

Marketing car love in an age of fear: an anthropological approach to the emotional life of a world of automobiles

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The emotional life of car drivers and passengers in the United States is complex, with car marketing and a wider car system of infrastructure, regulation, risk, and profit shaping those affects. Based on anthropological research with drivers, buyers, marketers, and emergency personnel, this paper outlines a political economy of automobile affect in the United States. It focuses on the emotional encapsulation and individualism that car culture encourages, the remaking of the car interior as a highly emotional marketing and political space, and the fear of crime and crashes that car marketing both elides and banks on.

KEYWORDS: automobility, emotions, political economy of mobility, encapsulation, fear.

O mercado do amor ao carro numa época de medo: abordagem antropológica à vida emocional de um mundo de automóveis ♦ A vida emocional dos condutores e passageiros de automóveis nos Estados Unidos é complexa, sendo os afetos moldados pelo mercado, por um sistema de infraestruturas mais vasto, pela regulamentação, pelo risco e pelo lucro. A partir de uma pesquisa antropológica que envolveu condutores, compradores, promotores comerciais e pessoal de serviços de emergência, o texto identifica os contornos de uma economia política dos afetos relacionados com o automóvel nos Estados Unidos. Centra-se no encapsulamento emocional e no individualismo encorajados pela cultura automóvel, na reconfiguração do interior dos veículos como espaço político e comercial fortemente marcado pela emoção, e no medo do crime e dos acidentes que a promoção de mercado omite, mas do qual depende.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: automobilidade, emoções, economia política da mobilidade, encapsulamento, medo.

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WAVES OF INTEREST IN THE EMOTIONS HAVE RUN THROUGH MANY OF the academy's disciplines over the last three decades. In anthropology, the wave began in the 1980s, with post-structuralism and feminism putting new winds in the sails of ethnographers who had previously seen the psychological sciences as the only framework relevant to the emotions. One of the central problematics prompting that work is an interest in understanding emotional life not as a private matter which we must struggle to make public, but as a phenomenon as culturally resonant and as embedded in social relations as language, politics, or religion. This anthropological work, based in close and long-term ethnographic work in communities around the world, also emerged from an interest in deconstructing the specific English language concepts, such as anger, fear, and happiness, that had served as the comparative constructs for earlier work, and in identifying and translating concepts in local languages that were used to make specific, often culturally complex emotional claims (Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990).

Anthropologists examined how the use of local emotional constructs, such as those of honor and modesty, were used to reproduce and challenge gender relations and patrilineal kinship patterns (Abu-Lughod 1986; Mageo 1996). So, for example, ethnographic research that I conducted on a Micronesian atoll identified the ways in which the concepts of *metagu* and *song* could not be simply translated as fear and anger and left at that (Lutz 1988). Instead, *metagu* was one of several types of fear, this one more social and valued than other types, and taken as a sign of someone properly socialized to be anxious about violating social norms or about presuming to be "higher than" others. *Song* was more properly translated as justifiable anger, distinguishing it importantly from irritation, impatience, or a plethora of other terms commonly used for forms of anger. Observing the use of these two emotional claims showed that they participated in the negotiation of political legitimacy for the island chiefs, with the *song* of those chiefs taken almost as a legal judgment and as reestablishing convention.

As these examples show, the local politics of emotional life – not so much its psychodynamics – have become the centerpiece of many ethnographies. Their goal is to identify the ways in which the emotions are political and contested, and to understand how they enter into social relations in part as speech acts which aim to move others, pursue interests, and make political assertions for a particular kind of meaningfulness in an ongoing event.

Anthropologists have also worked to deconstruct the idea of emotion itself, seeing it as dragging with it unnoted and untoward analytic assumptions from Western ethnopsychological worlds. Those assumptions include the notion that emotions represent the irrational, the unintended, the uncontrollable, the physical, feminine and vulnerable aspects of human psychology. And the assumption is that the emotions are a fact first and only of the individual

psyche because they are pre-cultural, natural facts, and internal to the person. Finally, emotion as a concept has developed a contradictory relationship with the concept of morality: emotion is seen in some contexts as morality's antithesis – the subjective, the self-aggrandizing, even animal instinct – and in other contexts as its very ground of possibility, since it is the route by which people ascribe value and an important ingredient of moral judgments (Lutz 1988). The double-sidedness of emotion as a concept in the West, however, includes the assumption that it is both or alternatively our Achilles' heel and the core of what connects us to our inner self and to others. One anthropologist of emotions has observed that "In the modern world where computers are capable of calculating faster and more accurately than any person, we like to believe our emotions, not our analytic abilities, make us human. In other words, instead of 'thinking animals' we see ourselves as 'feeling machines'" (Lindholm 2005: 30). This raises the possibility that emotion's centuries-long struggle to be taken as seriously as cognition is in the ascendancy, as much the result of modernity's technological obsessions – its technophilia – as of any philosophical or purely theoretical reconsideration. It must also be seen as the result of the critique of the widespread cultural equation of emotions, femininity, and inadequacy by second wave feminism (itself a revolutionary moment with political economic foundations) (Hochschild 1975; Broverman, Broverman and Clarkson 1970; see also Boler 1999).

The goal of much feminist and anthropological work has been to relativize and historicize the emotions, that is, to see feelings as emergent from social life, not somehow preceding and then structuring it, and to see emotions as emergent in response to social changes large and small. Emotional claims and meanings can be seen to wax and wane in the course of history, this perspective argues, and political economic shifts provide some of the underpinnings for those historical changes (Reddy 2001). The methods of ethnography and sociocultural history, alone and together, have been used to build an understanding of local worlds of emotional meaning and their connection to political economy and to treat emotions as distinctive modes of enculturated reasoning and action.

This approach may seem similar to, but is in fact in sharp contrast to, the dominant paradigm in use in other social sciences, and particularly the psychology of emotions. As Boellstorff and Lindquist (2004: 437) succinctly put it, this approach "pairs a methodological individualism with a theoretical universalism, and 'culture' – that historically specific mediating level as fundamental to human experience as 'English,' 'Thai,' or 'German' – is elided." The dominant view continues to be one in which, as I have argued elsewhere, emotions like "anger" and "happiness" are viewed through the lens of "a referential view of language where emotions 'are treated, through the process of reification, not as concepts used to do certain kinds of things in the world but

as labels for concretized psychophysical states or objectivized internal ‘event-things’” (Lutz 1988: 9).

EMOTIONS AND THE CAR SYSTEM

The collective building of this new understanding of the emotions continues to allow us to animate and illuminate additional areas of sociological and anthropological inquiry. We are able to understand not only the face-to-face interactions of people in communities, but the relationship between people and their technologies or material world, and the larger political economic systemics which derive some of their force from the emotional worlds of understanding and motive that are created alongside those systemics. The example of such a large political economic system that I examine in this article is the emotional life of car owners and drivers in the United States as it is constructed in interaction with the car industry and its design, marketing, and advertising arms. The created emotional world of the car has relevance both at the level of how drivers relate to each other and how consumer choice is exercised. It also has relevance to the international system. This lies both in questions of trade and in other aspects of foreign policy: vehicles, along with gas to run them, are major items of contemporary international trade and trade negotiations, and the foreign policy of many nations is directed toward securing reliable and inexpensive access for the gas to run them on. Moreover, ideas circulates across borders about what a modern individual and a modern state are like, and they promote the notion that private car ownership and a domestic car industry are benchmarks of modernity (Wolfe 2010).

The global traffic in automobiles seems only to accelerate. While a pattern of rapid growth can be said to have characterized the entire 20th century, car sales have been growing recently on a much more massive scale than ever before. In 2010, new car sales were up 54% from the prior year in Peru, car sales in India rose an average 14% a year between 2003 and 2010, and automakers sold over one million passenger vehicles in China in one recent month alone. This car population explosion is often conceptualized as a simple rational response of global households to their rising affluence; the post-socialist emergence of large consumer markets in the former Soviet Union, China and elsewhere; new government policies in some countries of the global south that facilitated the emergence of a domestic car industry; and/or the more aggressive search for car consumers by industry giants experiencing a crisis of overproduction in their own US, Japanese, or European markets.

While the political economic underpinnings of the global car population explosion merits close study, a less rationalist and more culturalist understanding of that political economy is necessary to make sense of its scale and to think about its future. These large jumps in the consumption of automobiles

have been accomplished not only through tax breaks and capital infusions and trade agreements, but through the intense marketing of “car love.” In some cases, what is on sale is the idea of the world as a dangerous place and the car as the best defense against its threats. For marketers and advertisers know what much academic work on the car and automobility has not fully appreciated, which is the complexity of the emotional life of the drivers and owners of cars and the importance of the emotional relations established between vehicle buyers and sellers, between citizens and the political elites making decisions about their mobility possibilities, between car crash victims and their caretakers or mourners, between political factions engaged in emerging culture wars around the car and the landscapes it has produced, and between the imagined world of nations involved in car brands.

What follows is a brief case study of the emotional life of cars based on anthropological research with drivers, buyers, marketers, and emergency personnel (Lutz and Fernandez 2010). This article outlines a political economy of some aspects of automobile affect in the early 21st century. It focuses on the emotional encapsulation and individualism that car culture encourages, the remaking of the car interior as a highly emotional marketing and political space, and the fear of crime and crashes that car marketing both elides and banks on.

ENCAPSULATION AND INDIVIDUALISM

In *The Capsular Civilization*, De Cauter (2005) argues that the attacks of 9/11 and the global war on terror have added accelerant to the longer standing encapsulating effect of capitalism on the built environment and stoked fear in everyday life. People have increasingly come to travel between “safe” enclosed spaces like malls and security camera-guarded homes in a private car, protected by the steel capsule from contact with others. This withdrawal from others, who are often construed as dangerous, has been evident in flight from the close proximity of cities, the withdrawal into gated communities, and the suburban sprawl that goes with both. Suburban sprawl has been caused in the United States by a variety of policy choices by post-World War II administrations, policies intended to support the US car industry and to build a foreign policy that allowed for cheap oil to fuel it. Sprawl and car culture – particularly where the most common number of people in an auto is one – do not just separate people from each other, but encourage a psychological encapsulation which is a form of hyperindividualism. Solutions like carpooling or mass transit come to feel deeply uncomfortable, as does the option of getting on mass transit to sit or stand close to others.

In interviewing people about their lives with cars, we found that many used this logic of hyperindividualism to speak about why and how they live

as they do (Lutz and Fernandez 2010). So one woman told how she and her husband had moved from New York City to the suburbs with their single car but felt they needed a second one so that they could each leave the house in the morning whenever they wanted to get to the train station and on into New York for work. They each paid to park their cars in the station lot and absorbed the heavy cost of a second vehicle. But the wife said, "He takes an early train, I take a little later train." After a moment, she laughed and said "I'm not good at depending on him to drive me anywhere." Finally, and more seriously, she explained, "I'm very independent." While many describe their daily experiences on highly congested and poorly maintained American roads as highly stressful, others speak of their commuting time in the car as an oasis of peace between the social demands of their world spaces and their families. The pleasure of the car is associated for them with the pleasure of being alone.

The ubiquity of cell phone use in cars is one way that drivers attempt to accomplish some connection to their friends and family, often themselves encapsulated elsewhere alone in their homes, offices or cars. But these calls to others have the effect of further isolating the car driver or rider from the other people with whom he or she is sharing the road. The effects cascade further: the erratic and unsafe driving that results from this withdrawal into the cell phone conversation is something that further alienates and angers others around the driver in the road's public space. And the basic substrate with which all drivers begin is not so much the joy of mobility (although many drivers identify that as an occasional or common feeling), as the strain and anger of unpredictable and congested traffic. Surveys show lower levels of reported happiness in those with long commutes (Stutzer and Frey 2004), and many people identify their own car love with the past when roads were more open and their commutes not as long.

The average amount of time that Americans currently spend in their cars, as driver or passenger, is now 18 and a half hours per week. Under these conditions, both the cell phone and the radio take on heightened importance. The cell phone allows people to maintain relationships otherwise impossible because of time constraints and the radio allows for "interaction" with an imagined social world of news, friendly DJs, and talk radio. Talk radio exploded in the US in the 1980s and 1990s when the federal law called the Fairness Doctrine was repealed, a law which had dictated that radio and television stations air a balanced set of political points of view. As a result of that repeal, the 400 talk radio shows of 1990 had become 2,056 by 2008 (and the top eight such talk shows feature distinctly conservative voices). At least one reason for the growth of that format and the growth of the audience for that format is the amount of time people spend driving, hungry for diversion and, often, human connection.

The emotional tenor of the road, however, is often centered around frustration with traffic congestion, which has dramatically worsened over recent years as the number of cars in the US (now at a quarter billion) and miles driven (now at 3 trillion annually) have exploded and lanes of asphalt have not. Anger with other drivers, increasingly distracted by their in-car technology and increasingly frustrated with their own long and snarled commute, finds its mirror in the often angry or snarky hosts and callers on talk radio, even as the political terrain appears to be the subject of discussion. One man interviewed for this study wondered whether the fiery, hostile tone of much talk radio not so much mirrored the feelings of listeners as emotionally prepared them for the highway wars they would join as they left their driveways each day. While some talk radio in the US is more light-hearted, focused on sports or leavened with humor, drivers in their capsules choose from a range of emotionally tinged radio that reinforces not only their political points of view but the kind of emotional life that feels most comfortable and reasonable to them. The car as capsule is an emotional resonance chamber in which contemporary emotional qua political life is led.

THE FLUIDITY OF FEAR

Automakers do extensive research to understand how people emotionally connect to their car and to car buying. They not only work to understand the emotional response of consumers to the size and ferocity of a front grille, or the quirkiness of a new, more squared off chassis, but the emotional sense people make of the wider world they perceive themselves to inhabit. So the Ford Motor Company's Global Consumer Trends and Futuring Manager has the job of identifying and analyzing broad social trends and passing that information to marketing personnel to use in designing their campaigns for particular Ford models in particular countries. In making those assessments of trends and human consumer behavior, emotions play a key role.

Fear, in particular, is seen as a more powerful motivator than even desire itself in prompting purchases and other behaviors. The Ford manager we interviewed noted that Americans have long been, and are now increasingly concerned with, safety and security. The sources of the danger they perceive are often imagined or at least quite inflated (and often correlated with how much exposure they have to both TV news, and particular stations, and to talk radio). So it is that Americans have believed that the crime rate in their area is high and rising even when it is not (Glassner 1999). This manager's research also suggested to her that Americans' fear of terrorism has added a deep new level to their sense of insecurity. In addition, she said, people are taking action, including making certain kinds of purchases as a result of this fear because they increasingly have "mistrust in business and government [which] has

made people feel it is incumbent on the individual to take care of themselves.” This fear – of economic collapse, unemployment, or financial stress as well as of crime or terrorism – can structure how people approach a car purchase and approach particular models (with particular kinds of aggressive front grills¹ or excessive height and weight or security systems) or even prompt the purchase itself.

In marketing their cars, Ford’s managers draw on the knowledge that feeling safe in a particular car is not simply about whether it has the latest and best safety devices for crash prevention and crash survival. Instead, those feelings of safety or fear move very “fluidly,” in the words of one executive, between the inside and the outside of the car. So while the consumer might think that he is buying a GPS system to make it easier and safer for him to get around without fumbling with a paper map, on some level, he may be spending money for it because he has been led to believe that it will make him feel in control in a world perceived as dangerous. Certainly others have pointed out that the sales of a military-grade vehicle like the Hummer might reflect a militarized climate in a nation fighting two, and now three wars, but the marketers know that the well of anxiety which all vehicles at some level can tap into is a deep one in the contemporary United States.

Advertising in the US context often suggests as much. Says a recent TV ad, “In an unpredictable world, you can trust a Mercedes.” The OnStar system, an in-car crash and breakdown service, is sold as a fail-safe mechanism bringing help not just for car breakdown or crashes, but for a host of other troubles and dangers. OnStar’s promotional material lists the things it can help with: “Crash? Emergency of any kind? Out of gas? Flat tire? Stolen vehicle? Locked out? Crisis in your area? Fender bender? How are your vehicle’s key systems running? Need driving directions?” While the car was and is still marketed as a ride to freedom, it is now also marketed as a lifeboat in a sea of carjackings, hurricanes or terrorist attacks.

When such ads suggest that the car – not just OnStar but the OnStar equipped car – is a safe haven, the social consequences of this deployment of fear, particularly given the industry’s vast advertising exposures, are multiple and consequential. Walking, biking and transit are more likely to become anathema. Even yellow school buses have been abandoned by US families in large numbers over the last number of years. On many routes, those buses

1 A French marketing powerhouse who had great influence on the way in which a number of companies designed and marketed SUVs drew his aura of expertise from focus groups he ran with car owners asking for their responses to some of the more menacing grill designs then in development. He argued that the appeal he found they had among these interviewees came from “the reptilian part of the brain,” whose pleasure comes from dominating others on the road (Bradsher 2004). This reductive, physicalist and universalizing view of how emotional life is generated has immense purchase in the contemporary US.

ride to school mostly empty alongside parents driving their children to school along the same route; the rise in driving is the result of a fear of other people's children on the bus, and the socially constructed fear of bullying, as well as fears of strangers on the streets that their children might otherwise walk or bike. In fact, Americans between the ages of 3 and 34 are more likely to die in a car crash than in any other way, with the annual death toll near 40,000 until a recent decline in deaths with a recession-driven drop in driving.

The car remains one of the most striking illustrations of the degree to which fear is socially constructed and managed. The significance of this emotional management of the risk of death is at least twofold: it serves as a strong linchpin of the success of the global car industry and it exacerbates one of the largest public health issues of the contemporary world (WHO 2009).²

CONCLUSION

This article has identified a number of cultural and political economic factors that together have created the feelings associated with the automobile in the United States today. A few additional thoughts in conclusion suggest how the political, the economic, and the emotional are interconnected.

Both journalism and advertising play crucial roles in educating, ritualizing, and commodifying the emotions in every possible domain, from foreign policy to consumer behavior. It is not surprising, given the power and scale of the international car industry, that vehicle advertising is one of the largest sectors, and in the US, the largest sector in the ad industry. Treating advertising as a, or better the, modern myth-making machine, we can ask how it has shaped the trade in cars and oil through its shaping of ideas about how its targets ought to feel about the car they might own: free and modern, and in love.

The idea that Americans (and now Brazilians, Indians, and the Chinese) are embarked on a "love affair with the car" is a popular trope of advertising and car industry discourse. A Google search for that phrase turns up 2.4 million hits. The phrase provides Americans an important vehicle for understanding why they have made such deep household investments in this particular consumer good (which now is close to rivaling housing costs for the average US family) and why their government has made such deep political investments in making the car industry profitable. These investments include maneuvering for US manufacturers' access to domestic markets around the world, investments which have left most of them with few or weak mobility options besides the car. Journalists have also started using this emotional language – positing a naturalized romantic attachment to the car – to explain

2 See Moodie (2006) and Lamont and Lee (2015) for striking analyses of the relevance of the emotional stance towards the car crash dead for our understanding of contemporary modes of governance.

the massive shifts underway in the US mobility system. Americans are “falling out of love” with their cars, the common phrase now goes, as problems with traffic and gas prices become more severe and the car system has become more obviously unsustainable at household and environmental levels. The actual, ethnographically discoverable emotional relationships make this far too simplistic an understanding of what is happening to car affect: resignation to the politics and economics of limited alternatives to the corporate form (Benson and Kirsch 2010) and the car system as its outcome might be one important component of a richer explanation.

To understand the contemporary world, one must understand the car: like all material culture, the world can be found in the thing – in the case of the car, its steel-and-oil resource base, its labor and its state subsidies and enablements, its chemical and physical assaults on the body, environment, and climate of its users and bystanders (Miller 2005). The world-in-the-thing is also found via the desires, pleasures, and fears that are culturally constructed, relationally enacted, and driven by political economic forces. Like all commodities in the modern world, the car and its production, trade, use, and environmental footprint have deep international and transnational aspects and impacts.

To understand the car system and its emotional matrix anthropologically is to constantly recontextualize and widen the phenomena seen as relevant to understanding that system’s emotional life, and to work both from the bottom up and the elite top down in understanding it. The car system has local, national, transnational, and international dimensions and as the central commodity of the modern world, the car provides some unique perspectives on where an anthropology of emotional life can take us in understanding contemporary global issues of central importance.

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