

SÁNDOR VÉGH

ADOPTION OR ADAPTATION?: INTERPRETATIONS OF THE AUTOMOBILE

Introduction

To offer potential interpretations of the automobile it is necessary to begin with the observation of its way into American society. Contrary to the common assumption that the automobile worked its way into the American cultural scene on the *veni, vidi, vici* basis, I believe its spreading occurred according to a prefabricated agenda which aimed at business interest rather than social improvements *per se*. Consequently, the changes in the social and cultural landscape that followed the appearance of the automobile were clear examples of a set of business-driven decisions on the way to the formation of a modern, capitalist consumer society.

The development of the automobile was certainly a gradual process. However, for the common man the automobile seemed to become reality overnight when Ford's Model T came out in sufficient quantity to fill the streets of American cities. Most of the people did not see the actual stages of development from Nicolaus Otto's four-stroke engine to Ford's Flivver. Therefore, it is also necessary to pay attention to how, and in what phases, the automobile was integrated into the lives of American people. Whether the automobile had to be changed to suit the needs of society, or actually society had to be reshaped to fit the automobile; that is, whether society *adapted* the car and altered it to its needs, or the process seemed rather an *adoption* which would suggest that it was society which was in constant change in order to accommodate the car.

It follows from the thesis that certain changes had to be implemented in society prior to the wide—range sale of the automobile. In my opinion, this preparation for mass distribution happened during the automobile's "plaything of the rich" period and included manipulation of the masses through advertisement emphasizing the car's advantages, such as mobility, equality, and individuality. These appeals will be examined in the paper.

But why the great need for the automobile? The answer is not at all simple, as one would think at the first glance. "Our need for cars is a 'false' need created through the manipulation of consumer desire," says Interrante (90). In his essay, he also states that the car did satisfy a *real* need for transportation, but argues that this need has changed as the social and spatial patterns of American culture have changed. People use their cars far more often than it would be necessary. If they can afford to do so, they buy better-looking, faster, more powerful, and more expensive cars than they really need. To be able to provide a complete answer to the question one has to go beyond the concept of the car as merely a means of transportation. For the automobile may also serve as an exemplary object in examining the structure and operation of a consumer society in its adolescent period as well as an exciting piece of consumer article which came to mean much more through its mutually influential relationship with society. Therefore, it might help understand the automobile's integration into American culture if one looks at the automobile not only as a means of transportation, or a consumer item, or even as a fashionable contemporary obsession, but as a unique and cohesive mixture, an incarnation of the American dream, the manifestation of America itself.

The automobile's way into American society

To fully comprehend how Americans relate to revolutionary technical inventions, one has to observe the car as a concrete manifestation of an abstract idea of technical evolution in the American environment. From the very beginning America was struggling to develop self-consciously and rapidly to make up for the few hundred years it skipped in history. It was a new nation that had to prove its right to exist and its power to survive, advance, and

eventually to lead. It had to show the world—especially England and Europe—that it was possible to establish a new order, “to transplant upon a wilderness environment a culture centuries old” (Nevins IX)—to grow into a new, a unique civilization. And the “eyes of the world” were upon America. Thus, the secular understanding of the “city upon a hill” concept had determined the attitude of the American people toward the notion of progress in civilization. During this evolution, they cheered and applauded every single person—in an outstanding manner—who did achieve something of any importance that moved the nation to the cutting edge of progress.

This activist understanding of national progress was especially true in the 1920’s considering what we already know about the mood of the period. It is evident that one of the advancements of the era was the automobile itself among, of course, other technical and technological inventions. Moreover, the automobile’s future orientation was typically American. It had no past, and pointed toward the future. Undoubtedly, the car smoothly suited the American *Weltanschauung* and fitted in the course and concept of American destiny and identity. In the view of this notion, it is understandable why there was a great public appreciation for the automobile. In fact, I think, the same explanation holds true for other technical innovations that received an overwhelming welcome, such as the airplane, the spaceship, and the computer. Foster’s statement that “Americans have traditionally manifested remarkable enthusiasm toward technological advances” (24), explains why automobile ownership for transportation purposes resulted in a national automobile mania. Since then the family car has often been chosen to symbolize (the best of) American life. To what an extent it became an inseparable part of everyday life was very well illustrated by Martin Wachs:

They are, in fact, the critical link between our homes, jobs, and social lives. Marriages are proposed in cars, and children conceived in them. A parent tells a child about his or her birth by relating the story of a hurried trip to the hospital in a snowstorm, and the end of life is marked by the solemn ride to the cemetery. (86)

From a popular cultural perspective, the automobile in its early years could be looked upon as the “current American mania.” As it

has become evident by the infinite number of examples by today, American popular culture needs only an impulse to explode into some contagious infatuation, especially when supported by the media. The object of the frenzy may be the automobile itself, such as the Flivver from 1910 until the middle of the 20's, or the Model A from 1927, or it may be just a part of it, like the tailfin craze of the late 50's, early 60's. By the end of the century, automobiles, now omnipresent in popular cultural products, have had various characteristics always peculiar to the era. For instance, today's vehicles equipped with a computer on board can "think and talk." These material cultural manifestations always reflect the mood of the period and the national economic situation. American culture has been in constant interaction with the automobile, one endlessly forming the other. This cycle ensures the automobile to remain a cardinal pillar of American culture, to remain mostly American.

Consumerism and the automobile

The automobile definitely provided a broader definition for equality. First, especially in its early age, the automobile did not make distinctions between riders on the road; it equalized them in a way. Second, it provided a democratic access to goods. Theoretically, it looks like a promising leap ahead on the road of modern democracy—providing each and every car-owning consumer with the same access to goods. However, in my opinion, it was rather a controlled process to establish a broader segment of society who are consumers of that particular product. The providers of society found ways to every potential customer through the establishment of mail-order stores where one could buy practically anything from a catalogue by mail, or over the phone. This institution spectacularly succeeded in integrating those without the possession of an automobile into a more complex group of consumers.

For the purpose of this essay, it is worthwhile to revisit the basics of capitalist control. In case of the automobile also, it was exactly a group of capitalists who made decisions upon what product they should make, how they would distribute it, and whom they would make it accessible to. The idea was to take advantage of the consumer's limited position while convincing them that the entire

system was working *for* their benefit. In fact, it was working *because* of them, and the aim was achieved by simply de-emphasizing capitalist interest and overemphasizing consumer choice. The automobile, which apparently brought about immediate changes in society, established new institutions, and created roadtowns, suburbs, shopping malls had, in fact, no automatic consequences—its whole existence was under the control of corporate leaders in key decision-making positions, i.e., controlled by the providers of the consumer society. Every decision was dictated by business and the effort for higher profits. The consumer did not really get what he wanted, but what was offered. There was, of course, a considerable feedback from the customers regarding their desires and needs, but it was the providing capitalist who monitored, filtered, and decided mainly on the basis of the profit demands and—to a less extent—on the consumers' desires. This fact was supported by the highly manipulative commercial advertisement, of which the main goal was to have the consumers buy the merchandise with the cheapest production cost at the highest price possible, while they still thought that they had made a bargain. Although this is not surprising at all if one is aware of the fundamentals of economics, free market capitalism, free competition, and is able to look at the automobile as a piece of consumer product, not only as an ingenious invention that can take one to distant places. The car for the masses arrived at a time when Americans had extra money and "free time." The prosperity of the 1920's had its role, but the nation's overwhelming acceptance of the automobile was also due to several other factors. Let us examine some of them.

Self-awareness of the average American in the early years of the automobile

The automobile was a distinguished manifestation of the enormous change in the thinking of the American public during the first decades of the century. A growing self-awareness in the nation had actually begun after the economic recession in the 1890's when the average American became increasingly aware of his impersonalization as a worker, his insignificance as a citizen, his helplessness as a human being, and, finally, a diminished understanding of his rights as an American. The peak of the individualization movement coincided

with the coming of the automobile's—and the question arises: Did the automobile play an initiative role in the process that resulted in an increasingly self-conscious average American citizen or did this happen the other way around? Or is there a meaningful link operating at all? Well, the answer is no to the first two questions; however, as to the interaction between the two, a viable link might exist.

The changes in the popular consciousness had started in the 1890's. By the end of the first decade of the 20th-century, it had developed to a widely noticeable extent amplified by the Progressive movement, the nationwide workers' unions, and the increased reform activity in journalism and literature. On the other hand, the automobile had not been mass produced until 1913¹; without which it was impossible to have an effect on a considerable segment of society. Even when mass-produced, the automobile did not become available to the working class for another decade or two. As a matter of fact, the classic case study of the impact of the automobile in Muncie, Ind., Middletown, conducted by Robert and Helen Lynd in the 1920's, has been proved to be wrong in its prediction, because of the facile assumption that the automobile had revolutionized the lifestyle of the American society of the 1920's (*Automobile Age* 158). As Flink rightfully noted in his masterly historical narrative of the automobile, the statement itself is not true without pointing out that the period of the 1920's was a revolutionary time *only* for the middle and upper classes, while the change in the life of the working class came as late as the 1950's. In fact, in 1927, more than half of the American families did not own a car (130). The connection between the self-awakening of the American worker and the automobile lies in the fact that the automobile industry and mass production techniques are very specific instances of the environment where the American worker found himself oppressed and for which he demanded changes. At the same time, the automobile itself is a particular object that—in its

¹ In fact, Ransom E. Olds had introduced the method earlier with the two main principles that the work should be brought to the worker, and that the line should be elevated to the waist level so the worker did not have to stoop. Thus, the 1903 Oldsmobile was the first car ever made on the assembly line, but its production output had not been more than a few hundred and Ford was the one who refined the method and put it to work more effectively.

development—was a pioneer in the new consumer culture and manifested the change which the American citizen experienced.

Mass production and its technical realization, the assembly-line, had far the greatest social impact on the industrial workers of the era. It proved to be a controversial issue with its enormous industrial success, but serious social consequences and bitter public response. The success was hardly disputable in the light of the rising production curve. It was apparent at the same time that early manufacturers did not consider the human factor of mass production. True, however, that Henry Ford attempted to compensate his workers by paying five dollars for an eight-hour day, but it came at the price of the Ford Company's direct interfering with the private lives of its employees to verify their qualification for this new "profit sharing plan."

Mass production caused many changes in everyday life that were perceptible by the mid-1920's. The simplicity of the task the workers had to perform allowed a considerably wider range of possible labor force. In fact, young and energetic people became more valuable workers than their fathers (quoted in *Automobile Age* 119); therefore, in blue-collar families respect for age, as well as parental authority was undercut. At the same time, since the newly available workers also included women, the democratization of the American family was actually furthered by mass production. On the other hand, from the perspective of traditional American values, the impact of mass production on the worker was disastrous. The slightest chance to become a self-made man, or to move upward socially simply vanished. This social *cul-de-sac* made the assembly-line worker rightfully frustrated. Flink also points out that the meaning of work "long sanctified in the Protestant Ethic" diminished to moneymaking at a job was rather a "treadmill to escape than a calling to find fulfillment" (*Automobile Age* 120). At the Ford Motor Company workers were already protesting against inhumane working conditions, because they felt that their identity and personality were being oppressed. The assembly-line workers had no chance for social advancement at Highland Park.

In this new era and new concept of life with the economic stabilization and prosperity of the country between the turn of the century and 1929 people quickly adopted technological inventions

into their lives, and culture was in a process of continuous formation. The consumer society was just adjusting to the new circumstances. Susman observed that people entered from the world of scarcity into the world of abundance, leisure became as important as labor, and they did not hoard their savings anymore, but spent much of it.² While in the 1870's, as W. G. Sumner wrote, the savings bank depositor was the true hero of civilization, now Americans learned that they were largely to think of themselves as consumers (111). The change in human nature followed soon: the values of Puritanism were being replaced by ideas of Modernism, which caused a serious rift between the two generations involved.

Generally, the self-awareness and individualization movement juxtaposed with mass production and mass consumption shows an interesting and controversial duality. One might wonder how it is possible to satisfy the needs of so many individuals by providing mass-produced cars for them. It is known that newspapers and magazines gave the motorcar generous and extensive coverage, both in the format of news reports and commercial advertisement. On the whole, the national taste about the automobile was consciously formed and manipulated, thus; the mass automobile industry could more easily satisfy the needs of the consumers. Mass consumer culture makes it possible through mass communication not to control the consumer article only, but to manipulate directly the consumers' demands. Loewy complained that "whatever was chosen by the major manufacturers became the accepted style through saturation" (Gammage 146). Certainly, a range of media products played a key role in the popularization of the automobile. With Hollywood in the lead, they even managed to form popular taste abroad and thus created an international market for the American-made automobile overseas.

In the new world of mass consumption people still wanted to express their individual needs. For instance, soon after Ford had provided them with a cheap and reliable family car they realized that price and efficiency were not enough—they demanded new inventions and luxuries. This claim is supported by numerous instances when people actually suggested improvements themselves directly to car

² This phenomenon can be very well demonstrated by Ford's 8-hour 5-dollar day, which resulted in more money to spend and more time for leisure.

manufacturers. Wik reported that an average of 300 letters a day had reached the Ford plant from customers recommending possible additions to the Model T, such as turn signals, self-acting windshield wipers, four-wheel brakes, and automatic transmissions (43). Customers, especially farmers who made the most diverse use of the Flivver, wanted to participate in the development; to contribute to the automobile so as to make sure their individual demands would be reflected in the new models. Furthermore, by contributing to a wide-scale, mass-produced, all-American product for themselves, consumers felt that they—the individuals—became significant at a level where they had had no voice before.

Automobile manufacturers soon implemented effective methods to make mass-produced, similar cars unique, tailored to individual needs as the consumers demanded. In the upcoming decades more and more automobile parts could be personalized, adjusted to one's own needs, or equipped with personally chosen accessories. These parts that make the same models different are, for instance, the body that could be painted any color, the seat cover that could be of any material, the seats and wheel that could be adjusted, the car radios that offered a wide variety of choices in quality and appearance as well; today, even the license plates can be customized. One reason for the fall of the Model T was, in fact, a misplaced marketing strategy; namely, the refusal to add luxuries to the Model T. Ford's commitment to the common man was admirable, but he failed to perceive that people "did not want to feel common anymore" (Susman 140), especially in an age when Americans were becoming increasingly self-aware.

In this changed world, as in the case of the automobile, the luxuries, the more convenient and more modern innovations help civilization to advance as far as human needs are concerned. In Walter Engard's words, "To keep America growing we must keep Americans working, and to keep Americans working we must keep them wanting; wanting more than the bare necessities; wanting the luxuries and frills that make life so much more worthwhile" (*Car Culture* 149). By 1960, the purchasing habits of the nation had been altered by economic factors. Smaller and more compact cars were introduced on the market. But Americans have not given up their desire for more stylish and extravagant models: the manufacturers came out with new

categories, such as the “luxury economy cars” to satisfy the needs of costumers who still perceived their automobile interiors as substitutes for living rooms, a mobile extension of their houses.

Social consequences

Individualization of transportation should result in the rise of the individual. However, this was a spurious conclusion since a greater level of individuality can only be estimated if it is compared either to the previous level of the individual, such as those who used, for instance, horse power for transportation, or to other individuals. But the arrival of the automobile after the 1920’s was so overwhelming that horse-drawn carriages rapidly vanished from city streets, not leaving ground for either side-by-side comparison, or doubts about the usefulness of the car. However, it has to be reiterated that automobilization happened in waves—the first of which provided the rich with the possibility to own an automobile. Thus, its effect on the state of the individual meant the expansion of the gap between the elite of the society and the working class rather than the expansion of the individual’s dimensions.

It follows from the above that some historians firmly believed that the automobile erased class barriers, while some others said it made the gap even wider. In my opinion, the automobile defined an *alternative class system* (ACS) on top of the existing one: while the basis for distinction in the 1920’s was whether one had a car or not, toward the end of the century the determining factors came to be quantity, quality (including year and make), and price. In the ACS, the social standing is dynamically determined on the road by the attributes of the vehicle driven. It follows that while the lowest layer of society includes those without property, in the ACS, the poorest are those on foot. The ACS was finer and even more complex combined with the traditional one if we note that one’s social status in the “traditional” system did not necessarily coincide with one’s position in the “automobile-based” one.

Before the automobile, especially at the end of the previous century, many Americans had been humbled by poverty and by their own insignificance in the business order. However, by owning a car, one gained a new sense of authority. The car was ready to take the

riders wherever they personally pleased. If one was driving a bus or a huge truck trailer—as historian F. L. Allen pointed out—he felt even more kingly since he felt responsible for the wielding of a sizeable concentration of force. According to him, this phenomenon was especially noticeable in the South where black people had been oppressed to the greatest extent by racial status. Whites began to complain about “uppity niggers” on the highways where “there was no Jim Crow” (*Big Change* 130). Hence, the instant demand of the upper class for more luxurious vehicles that only they could afford, in order to partially restore their weakened position on the road.

From the beginning, the automobile has been an ultimate status symbol. Mowry believes that “people are giving less thought to the home and more to the car as an indicator of social position [see ACS]. The house stands still; only a chosen few can see the inside. But the car goes about; everybody sees it, and many observers know what it cost” (46). At the turn of the century, the automobile meant a decent social status. In the era of mass production and the Flivver, the unique, better-looking, more stylish, and more expensive models meant social appreciation. In the 1950’s, the emphasis shifted to the size of the car; later the number of cars one owned was the main indicator of affluence. Today, since most families can afford a car (nine out of ten in 1994)³, the more expensive, the more luxurious, or the more equipped the car is, the more likely that the owner maintains a high social standing. Moreover, the possession of a remarkably expensive car is a social expectation for the upper layer of the society. By the end of the 20th-century, rather the lack of the car became a social indicator, thus, “the car ... has become a measure of failure as well as a symbol a success” (Sanford 142).

In fact, an interesting analogy can be discovered between the political and social events of the 1920’s, and the progress of automobility in the popular consciousness. The 1920’s seemed to have been an extravagant and careless decade with its sensational news, criminal trials, horrifying murders, heroic achievements, and famous

³ In 1994, 89.3 percent of the American households owned a motor vehicle. In details, 33.1 million households owned one motor vehicle (35.3 % of the total), and 50.8 million (54.0%) owned two, or more. (Source: Statistical Abstracts of the United States, 1994)

heroes, but under the surface there was the truth which covered political intrigues, cultural crisis, and the shadow of an economic disaster. Similarly, people tended, or rather wanted, to look at the automobile as a perfect gift which would transform the world automatically into an ideal one, utilizing only its advantages. However, the changes did not at all surface immediately, and several—actually foreseeable—problems and negative effects came up in the following decades which raised certain doubts about the automobile's overall beneficialness.

In his list of the early negative effects of the motorcar, F. L. Allen identified the automobile as the source of family friction, a place for misconduct, the cause for a rising death toll on the roads, and an easy getaway for criminals (*Big Change* 123). Today, the most pressing ones are air pollution, exploitation of and encroaching upon the natural environment, and the parking problem. Historians have attempted to link other, not so direct consequences to the automobile as well.

Examining the impacts of the automobile, for instance, Flink found that class differences, as well as localism and ethnicity, suffered a well-perceivable decline (*America Adopts* 3). The long-term consequences are evident now at the end of the century. The automobile did open roads to and from remote villages, farms, and faraway places. It certainly destroyed localism, poisoned traditional morals and lifeways, but it opened up space for development and provided isolated settlements with an easy access to modern civilization. The degradation was realized and acted upon rather late by authorities whose main concern today is to rebuild these places, restore the atmosphere and preserve the American past of which localism was definitely a part. Although this reconstructed environment very well resembles the past, it is only a replica. By the masses it attracts, it does promote awareness of cultural heritage for Americans; however, its concealed falsity may give basis for criticism for counter-advocates of American culture. In my observations, Europeans who share a traditional and rich cultural history of a thousand years or more, vehemently protest against the unstoppable U. S. commercial influence and "low-brow" popular taste. While the average European is stimulated—by commercial interest—to identify American culture

with well-known food-chains and Hollywood blockbusters, we have no reason to wonder about this resistance.

Ethnicity, too, has fallen victim to the automobile. Originally closed ethnic communities were opened up, which undoubtedly helped them to be recognized and to promote their ethnic heritage, but destroyed their integrity. Geographical mobility loosened up these communities, scattered them around the country to become easy subjects to assimilation which certainly helped America to become a more unified nation, but also resulted in the loss of ethnic identity. Worst of all, the already fully operating consumer society tore off elements of ethnic cultures—national food in most cases—and identified the whole ethnicity with them. Certainly, the automobile is not responsible for the derogative connotations of these associations.

Summary

Even today, the development of the automobile continues to advance. The motor vehicle has become an inseparable and cardinal piece of the American scene; one foundation-stone of contemporary American civilization. Historians often concluded their research of the history of the automobile by slightly exaggerating statements. Schneider remarks that “the automobile is the greatest self-generating, self-sustaining development since the living cell first appeared on earth and began to populate it with the species” (Schneider 265). Flink's opening statement in his comprehensive study of the car is, “the Model T and the Fordson tractor more profoundly influenced 20th-century American historical development than the collection of reforms emerging from the so-called Progressive Era and the New Deal combined” (*Car Culture* 2). In his introductory essay, Neuman implies that “[t]o mechanical convenience has so enthralled a jaded public, as the automobile has the American public” (123). I agree with the experts of automobile history that no other technological advance opened up space for human habitation and habitude, and other use, in such a brief period than the automobile.

Undoubtedly, the automobile industry initiated other industries, improved and established many new types of small businesses, and positively affected most branches of the economy. American lifeways were reshaped; patterns of courtship, residence, socialization of

children, education, work habits, and use of leisure time have been radically altered by the adoption of the automobile (*America Adopts* 3). It reformed social values, altered the everyday routine of people, and progressively transformed American communities and daily living habits and gave direction to American life. Its most obvious advantage was that it meant a new way of mobility, which was no longer a steady, westward movement driven by "Manifest Destiny," but rather a frequent routine drive between the city and the countryside.

If I had to summarize the history of American automobility emphasizing its enormous influence on American life I would quote Foster who gave the most compact summary by saying: "Colonial Americans had little choice but to walk to their jobs in the city. Their heirs had almost no alternative but to drive" (35). While a much more bitter voice of one of the most concerned historians concludes, "they completed the rape of the land the frontiersman had begun" (Nye 131).

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