



# *Road Danger Reduction Forum*

## *CAR CULTURE – COUNTING THE COST*

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## ***What is it?***

“Car culture” is a term more often used than defined. In this paper, it refers to the positive values society attaches to the car, which may range from the “boy racer” celebrations of “Top Gear” and magazines such as “Redline” to the veneration implied by the car’s status as the star prize in game shows. It is also revealed by assumptions about the rights and responsibilities of drivers, including the notion that drivers are victimised by government taxation policies, traffic wardens and police.

**An assessment of the extent to which motorists cover the social costs of driving is given in the appendix to this paper.**

“Car culture” is not the same as car dependency but underpins it. It underlies a myriad of life style choices, planning decisions and social expectations. It is the ideology which makes car dependency appear natural and limits our ability to imagine alternatives.

To use an analogy with drugs, car dependency is the physical addiction whereby the body cannot function normally without the drug, while car culture is the psychological and emotional dependency which the drug inspires.

## ***Some examples***

Responding to the recent publication of the Integrated Transport White Paper, “The Sun” ran a front page feature depicting “thousands of Chinamen trundling off to work on their bicycles” accompanied by the headline: “Is this Prescott’s Dream of Britain?” In other words, it is self evident that the bicycle is an inferior form of transport and that car ownership is an inalienable right of the British citizen.

Negative reviews elsewhere focused on the perceived persecution and fleecing of the motorist. While these responses reveal how the car culture insinuates itself into the taken-for-granted assumptions of everyday life, this process is reinforced at the fantasy level by advertising.

Car advertising connects car ownership to deeper psychological structures. Despite the realities of traffic congestion, casualties, noise and air pollution, advertising often depicts the object of desire in settings such as wilderness, empty roads and exotic settings. Car owners are normally depicted as aspirational figures of affluence, youth and erotic appeal.

Advertising attaches some crucial social signifiers from the wider

culture to the car, emphasising technological sophistication, high levels of skill and performance, not to mention safety and security, which may seem ironic to the pedestrians and cyclists who have to deal with the consequences.

## ***So what?***

So, what relevance does this have to the professionals, whether planners, engineers or road safety officers, who have to deal with the consequences of mass car use?

For much of this century, road engineering and traffic management have been based on the premise that the growth in car use is a fact of life. The needs of ever increasing car use have been accommodated and the role of alternative modes down graded or ignored. The use of guard rails to restrict pedestrian movements and the phasing of controlled pedestrian crossings demonstrate the degree to which the needs of motorised traffic have been given priority.

In the area of safety, traditional road safety campaigns, such as cycle helmets, reflective clothing and road safety instruction of children and the elderly have sought to adapt vulnerable road users to the demands of rising traffic levels rather than the other way round.

Now that the damage to the environment and levels of traffic congestion require a complete reversal of these policies, the car culture imposes a huge barrier to change. We need to clearly understand what we are dealing with.

To consider the car merely as a means of transport about which rational decisions can be made is largely to miss the point.

## ***In the Psychiatrist's Chair***

Car culture has both a psychological and a practical aspect. One of the strongest psychological components is the car's role in defining status. The car you drive is a badge of status in the anonymous environment of the modern world. The salesman or executive's position within the hierarchy is often explicitly linked to the company car which goes with the job. Cars are marketed in ways that encourage us to choose them on the basis of how we see ourselves or would like to be seen. Sporty, performance vehicles give out a radically different signal from the four-wheeled drive or BMW. The marketing of cars both reflects and reinforces fundamental social divisions of age, gender and class.

Status is also conferred through passing the drive test, which has almost become a rite of passage. Cycle proficiency training has in the past often been seen as laying the foundations of road sense to

prepare the child for their future role as a driver.

Apart from status, the other major psychological attribute of the car is security. Both in terms of the safety features much trumpeted by advertising and security for those who feel vulnerable when walking, cycling or using public transport, the car offers a cocoon of protection against the threatening outside world. The irony is that increasing levels of traffic contribute enormously to the danger, alienation and anonymity from which we seek protection.

## ***Vested Interests***

The car culture, as it has developed since the inception of the private car, has become self-reinforcing through its impact on the physical infrastructure. Road building, out-of-town shopping malls, the location of housing on greenfield sites, the depletion of public transport provision, reflect and reinforce the primacy of the car as a mode of transport.

This process of mutual reinforcement also extends to the economic sphere. The level of car production is seen as a key economic indicator. While car companies are large employers in their own right, a myriad of related industries including road builders and powerful oil companies, share a vested interest in feeding and maintaining the car culture.

Since Margaret Thatcher celebrated the “great car economy”, few politicians of any persuasion have been prepared to confront it.

All of the above forms the context within which the road safety practitioner has to work. The car culture manifests itself in social tolerance of speeding, lax penalties for dangerous drivers, variable levels of enforcement and opposition by motorists to government attempts to impose higher costs. The transfer of risk towards the most vulnerable road users is obscured by the tendency for safety to be defined in terms of air bags, seat belts and crashworthy vehicles.

In the face of attempts to curb car use, it almost seems reasonable when drivers represent themselves as victims. A sustainable transport future requires that the car culture be challenged. Changes to the road environment will not, of themselves succeed without a radical change in public attitudes. Travel awareness campaigns which do not address the irrational aspects of car culture and appeal only to reasoned argument are unlikely to succeed.

## Confronting the car culture

It may seem from the above that challenging the car culture implies the need to take on the entire dynamic of modern international capitalism. However, as government policies move ever more explicitly towards sustainable transport, the opportunity is there to accelerate the process. Here are some suggestions:

- **Education:** Road safety education has traditionally taken car use for granted. More and more, educators are providing a different context, which encourages children to challenge rather than to accept the level of road danger they are exposed to. Car advertising in itself is a worthy area of study and children will often be able to make the connection between the situation they find themselves in as road users and the values promoted by advertising.
- **Infrastructure:** the present road environment is a “concrete” manifestation of the car culture. Re-allocation of road space gives out a different message about the relative rights and responsibilities of road users as well as their relative status. Planning decisions which aim to reduce the need for car travel as well as to reduce facilities for drivers will help to clarify this message.
- **Car design:** this offers an opportunity to challenge car culture both practically and symbolically. Car design currently offers performance standards far above what is required for cars to perform their function. New design standards which limit the car’s capacity to cause injury and pollution to only what is necessary to carry out its function would limit the industry’s power to produce and market cars able to travel at twice the speed limit and accelerate far faster than is safe for other road users. It would also undermine the performance claims which make cars so desirable for those with a “boy racer” mentality.
- **Community involvement:** while drivers claim to be victimised by such recent measures as pollution checks, congestion charging and higher petrol taxes, it is important to remember the other, real victims of motor traffic. Apart from the obvious victims of crashes and air pollution, many people are intimidated by the speed and volume of traffic in their communities. They often lack the strong and influential organisations that support the motor industry and car users. Local authorities have the capacity to support, empower and represent groups and communities that are more plausible victims than car owners and should use their resources to do so.

- **Enforcement:** when a former Home Secretary felt able to say that police officers should not be “harassing middle class motorists” who just happen to be driving at 10 mph above the speed limit, it seemed that car culture was explicit government policy. In recent times, the arguments for speed enforcement have been heard more sympathetically. However, a change in public attitudes in support of strong enforcement of road traffic law is still required. There needs to be continuing pressure for enforcement policies and a higher status for traffic policing so that drivers can be held fully accountable for the damage and intimidation they cause.
- **Speed:** this is a key issue for raising awareness about the responsibility drivers bear for the safety and security of the wider community. Car design which makes driving comfortable at any speed, as well as greater survivability for the driver, reduces the awareness of drivers of the intimidation and danger they create.
- **Health and fitness:** the hardest part of the car culture to tackle is the status and sense of self esteem which car ownership can confer on an individual. It is hard to see cycling, walking or public transport being able to adequately substitute for these irrational attachments. The modern obsession with personal fitness offers one area in which the car has a negative image and the alternatives have a distinct advantage.

## **Conclusions**

The car culture is a deep rooted and complex aspect of modern culture. It is a considerable barrier to the kinds of changes necessary for a sustainable future. It has achieved and maintained its power through the actions of planners, engineers and educators which have reinforced it, as well as the economic interests which sustain it.

Changes in government policy and a growing awareness of the negative legacy which mass car use has left us offer a great opportunity for change. If Jeremy Clarkson still has credibility in 10 year's time then we really are in trouble.

## ***Appendix: Counting the Costs***

While cars have a dominant position in the transport system, this physical domination is reinforced by an ideology, some important features of which are described above.

In recent years, as more and more evidence emerges about the environmental damage created by car dependency and the futility of road building as a response to traffic congestion, so a new form of ideology emerges - the car driver as victim.

A key element of this ideology is the notion that, through the taxes drivers pay on fuel, as well as the annual Vehicle Excise Duty, compared with the amount spent annually on the road infrastructure, the driver is being cheated by the government. Proposals for congestion charging and road tolls are rejected by motoring organisations on the grounds that drivers are already being "ripped off".

This is a naive approach which masks the overall costs to society of mass car use.

These calculations compare the taxes and charges paid by the motorists with the direct costs of providing for them - road building and improvements, highway maintenance, etc. What such analyses conveniently ignore are the "externalised" costs of car use.

These external costs include the costs to the Health Service of treating the victims of road crashes and air pollution, the costs to industry of traffic congestion and the loss of amenities due to road building. Other costs are harder to quantify such as the effects of stress due to traffic noise and the impact of car-based developments such as out-of-town shopping centres on non-car users.

Based on current estimates, the cost of recorded traffic casualties is approximately £10 billion and the costs of traffic congestion around £18 billion per year. A recent report\* by the Environmental Transport Association (ETA) estimated the total external costs of car use at £50 billion per year, including congestion, pollution, noise, road crashes and global warming).

On this basis, far from being victimised, the motorist is being subsidised by society to the tune of roughly £34 billion per year. A unique form of victimisation!

It is important that professionals seeking to challenge the car culture understand the role of the victim myth and the assumptions on which it is based. Greater transparency will be provided by the hypothecation of road user and workplace parking charges, as pro-

posed in the government's Transport White Paper. The use of such funds for public transport improvements will help to undermine the argument that drivers cannot be expected to pay higher charges while alternative forms of transport are not available.

However, the argument advanced by the motoring lobby is ideological rather than economic. By focusing attention on the taxation issue, the wider impact of the car culture is obscured. The fact that the impact of motoring on the wider society (casualties, congestion, enforcement costs, the loss of amenities due to road building ,etc) is ignored by lobbyists such as the AA, is a crucial weakness that deserves to be exposed.

*\* The Real Costs of Motoring - ETA 1991, updated 1996*