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Automobile Subjects

TSU Seminar Series: Socio-spatial inequalities, transport and mobility
Theoretical background

- Poststructural concepts of space in human geography (Massey); works on power and space drawing on Foucault (Elden, Philo, Glasze etc)
- Foucauldian discourse theory and dispositif analysis (as discussed especially in German sociology by Bührmann/Schneider, Diaz-Bone, Keller etc.)
- Mobilities paradigm (Cresswell, Sheller, Urry etc.)
- Many empirical studies on automobile practices and the history of automobility.
Overview

1. Dispositif of automobility
2. The production of automobile subjects
3. ICE/ICT-Dispositif of mobility and the urban nomad
1. The dispositif of automobility

Foucault's term “dispositif” (apparatus):

"What I’m trying to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements. Secondly, what I am trying to identify in this apparatus is precisely the nature of the connection that can exist between these heterogeneous elements. [...] Thirdly, I understand by the term “apparatus” a sort of – shall we say – formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an urgent need. The apparatus thus has a dominant strategic function." (Foucault 1980 [1977]: 194f.)
1. The dispositif of automobility

➔ The dispositif defines the space of allowed and forbidden movements, of possible and visible as well as of unthinkable and obscured mobility landscapes and of normal and of deviant mobile subjects

➔ The urgence, to which automobility responds to is the movement problem, which lies at the heart of modern state formation

➔ Automobility as a governmental technology to maximize productive motion, consisting of material landscapes and social institutions, discourses and knowledge, formation and government of subjects and their practices
2. Automobile subjects

Dimensions of the subject-term (Foucault, Butler):
• Subjects / subjectivations as normative real fiction, as discursively and materially constituted opportunities
• Subjects as empirical beings

➔ Transportation landscapes, discourses and collective imaginaries concerning mobility are structuring the fields of action, presupposing and constituting different subjects which are positioned within power relations.
2. The automobile subject

Material governance

- Material automobility: cars and “motorscapes” (Edensor 2004), shape of contemporary cities etc.
- Ongoing enforcement of private automobility as part of “splintering urbanism” (Graham/Marvin 2001) and neoliberal governmentality
2. The automobile subject

Discursive subject formations

- Appearance of the car: framed as a means to escape constraints of a highly disciplined urban industrial order and de-individualising mass-transportation
- Germany after WWII: automobility as a sign of technological progress and modernity and as means of transportation of a non-collectivist society
2. The automobile subject/discursive subject formations

- Car symbolism of freedom, mobility, individualism, speed, power, privacy can be found in films, literature, popular music and advertisements
- Interweaving of discourse of good parenting with automobility: caring mother as car-driving mother
- Automobility and safety: specific distribution and range of responsibility
2. The automobile subject/discursive subject formations

Automobility in transport policy and spatial planning

- Roads framed as state service for the public → citizen as automobile citizen
- Provision of public transport framed as welfare policy → old, young, poor, handicapped citizen as deviant citizen needing subsidies

- Car driver as productive subject
- Hidden social embedding of the subject
2. The automobile subject

Shaping the driving body

- “motion and emotion (…) are kinaesthetically intertwined and produced together through a conjunction of bodies, technologies and cultural practices” (Sheller 2004: 227)
- Road safety education as part of school education: specific power hierarchy and corresponding distribution of responsibility of moving bodies
2. The automobile subject

Empirical subjects – automobile practices

- Continuous increase of privately owned cars in Europe after WWII
- Systematic differences between urban and rural areas
- Multiple interactions between social inequalities and automobile practices
- Signs of decline of automobility: smart phone has replaced the car as a prime object of material aspirations
2. The automobile subject

Empirical subjects – automobile practices

Proportion of young people (age 20 to 29) holding a drivers licence and living in a household with private car (ifmo 2011)

Abbildung 2: Anteil junger Menschen (Alter 20 bis 29) mit Führerschein und Pkw im Haushalt (Datenquellen: 8, 9, 13–19)
3. Urban nomads – ICE/ICT mobility

- Nomadic figure produced in public discourses: highly geographically mobile, equipped with ICTs
  - Western knowledge worker from the middle or upper classes
  - Obscuring of material, geographical and social exclusions
3. Urban nomads – ICE/ICT mobility

- Nomad as proto-type of an accelerated mobilising modernity, normalising uninterrupted and ubiquitous availability, temporal blurring of work and leisure
- Flip side: sedentary localised immobile subject associated as being unproductive, out of time and rigid
- Enhancement of the modern free rational and productive subject
“As Marx repeatedly pointed out, the worker was to be freed from the land through the removal of long-standing rights which enabled a limited self-subsistence, and freed for exploitation in the labour market through punitive sanctions against gambling, vagrancy and the like which precluded any and all legitimate means of survival other than waged labour. Simultaneously, the worker was to be individualized: freed from collective bonds through laws against combinations and collective action. Once the worker was individualized and wage labour generalized, the dull compulsion of the labour market would combine with the disciplinary organization of time, space and activity in the factory, mill and mine to produce the forms of life and modes of individuality in which docile and utilizable labour would present itself at the workplace 'of its own free will'.” (Rose 1999: 70)
References


