

Anthropology 450
Two Billion Cars: Humans, Markets, Cultures, and the Automobile
Spring 2012

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Password for OCRA/Course Reserves is: automobile



Summary: With the possible exception of the computer or antibiotics, the car is arguably the most significant invention of the last two centuries. It has fundamentally reshaped landscapes, lives, and economies, and its impact will only increase as the global vehicle population doubles, as predicted, to two billion by the year 2030. This class will explore the immense social, political, health, and environmental consequences, as well as the cultural and political economic explanations for the car population explosion. Alternative forms and futures for transit will be considered throughout the course.

Course readings and class time engage with cultural and political economic approaches to understanding a range of issues including (1) government policy choices around transportation and related industrial and land use policies, (2) the auto and oil industries and particularly their marketing practices, (3) public health problems connected to the car including especially the 1.3 million person annual death toll from crashes and the additional problems associated with air quality deterioration, (4) cultural ideas and values and their relationship to car buying, car use patterns, and driving behavior, and (5) the car's effects on the environment and (6) on income inequality.

Goals: This course is designed with two main learning goals in mind: (1) to introduce an anthropological approach to a major artifact of modernity, using theories of material culture, mobility, and international political economy, and (2) to engage in hands-on research, including cultural analysis of car advertising, a country study, and, especially, experiential learning through

fieldwork on transportation in Providence, some of which will be done in coordination with organizations working towards sustainable transportation in Rhode Island.

Format: Class time will be spent in collective and small group discussion of the readings and engagement with the specific research projects the class does. Classes will begin with brief exposition of core concepts for the week and move to small group work with both the questions submitted before class and additional visual and other case materials. These materials will be brought before the class both by the professor and by student teams who will be conducting research in the Providence area. We will watch a small number of films. Attendance and participation are keys to your success in the course: this course is centered on your engagement with me and with each other over the readings and research you are doing outside of class.

Requirements:

1. Prepare for each class by close reading of our syllabus materials. To facilitate active engagement with each reading, you should formulate and post short observations and questions (format explained below) to our website that will form the basis for work during class time.
2. Write a 4-5 page analysis of some print, internet or TV car advertising, focusing on cultural themes and appeals in the ads, including its interpretation by viewers. Due March 1.
3. Choose a country and do basic research on its history and rates of motorization, its government policies relating to the car such as the legal driving age, support for the car industry, land use policies, public health outcomes related to air pollution, and/or gasoline taxes. Students are strongly encouraged to choose a country where a language that they command is spoken to better access relevant sources. Summarize the results of this research in a 4-5 page paper. Due April 3.
4. Conduct a team field research project in Providence chosen from the list at the end of this syllabus or of your own design. Prepare joint class presentation on your findings for an April date TBD. Write an individual research paper based on your group project. Final 10 page paper due May 3.

Grading:

Class preparation and participation (including questions)	25 points
Advertising analysis OR country study	30 points
Group research project presentation and paper	45 points

Readings:

January 31

The car as an aspect of human mobility

- o Urry, John. *Mobilities*. Polity Press, 2007, Ch. 1, pp. 3-16, Chs. 4-6, pp. 63-134.

February 2

The car as an aspect of human material culture

- o Miller, Daniel. *Materiality*. Duke University Press, 2005, Introduction, pp. 1-50.

February 7 and 9

The car as an aspect of international political economy

- Paterson, Matthew. *Automobile Politics: Ecology and Cultural Political Economy*. Cambridge University Press, 2007, Ch. 4, Automobile political economy, pp. 91-120.
- Sperling, Daniel and Deborah Gordon. *Two Billion Cars: Driving toward Sustainability*. Oxford, 2009, Ch. 8 Stimulating Chinese innovation, pp. 205-34.

February 14

The emergence of the car system

- Wolfe, Joel. *Autos and Progress: The Brazilian Search for Modernity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, Introduction and Chapter 5, pp. 3-12 and 113-43.
- McCarthy, Tom. *Auto Mania: Cars, Consumers, and the Environment*. New Haven: Yale University Press. Ch. 3, pp. 30-54.

February 16 and 23

Cultural values and the car

- Lutz, Catherine and Anne Fernandez. *Carjacked*. New York: Palgrave, Ch. 2, pp. 13-38.
- Seiler, Cotten. *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America*. Chapter 3, Crafting autonomous subjects: Automobility and the Cold War, pp. 69-104.

February 23, 28, and March 1 (advertising paper due)

Selling the car: Advertising and marketing across cultures

- Mazarella, William. "Very Bombay": Contending with the global in an Indian advertising agency. *Cultural Anthropology*, 2003, 18: 33-71.
- Foster, Robert J. The work of the new economy: consumers, brands and value creation. *Cultural Anthropology*, 2007, 22: 707-31.
- Lutz, C. and A. Fernandez. *Carjacked*. Ch. 3, How they sell, pp. 39-60.

March 6 and 8

Buying the car: Wheels, brands and identities

- Miller, D. Consumption. In *Handbook of Material Culture*, C. Tilley, ed. Sage, 2006, pp. 341-54.
- Plath, David W. My-car-isma: Motorizing the Showa self. *Daedalus*, 1990, 119:229-44.
- Lutz, C. and A. Fernandez. *Carjacked*. Ch. 4-5, How we buy and what we really pay, pp. 61-100.

March 13 and 15

Using the car: Driving as social relations

- Gessen, Keith. Stuck: The meaning of Moscow's traffic nightmare. *The New Yorker*, August 2, 2010.
- Vanderbilt, Tom. *Traffic*. Vintage, 2008, Ch. 8, How traffic explains the world: On driving with a local accent, pp. 211-43.
- Lutz, C. and A. Fernandez. *Carjacked*. Ch. 7, What drives us, pp. 127-59.

March 20 and 22

The automobile systems' production of inequality

- Illich, Ivan. Energy and equity. http://clevercycles.com/energy_and_equity/

- Peng, Z. And Zhu, Yi. Urban transport in Chinese cities: The impact on the urban poor. In G. Bridge and S. Watson, eds. *The Blackwell City Reader*. 2nd ed. Blackwell, 2010, pp. 159-68.
- Lutz, C. and A. Fernandez, *Carjacked*, Ch. 6. The catch, pp. 101-26.

Spring break

April 3 (Country study due) and 5

Surviving the car: Public safety

- Moodie, Ellen. Microbus crashes and Coca-Cola cash. *American Ethnologist*, 2006, 33 (1): 63-80.
- Lamont, Mark. An epidemic on wheels? Road safety, public health and injury politics in Africa. *Anthropology Today*, 2010, 26 (5): 3-7.
- World Health Organization. *Global Status Report on Road Safety*, 2009, pp. 1-6, 11-40.
- Lutz, Catherine and Anne Fernandez. *Carjacked*, Chs. 8 and 9, pp. 161-203.

April 10, 12 and 17

Alternative futures of mobility

- Owen, David. Green Manhattan. *The New Yorker*, October 18, 2004.
- Pucher, J. et al. Urban transport trends and policies in China and India: Impacts of rapid economic growth. *Transport Reviews*, 2007, 27:379–410.
- Patterson, Matthew. *Automobile Politics: Ecology and Cultural Political Economy*. Cambridge, 2007, Ch. 7, Greening automobility?, pp. 192-224.
- Kingsley, Dennis and John Urry. *After the Car*. London: Polity 2009. Selections.
- Duany, Andres, Elizabeth Zyberk, and Jeff Speck. *Suburban Nation*. North Point Press, 2001, Ch. 11, What is to be done?, pp. 183-243.
- Sperling, Daniel and Deborah Gordon. *Two Billion Cars: Driving toward Sustainability*. Oxford, 2009, Ch. 9, Driving toward sustainability, pp. 235-60.
- Wray, J. Harry. *Pedal Power: The Quiet Rise of the Bicycle in American Public Life*. Paradigm, 2008, Ch. 2, Biking in Amsterdam: The politics of the possible, pp. 30-52, recommended Ch. 3).

April 19, 24, 26

Field research project presentations

May 1

Final class

May 3

Final research paper due

Reflections on the Reading and Preparation for Class Discussion

Each week, you should post an observation and a question about each of the readings for that week on-line at the course website by 9 a.m. the day of class.

Each posting should be in two parts:

- (1) An Ah-Ha! observation that describes the most important thing you learned from the reading. This would be something that you did not know before and/or that contradicted and/or improved your understanding.
- (2) A Head-Scratcher that articulates a significant question you are left with. The Head-Scratcher is particularly important, because students too often think that mastering concepts means just committing them to memory and being able to use them. Think about the daily conversations that you have with friends, however. The best ones usually spring from confusions, disagreements, or puzzles you notice rather than shared certainty. Indeed, certainty elicits mutual affirmation more than discussion, and is usually an absolute conversation-killer.

If there are three readings for particular class meeting, you will have posted six short items (several sentences or a short paragraph) for that day.

The goal of these cyber-posts is to encourage thoughtful and consistent engagement with the readings and to allow me to understand and address the most important questions you have about the issues we are looking at. They will also form the basis for our small group work in class.

Research Groups

Each of you should choose one of following topics on which to conduct group field research. The research groups will each have 4 - 5 students involved and you will report on your findings in a 25 minute class presentation.

1. Work with the Coalition for Transportation Choices, including such organizations as RIPTA, the Sierra Club, or Smart Growth RI to conduct research on sustainable transit in Rhode Island. An organization official will consult with you to construct a research project that will be of use to the organization.
2. Work with a local electric car, car sharing, or bicycle promotion organization. Interview them on the values and ideas that animate their work, and construct a research question whose answer will assist in their work.
3. Conduct an ethnography of road sharing by pedestrians, bicyclists, and cars in a variety of Providence neighborhoods. Develop a theory and strategy for choosing neighborhoods and behaviors to compare that will help explain varying patterns found.
4. Conduct an “object ethnography” of a sample of cars and their owners. Follow their relationship through participant observation. Include interviews about their estimated costs of ownership and then together more closely gauge actual costs. Collect history with this and previous car experience. Use visual as well as verbal evidence of the car world studied.
5. Examine the physical traces and history of car safety in Providence. This could include creating a history of car safety that includes car deaths and injury rates and demographics and a mapping and documentation of car death memorialization practices. You might also map these deaths across time and compare them with other forms of premature mortality.
6. Conduct research on the nature and costs of, and obstacles to, mobility in several Providence neighborhoods of varying wealth. Experiment with travel times/modes/costs to different parts of the city.
7. Map car title loan outlets and the Buy Here Pay Here lots in Providence. Price loans and cars in different neighborhoods, and interview customers about their experience. Examine government regulation of car and car loan sales practices.
8. Conduct an ethnography of Rhode Island Traffic Court/Tribunal (<http://www.town-court.com/getTownCourt.php?courtID=1954#>) Who is there? How do they end up there? What does it cost them? How do they understand why they are there? In what ways are the US class system visible there?
9. Propose your own ethnographic topic on mobility in Providence.