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THE LOVE AFFAIR WITH THE CAR - WEDLOCK OR DEADLOCK

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Introduction

No matter how much it might be denied cars are important to people. The personal value that people attach to cars is so great that they are willing to make radical changes to the environment and societies in which they live. Cars are not merely 'products' like many other goods; nor are they just a mode of transport. Rather, they are often seen as an extension of the person or household who owns them.

People's attachment to their cars appears to vary from person to person; people love cars for numerous different reasons. Below is a list of some of the most commonly perceived attractions:

- A sense of protection from the outside world.
- A machine that one interacts with but which is more predictable than a fellow human.
- The association between the car and sexuality.
- A sense of status.
- A sense of group identity.

The idea of a love affair with the car is a popular one, but it is not often the subject of conference papers or research within the transport field. There appear to be several reasons for this lack of research:

- Transport science has concentrated on engineering, economics, planning, and a 'scientific approach' - the idea of emotional attachments is outside these fields of interest. In dealing with 'emotional responses' we are dealing with something that cannot be measured.

- The love affair with the car is a phrase which has been coined in journalism, and even fiction. Such professions are normally scorned by researchers.

At the present time however environmental and congestion problems are forcing planners to look at other ways of organising transport other than 'providing for the car'. New policies are suggested ranging from somehow making cars pollution free and congestion free, through to charging people to drive their cars and radically improving public transport. Whenever the latter policies are mentioned someone will say that you'll never get people to forego their cars.

The Early Days

The idea of a love affair between people and their cars goes back a long way. In the early days of motoring the car did not give a huge practical advantage to most people in their daily life. With low levels of car ownership the infrastructure existed for those without cars to carry out their activities by walking, cycling, or using public transport. There were benefits for the rich in isolated houses in terms of accessibility, but most of the benefits were in status, or in having a rewarding hobby.

Large scale ownership started in the 1920s and 1930s with the advent of the mass produced car. The pleasure of motoring was an important reason for car acquisition, but increasingly the scope for transportation of a family or group of friends in private from other travellers were realised; and the accessibility afforded to car owners was seen to be higher.

Over time the reasons for car purchase can be said to be increasingly practical. However, while cars may be needed for practical reasons it is not necessarily true that our relationship with the car is based solely on its practicality as an efficient mode of transport. Could it not be true that the car provides a means for people to declare themselves both socially and individually?

In this paper we try to analyse the elements of this 'love affair' by asking various questions about it. Our aim here is to provide information on the subject and to debate some pertinent questions. The paper is not intended to be 'the final word on the subject' but is intended to provoke discussion and research on this important issue.

What is the basis of people's relationships with their cars? - Dependence or Attachment?

The term dependence is just one way of describing society's affiliation with the motor car. Other writers on the subject describe the relationship as one of attachment. Which is the correct term, dependence or attachment or are these descriptions synonymous?

Within the field of child psychology both these terms are used frequently to describe the relationship between mother and child. However, within this context Bowlby (1969) believes

the terms dependence and attachment should not be used synonymously.

To be dependent on a mother-figure and to be attached to her are very different things. Logically dependence refers to the extent to which one individual relies on another for existence and attachment refers to a form of behaviour. Thus whereas dependence is maximum at birth and diminishes more or less steadily until maturity is reached, attachment is altogether absent at birth and is not strongly evident until a few months later. Hence the words are far from synonymous. Is this true of man's relationship with the motor car? In the initial stages of the relationship is one dependent on the vehicle, a situation which gradually diminishes to be replaced by attachment, or is the reverse true; the initial relationship being one of attachment which gradually becomes an absolute dependence? Maybe an element of both processes underlies the relationship?

There seems also to be evidence that car use by car owners becomes greater 'of its own accord'; Is this possibly a reflection of addictive or habit forming behaviour? For example,

- People make journeys they would not make if they had no car;
- For many journey purposes, people with cars make longer trips than people without.
- People with cars are observed to be 'unwilling' to use other modes (for example walking for very short journeys) even when they would be easier.
- People with cars appear to be at a bit of a loss if, for any reason, their car becomes unavailable.

All these factors point to a habit forming relationship although this conclusion is grounded in 'anecdotal evidence'. There is, nevertheless, much evidence for irrationality in the choice of car for a journey, and in the type of journeys undertaken by car drivers.

How do people form a personal attachment to the car?

It can be argued that from a very young age, children learn to like cars. Cars are a predominant feature of the environment for many children from infancy to the time when a car can be acquired legally.

Car rides are recognised as being a good way of inducing sleep in babies, and 'Car' is one of the first words that most children learn. Cars are big, often brightly coloured and fast moving. A trip around children's shops, like the Early Learning Centre or Mothercare, illustrates that about half the toys available concern transport. Children appear to be fascinated by fire engines, ambulances, police cars, helicopters, ordinary cars, buses , trains, dumper trucks and road

diggers. All manner of toys with these themes are available from the smallest plastic mouldings and cut out stencils, to Lego and Meccano.

Parents can also be regarded as a source of positive reinforcement for the car. Children will see their parents preening the car (washing it) and providing it with 'tender love and care' and little boys in particular will want to copy 'daddy' in driving. They also hear their parents boasting about their car relative to someone else's and this gets taken up by the child who uses it in arguments or contests to show his superiority at school ("Your Dad's only got a Metro; mine's got a Cavalier, and it's newer than your Dad's!"). So, to the child, the car also becomes an object which denotes social status.

When cars are presented to children they are nearly always presented in a positive way - as sources of pleasure and gratification. For example, merry-go-rounds and dodgems at fairgrounds; in many films, stories and television programmes cars are shown in a magical light, the hero characters possessing the most glamorous vehicles. The car as a symbol of freedom and rebelliousness is particularly apparent in American films targeted at the teenage audience.

For the young teenager, driving and owning a car is one of the few positively viewed behaviours that they are not allowed to do. This may be a powerful force in making them acquire a licence as soon as it is legally possible. There are other things that are banned to 15 year olds, but which they can nevertheless do, like smoking, drinking and having sex. Driving, however, is more difficult and underage driving easier to stop. This may reinforce their desire to do it when they can, for to do it signifies that they have attained adulthood, a sort of rite of passage.

It must also be pointed out that not all associations with cars are presented as being good. The danger of being run over as a pedestrian is stressed by parents in terms of not straying off the pavement when walking, and not playing on busy streets. Schools conduct campaigns about road safety by means such as 'The Tufty Club' and the 'Green Cross Code'.

Richards (1990), in a popular newspaper item, looks at reasons which account for the level of attachment to cars. The one he sees as most important is concerned with the development of the individual. In early years mobility away from the mother by crawling and then walking is encouraged. It is personally willed and executed. These experiences are confirmed by car driving. Later in childhood agility and surefootedness is important, which is mirrored by the emphasis on speed, performance and 'driving skill'.

> "The car taps into powerful sources of feeling, and not just to revive in the adult some of the pleasures of earlier development, but to redeploy on an adult scale the feelings associated with the achievement of mobility." (Richards, 1990)

Symbolism and Objects

In almost every culture, objects are chosen to represent the power and status of the owner. For men this power tends to be synonymous with virile virtues such as strength, bravery, prowess, endurance; for women power is expressed in the equally stereotypic forms of seductiveness, fertility and nurturance. Although these traits no longer reflect adaptation to the physical environment, these sex stereotypes are maintained through the possession of objects which act as symbols.

Anthropologist Evans-Pritchard (1956) investigating the Nuer tribe of the Sudan, described a man's fighting spear as an external symbol standing for the strength, vitality and virtue of the person. It demonstrates to everyone those personal traits that the rest of the culture aspire to: strength, speed, potency, permanence, the ability to command respect, to control one's surroundings. In our own culture the enormous symbolic significance of vehicles is so obvious that it is often too easily taken for granted. The constant loving care so many people devote to their cars parallels the Nuer's fascination with his spear.

Symbols, Status and Clans

Status is just one quality that a symbol can signify within a culture. A flashy or expensive car for example, conveys to those who believe in its status, that its owner is a person possessing distinctive or superior qualities.

A car is seen by many as a status symbol both in its common parlance (of a single dimension of status), but also in its ability to place people on a number of scales of social positioning. While the cost of a car is one measure of status, other car types form sub-cultures, (e.g. vintage cars, small 'character' cars such as Citroen 2CVs, Ford Capris) - 'You can tell a man by the shoes he wears' can be replaced by 'You can tell a man by the car he drives'. The simple status aspect of cars is perhaps most clearly seen with company cars where cars offered to employees are clearly related to the status of a job within a company.

It does not matter that one remains anonymous in one's car - in fact the anonymity increases the acceptability of ostentatiousness among certain social groupings (e.g. those with furry dice, noisy exhausts, horns that play tunes, large cars). It is not generally so expensive as to give irrefutable indications of wealth (as a large house does), nor is it cheap enough to allow imitation (such as clothing, watches, and jewellery); it is mobile, and it is seen as useful.

As Leiss et al (1986) put it:

> "The product has become a totem, a representation of a clan or group that we recognise by its activities and its members' shared enjoyment of the product. The response to consumption seems to be less concerned with the nature of satisfaction than with its social meaning - the way it integrates the individual into a consumption tribe. Meaning here focuses on questions like, who is the person I become in the process of consumption? Who are the other consumers like me? What does the product mean in terms of the type of person I am and how I relate to others?"

Put in these terms people may buy cars as much for the desire to belong to a clan as the desire for efficient mobility. The expenditure of over £40,000 for many makes of car does not make them ten times better than cars costing £4,000. The car has become a powerful public symbol of 'clan membership'. This would explain much uneconomic car use as showing clan membership to an anonymous public. It also helps to explain the categorisation of people by "... and what do you drive? ...".

Marsh (1988), talking about the car writes "Many other artefacts can be used as indicators of allegiance among the modern tribes - the style in which one decorates one's home, for example, or one's possession of a coffee making machine; because of its visibility, the car is perhaps the most important indicator of all. From this point of view, we are what we own."

The Role of the Media

In the UK in 1989, £235 million pounds were spent by the ten major West European car manufacturers on advertising. Out of the top fifty advertisers in Britain (in terms of revenue spent), nine were car manufacturers. Thus in the 'big league' of advertisers cars account for about 20% of UK spending on advertising.

Marsh and Collett (1986) suggest that car manufacturers understand the underlying psychological relationships people have with their cars, but are rarely willing to admit to it, preferring to be seen as supporters of the conventional theory of the automobile; that men and women buy cars as a result of a rational evaluation of factors such as economy, reliability and safety.

There is a difference of opinion concerning the effects that advertising has on people. One argument is that adverts merely provide information to an audience which needs all the help it can get to be able to make rational purchasing decisions. This may be the case where the product is new or where it is an existing or established market and the advertisers are seeking to maintain or increase their market share.

The second argument is that adverts have wider effects, encouraging people to buy things they would not otherwise buy by creating 'false needs', and encouraging people to believe that

gratification can be ‘purchased’. They argue that the widespread subjection of people to media messages from newspapers, film, television and radio all help to change people’s mental framework of the world, substituting ‘media’ styled norms of behaviour and tastes for ones produced within a community based on religion, social necessity, and the other older methods of ‘persuasion’. They also argue that while one advert viewed separately appeals to feelings in people to try to convince them to buy that product over another, a multiplicity of advertisements appealing to different, but all positive feelings about that type of product (in this case the car) reinforces positive feelings about the product i.e. cars.

Stuart Ewen (1976) suggests that advertising functions both in an economic and a cultural sense, causing material objects to play an increasingly important role in everyday life , as symbols of prestige and status; objects are made attractive to particular segments of society by associating them with the badges or marks of particular status groups. This is a sociological approach to understanding advertisements.

Carrier (1990) suggests that because the manufacture of commodities is increasingly alien to people’s direct experience, the cultural meaning people attach to manufactured objects is more susceptible to symbolic manipulation, including the intentional manipulation by advertisers.

In modern society advertisers faced with trying to sell basically similar products appeal to the cultural meaning people attach to goods, in order to make their product more desirable. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) have described "the ability of an object to convey meaning through its own inherent qualities". It is this concentration on these sometimes subliminal, subjective and emotional aspects of goods which is seen as affecting people in their tastes.

Many have argued that advertising makes people materialistic. Williams (1962) argues that this is not the case, and the analysis of adverts shows that materialism is not the driving emotion or sentiment in advertising. "We are not materialistic enough to be conned by advertising..... Objects are not enough but must be validated, by association with social and personal meanings".

The strength of the link between advertising and cars seems to be due, at least in part, to the importance of the symbolic and status attributes of cars. Not only are cars advertised as a product in their own right, but they are also an important element in many adverts for other goods. It seems that the advert needs the car as much as the car needs the advert.

The Future - Wedlock or Deadlock?

What are the signs of stress in the relationship?

If one examines society's love affair with the car more closely, it becomes apparent that the relationship is far from blissful and has not been for some time.

> "The love affair with the car is under strain. At the very least some marriage guidance and new types of awareness and behaviour are necessary and some people are even beginning to speculate about trial separation or divorce." (Goodwin 1991)

Areas for popular disenchantment are seen in an uneasy recognition that cars are dangerous, that they are a nuisance when one is a pedestrian, that they are costly, and that they consume a large amount of public resources, such as land for roads, car parks etc.

Methods of tackling this disenchantment have been varied over the past 30 years or so. Popular solutions in the 1950s favoured high speed personal airborne transporters and other high-tech ideas. It was only with the rise of interest in ecology in educated circles that solutions such as improving public transport were proposed as being 'progressive', and only since popular awareness of ecological issues that any form of mass disenchantment with cars has occurred.

This disenchantment has tended to be coupled with a feeling of necessity for a car, and has not been associated with people giving up their cars. The infrastructure in Britain has become 'car friendly' and 'public transport unfriendly'.

Thus for some people the actual attachment to the car has already been reduced. In many cases, however, they continue to use them, either because they feel that other forms of transport do not cater for their needs, or because the wish to drive is stronger than the desire not to pollute, (or a combination of the two).

The current consensus view about transport as we enter the 1990s is that 'something has to be done about the car'. Congestion (and the dawning realisation that road building will not solve the problem), and pollution (with the lack of any non-polluting car on the horizon) have led most commentators to the view that use of the car needs to be reduced.

In the early 1990s two new factors are causing people to view the car problem with greater urgency:-

- Increasing congestion leading to the end of the idea of the 'open road'. Traffic jams are a regular part of day to day journeys for many people and there is no way around them. For many people in non-urban areas there is no public transport or any travel mode

(except for the fit cyclist) possible. Short of a change of work or home location the car driver is trapped. The analogy with personal relationships cannot be ignored here. The difference between entrapment and dependence is small from the outside, but of great importance to people's feelings.

- The rise of environmental concerns has made some people feel guilty about using cars. At present, most who feel any guilt may not use them for incidental journeys, but do however, still use them. There are justifications, and in many cases there are few alternatives. The current concern about global warming is adding urgency to the environmental issue.

  "These poor dupes, suckled on a diet of motoring images of freedom and individual triumph, convinced by generations of car makers, oil men and politicians that the car is the ultimate symbol of individual liberty and self-expression, simply cannot believe that the car is also a terrible trap. A trap that far from confirming the individual's splendid isolation and independence, condemns the individual to a dronelike conformity of movement, or, as is increasingly the case, paralysis. Far from celebrating the freedom of the individual, more and more the private car is becoming the ultimate leveller, reducing us all to a dull conformity - identically frustrated, identically furious, identically stuck." (Elton 1991)

What could get people out of their cars?

We have treated the relationship with the car as one of many factors which influence people's choice to own a car, and to use it. But factors such as the need for travel and choice of travel mode are not related to each other in an arithmetic or geometric sense. People do not generally think about their journeys in the way that models of behaviour treat people. There are thresholds which will determine choice.

Cars have many inherent advantages and these must be taken into consideration when thinking about encouraging a reduction in car usage. The advantages of a car depend somewhat on the type of travel; whether it is urban or inter-urban. Taking the latter first, given today's transport scenario, the advantages of a car include flexibility, private cost, speed, time, luggage handling and privacy. These benefits increase with the load factor of the car. The advantages of a car in an urban situation are probably on average fewer and include privacy and some degree of flexibility. Other potential advantages in the latter case depend on the availability and cost of parking and the level of congestion. Thus, the practical advantages of a car are substantial. They are not, however, immutable for the following reasons:

1. They could be reduced significantly if public transport was improved to provide a better alternative to the car.

2. They could be altered by changes in urban design. As the ownership and availability of a

car becomes increasingly standard, it promotes the establishment of out-of-town shopping centres, leisure centres, hospital centres, etc. This reinforces the need for a car since public transport to these out-of-town centres is usually poor, and one out- of-town site only contains one or two shops or a hospital, rather than a full range of facilities.

3. Measures taken to restrain the use of the car in cities also reduce the attractiveness of using the car. If a city centre area is traffic calmed, the inherent advantages of car use in this area are diminished. If the space available for parking is reduced, or the price of the parking is increased, the advantages of a car are also reduced.

From a situation where it is argued that people will not switch to public transport unless the emotional attachment is catered for, the idea that people might be trapped in their cars leads us to ask whether in certain situations people would be only too happy to switch to another mode if it was available, and had practical superiority over the car (e.g. public transport with priorities). Thus, if congestion gets worse, we may see the breakdown of the love affair happen naturally (as long as public transport is improved). As long as people can still use their cars for leisure and family purposes the problem may solve itself. Possible obstacles would seem to be:

- The hatred of public transport (especially buses). How do we make it positive?

- The hatred of urban life. Public transport can only be well suited to urban situations. Outside urban areas, the car does generally have great advantages. If people continue to leave cities at the current rate the problem may become virtually insurmountable. In this case there would be entrapment without sight of a divorce.

- To keep people in cities (and to keep them happy) we have to ensure that the city is liveable in. This requires an improvement in areas such as crime, race relations and social security policies.

- Individualism. In macro-historical terms the recognition of the 'importance of the individual' as opposed to the 'importance of society' is fairly recent. It is only since the 18th century that it has grown. In the last 12 years that trend has been accelerated, and many argue that policies for public service will stand less chance of success in the future. If this is so the switch away from cars has to be for selfish reasons.

The likely success of policies aimed at reducing car use

Given the above, it might seem as if there is little that can be done to reduce the 'irrational attachment' to cars. Despite the strength of pro-car feeling it seems defeatist to give up at this point and say that car use in its current form will continue for ever, simply because people love

them.

Even if at the moment, attempting to limit use of the car is seen as political suicide, this may not always be true. The acceleration in scientific evidence for severe ecological problems concerned with global warming, could lead to action in the near future. This action may be regarded as being unrelated to advertising, but it would be useful to explore whether advertising and marketing could have some role in reducing car usage, and whether that role would be useful and desirable.

- It must be stressed that these changes can only be envisaged in a situation where alternatives to cars are promoted such as public transport, to ensure that activities which involve travel are not made more difficult.

- It must also be stressed that only a few people see the total banning of cars as anything but a retrogressive step. In this paper we are discussing the aiding of the transfer of journeys which would be better made by other modes, to those other modes.

There is a surprising consensus for this kind of view. In a special supplement to *Car* Magazine in June 1990 called "The car in the future - What you'll be driving in the next century", the bulk of articles dealt with ways of helping the car to survive in the future. In an editorial to introduce the supplement Gavin Green (editor of Car Magazine) writes:-

> ".... the car's role in society must change. Cars should be used less. This may not be bad news for the motorist..."
>
> "We must be tempted to forego our cars when they are at their least efficient and least appealing (such as in day to day commuting, long distance business trips, and inner city motoring), so as to ensure their survival for the occasions when private transport is essential and pleasurable."
>
> "But (public transport) has to be better integrated; it has to be cleaner; it has to be more attractive; services have to be more frequent. It also has to be government funded, and cheaper, for public transport should be a state service, not a government money spinner. The changes needed to revolutionise public transport in Britain are at least as far reaching as those needed to revolutionise the car, and its usage."

For a motoring magazine to contain articles such as this shows the ways in which attitudes are changing. Similar sentiments expressed by leading figures among car manufacturers (Car Magazine, June 1990) imply that it may well be that the motor industry itself will want to demote some type of car journeys in order to 'save the car'.

One idea would be to produce 'the green car' which would have low pollution levels, would not travel very fast, and would be the marketing equivalent of the Mini. This might change the car from being a 'hard' product to a 'soft' one. Thus it would still retain the psychological advantages of security and freedom, but take away the macho competitive element. The macho car would still exist, but the non-macho one would increase in importance. We are not talking about a Sinclair C5, but a car the size of a Mini.

Richards (1990) argues that policies to reduce car use will not be successful unless they take the psychological attachment into account. In some ways this states the obvious, but it also points to policy options which might have success in this field.

- Policies of increasing taxation and road pricing are likely to override the psychological attachment. If done suddenly though, they would be unpopular, precisely because of the attachment. But if the cost advantage of the car is slowly eroded people will have time to contemplate other 'objects of desire', and to erode their own attachment.

- Media campaigns alone are unlikely to be successful, except among those who are already 'converted'. Campaigns against smoking have shown success among SEG groups A and B in the south of England, and campaigns for healthy eating have been similarly successful. The more subliminal campaigns of our times (such as share ownership and home ownership), have been more successful to a wider audience, but have been based on personal greed. It is difficult to imagine a car use reduction campaign to be based around greed rather than health, environmental, and altruistic ideals.

- The key would seem to be in ensuring that life's activities can be carried out with greater ease when a car is not used, be this by land use policies of ensuring high accessibility to activities by walking, cycling, and public transport; ensuring that walking is perceived as a safe mode by all people; slowly eating away at the practical advantages of cars by fiscal means and by improvement in other modes.

It seems that the nature of the psychological attachment is most bound up with the concepts of ownership of cars, and the idea of 'pleasurable motoring'. If particular policies can ensure that these remain (but that car use is reduced), the policies may be successful. But the nature of the attachment between people and cars implies that media campaigns will make these practical changes more successful if co-ordinated.

We do not regard the paper as negative or deliberately 'anti-car'. What we are saying is that if, say, for environmental reasons, car ownership and usage of the type of car now in existence must be reduced, several policy approaches must be used involving taxation, the media and

improving other modes of transport. The underlying reasons for car choice must be studied. In fact, we hope we have shown that there is scope for finding positive ways forward. Such ways include changes in the design of cars to make them more environmentally friendly or less macho and better promotion of the bus or other more efficient, safer forms of transport. There is already a move amongst perhaps even the most unlikely of sources - the motor industry - to recognise that the negative aspects of cars must be reduced and a more positive approach to car use must prevail if there is to be a future for the car.

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