoring together with the prevalence of convenient and cheap public transport are policies which have been purposely implemented [...] to suppress the demand for private transport.”⁵⁴

⁵² Ibid, p. 1248.

⁵³ Cullinane, Sharon. “Hong Kong’s Low Car Dependence: Lessons and Prospects.” *Journal of Transport Geography* 11, no. 1 (March 2003): 25–35. doi:10.1016/S0966-6923(02)00042-X, p. 33.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

While over 70% of young Hong Kong residents surveyed showed an inclination towards buying a car in the future, high fuel prices and costly and limited parking are the main factors deterring them from doing so. 40%, however, felt that public transportation was so good that they didn't need a car.⁵⁵ This demonstrates that effective policies to make the car a part of a balanced transportation system rather than the overwhelmingly dominant mode will have to incorporate both carrots (better transit and safe and attractive walking and cycling facilities) and sticks (increases in the cost of driving and parking to account for the costs that these activities, in the aggregate, impose upon society).

Bare offers a clear synopsis of the issue of public perception that poses the greatest barrier to enacting such policies to reduce auto dominance in the US and other car-dependent countries: "Americans need to [come to] view sprawl and its consequences as a collective disaster, rather than an efficient individual choice."⁵⁶ "The suburban American voters will not give up their subsidized version of the American Dream without a strong incentive," he insists.⁵⁷ He suggests, among a number of public policy changes, a sustained public education campaign that makes clear the costs of sprawl and the advantages of living in denser cities, towns, suburbs and villages, an end to the "direct governmental subsidization of the costs of driving," and an accompanying increased "commitment to funding public transportation."⁵⁸

Towards a compelling rationale for policies to put the car in its place

As we have seen, privacy and public engagement are competing ideas between which a healthy democracy requires a fine balance. Car-dependent lifestyles, however, tend to tilt the balance too far in the direction of privacy. It is precisely the privacy aspect that many like about driving and living in spread-out homes. But the more that we intentionally avoid unplanned contact with the full diversity of their fellow citizens, the more certain we become in our own

⁵⁵ Ibid, pp. 33-34.

⁵⁶ Op cit. Bare III, p. 456.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 483.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 459.

worldviews, and the more we talk past each other in political discourse, each side failing to speak to the other's value system.

How does one go about advancing policies that depend on the “mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon” of a populace that is largely unfamiliar with any alternative transportation framework and is skeptical of challenges to their ways of life, in a culture where driving is equated with freedom? Perhaps the collective energy needed to envision and then bring into being such a new way of thinking can be cultivated by reminding ourselves of the citizenship values we share and by opening our eyes to the quality of the places and spaces we inhabit and pass through daily. This is the essence of Light's “ecological citizenship” framework, in which a “sense of stewardship” is awakened through “[e]ncouraging a direct participatory relationship between local human communities and the ‘nature’ around them.”⁵⁹

Light refers back to the seminal mid-20th century works of William Whyte, who was associated with the likes of Kerouac and Steinbeck in seeing the “open road” as the site of the renewal of the sovereign individual⁶⁰ as opposed to the obsequious “organization man” that Whyte famously described in 1956. But in his later writings, Whyte came to extol the pleasures of vibrant city streets and to advocate the preservation of open space, which he saw was dwindling in urban areas. Whyte, Light observes, is concerned with our obligations to the more humble landscapes near where most of us live, rather than with the spectacular far-off landscapes that festoon the literature of many ‘green’ groups.⁶¹

“[A]n expanded sense of citizenship has been in steady decline throughout the history of the Western democracies,” Light observes. “Citizenship is something that most of us today see as only a guarantor of certain rights but not as demanding responsibilities of us, other than leaving each other alone.”⁶² Yet Light is optimistic that this trend can be reversed by giving citizens

⁵⁹ Light, Andrew. “Ecological Citizenship: The Democratic Promise of Restoration.” In *The Humane Metropolis: People and Nature in the 21st Century*, 23. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005. http://vedegylet.hu/okopolitika/Light%20-%20Ecological_Citizenship.pdf, p. 12.

⁶⁰ Op cit. Sciler, p. 14.

⁶¹ Op cit. Light, p. 3.

⁶² Ibid, p. 16.

opportunities to actively engage in projects that give them a sense of ownership over a piece of the public realm near their homes.⁶³ This could include not just the ecological restoration projects he describes, but also a number of other concepts that give people the power to re-imagine the use of space in their communities, such as mural and landscape design competitions, and the reclaiming of parking spaces for active human use.⁶⁴

Conclusions

Many observers, primarily sociologists and political scientists, have concluded that the automobile's equation with freedom results from a series of decisions made over time, by government and industry, that brought about both the physical dimensions of automobility (including the road systems and gasoline supply chain) and its social-structure dimensions: "a set of political discourses and decisions, which shape and are shaped by conceptions of public and private, perceptions of the relation between technological innovation and cultural change, and understandings of individual freedom."⁶⁵ It is not that the automobile is inherently an enabler of liberty and autonomy, but rather that the structures that have grown up around automobiles (as they, and their fuel, became affordable and widely available) have made this so in the popular imagination.

However, as Meyer points out, the public consensus needed to bring the transportation systems of developed countries into greater balance cannot be mustered by simply denouncing the "freedom of the open road" idea as a false consciousness. Instead, we must examine each of the components of what he terms "auto-freedom."⁶⁶ More movement should not be seen as making our lives better and our civilization richer, Meyer states. "While my freedom is clearly limited when my movement is restricted, this does not mean that greater movement is an

⁶³ Ibid, pp. 19-21.

⁶⁴ For example, see Fard, Maggie Fazeli. "Park(ing) Day Turns Metered Spots into Temporary Parks in D.C." *The Washington Post*, September 20, 2013. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/dr-gridlock/wp/2013/09/20/parking-day-turns-metered-spots-into-temporary-parks-in-d-c/>.

⁶⁵ Op cit. Meyer, p. 1.

⁶⁶ Ibid, pp. 10-11.

expression of greater freedom.”⁶⁷ If we wish to develop a regime where more forms of movement are viable, we must come to see not all movement as desirable.⁶⁸

If the American public of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which was already largely suburbanized, was able to muster the political will that led to the passage of a number of environmental protection laws,⁶⁹ then Bare suggests that there is precedent for the notion that such a groundswell could be witnessed that would attach to driving something more closely approximating its full social and ecological costs.⁷⁰ If physical, social and political structures similar to those that support the automobile system had instead grown up over time around other forms of mobility (walking, bicycling, car sharing or public transportation), then perhaps one or more of these modes would be widely embraced and defended as a symbol of freedom or as the conduit that allows each individual to achieve his or her full potential.

The automobile system does put a wealth of opportunities within reach of every motorist, but at a tremendous social cost and to the exclusion of non-motorists, many of whom do not have the option of becoming motorists, whether due to physical or financial barriers. A more balanced transportation system, where the automobile is just one of many viable travel choices and where each mode fills the niche for which it is best suited, would give people the same level of access to opportunities and the same freedom to go where one pleases, while also carrying a lighter ecological footprint and contributing to the social cohesion and civic engagement of our communities rather than impeding or stunting these building blocks of a robust democracy.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 12.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 13.

⁶⁹ E.g. Clean Air Act (1963), Wilderness Act (1964), National Environmental Policy Act (1970), Clean Water Act (1972).

⁷⁰ Op cit. Bare III, p. 494.

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