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978-0-521-69130-7 - Automobile Politics: Ecology and Cultural Political Economy

Matthew Paterson

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Automobile Politics

The car – and the range of social and political institutions which sustains its dominance – plays an important role in many of the environmental problems faced by contemporary society. But in order to understand the possibilities for moving towards sustainability and ‘greening cars’, it is first necessary to understand the political forces that have made the car so dominant. This book identifies these forces as a combination of political economy and cultural politics. From the early twentieth century, the car became central to the organisation of capitalism and deeply embedded in individual identities, providing people with a source of value and meaning, but in a way which was broadly consistent with social imperatives for mobility. Projects for sustainability to reduce the environmental impacts of cars are therefore constrained by these forces, but must deal with them in order to shape and achieve their goals.

Matthew Paterson is Professor of Political Science in the School of Political Studies at the University of Ottawa. He is the author of *Understanding Global Environmental Politics: Domination, Accumulation, Resistance* (2000), *Energy Exporters and Climate Change* (with Peter Kassler, 1997) and *Global Warming and Global Politics* (1996).

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Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	<i>page</i> vi
<i>Preface</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>List of acronyms</i>	xi
1 Introduction: (auto)mobility, ecology and global politics	1
2 Automobility and its discontents	32
3 Don't stop movin': the pro-car backlash	61
4 Automobile political economy	91
5 The car's cultural politics: producing the (auto)mobile subject	121
6 Swampy fever, Mondeo Man	166
7 Greening automobility?	192
8 Conclusions	225
<i>References</i>	236
<i>Index</i>	267

Figures

1	‘China opens up’	<i>page 2</i>
2	‘No stumps 4 oil’	55
3	‘So it’s massively over-engineered for the school run’	150
4	‘Unlimited access’	156
5	‘Something under your skin’	161
6	‘Swampy in Armani’	174

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[More information](#)

Preface

At the personal level, this book is perhaps the outcome of attempts to think more thoroughly about things which have occupied me on a daily basis since I started cycling to school at around the age of seven. At some point in time, I'm not clear when, I realised that this daily act of cycling had helped to form my political consciousness. I think that as an undergraduate in politics, with a number of feminist friends helping make the 'personal is political' connection, I started to realise that what I had taken for granted as just 'how I get about' had both political consequences and shaped how I experienced the political world. I realised that the simultaneous exhilaration of cycling in cities, with the constant potential for violence produced by, well, those bloody cars, and the sense of tension or anger that this engendered, helped me come to see that there was a daily, infrastructural, organisation of movement both by myself and by forces beyond my immediate control, even as I helped to produce them (from which I was thus definitely 'alienated' in the proper sense – I was reading Marx on 'estrangement' at around this time). So while the environmental benefits in the narrow technical sense were always there, as arguments to be produced when necessary to persuade, it was the visceral, experiential side that in an important sense produced in me a politics of automobility. It is precisely the strange realisation (for a white, middle-class man, in particular) that something I took for granted actually placed me in a marginal situation – relegated to the gutters, my needs neglected by the planning system, my safety constantly threatened – which produced a politicisation out of a banal act.

But cycling has also served as a key test case in distinguishing a properly Green politics from other sorts of transport politics. As I articulated this sense, mostly internally to myself or in the pub with friends, over the next decade or so, it became increasingly clear to me that if you spoke to someone who didn't like cars but came from the 'traditional left', for want of a better phrase, their contrast would

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[More information](#)

always be with public transport. For me, while promoting public transport is all well and good it never excites in the way that a bike does, and for me this speaks to the way that Green ideology makes the personal–political connection in a way that social democracy does not, as well as the way that Greens tend to resolve an individual/community tension in very different, more libertarian ways than do social democrats. The bike requires you to be active, to be an agent, in the way that you produce your own life and contribute to the production of a particular kind of world around you. The bus or the train solves the transport/environment problem through collectivisation, while the bike solves it through personal responsibility for reducing one's wants. Now it matters little for the argument of this book which of these you prefer, but it does show that how we experience transport helps to shape (and be shaped by) our overall political orientation.

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[More information](#)

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This book is the product of work on cars and environmental politics which began in around 1996. During the course of time I have thus accumulated an enormous number of debts. Perhaps the one most important to acknowledge is the ten years I spent at Keele University, with some of the most enjoyable colleagues one could wish to be around and, for the work that I do, perhaps still the best combination of interesting scholars in both environmental politics and critical International Relations to be found anywhere in the world. John Barry, Brian Doherty, Andrew Linklater, John Macmillan, Kara Shaw, Jill Steans, Hidemi Suganami, John Vogler and Rob Walker all deserve a particular mention.

Papers which have become part of this book have been presented to audiences at Keele University, Warwick University, the University of Ottawa, the British International Studies Association Annual Conference (1998), the AUTO21 conference in Ottawa (2003) and Carleton University. I am grateful to the attention given by all of those audiences. I benefited from a two-month stay at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University during 2001 and in particular from the hospitality of Maureen Molot. Parts of the book have also been read variously by John Barry, Simon Dalby, Andy Dobson, Brian Doherty, Steve Hinchliffe, Deborah Mantle, Pete Newell, Paul Saurette, Julian Saurin, Ben Seel, Kara Shaw, Hidemi Suganami, Rob Walker, two anonymous reviewers for Cambridge University Press – and I am certain others whom I am unable to remember and to whom I can only apologise. Thank you to all for your critical comments and enthusiastic support. Thank you also to Jo VanEvery, Andreas Krebs and especially Chris Green for suggestions of appropriate songs to discuss in chapter 5. My thoughts on cars and global environmental politics have also been sustained by the participants in several years of my ‘Car trouble: globalisation, hegemony and resistance’ final-year seminar course at Keele University and the

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

MA course I taught on ‘The political economy of the automobile’ in the Winter semester 2004 at Carleton University’s Institute of Political Economy. Paul Evans, Andreas Janz, Susan Kenyon and Emre Uckardesler stand out in particular for their engagement with this material. Finally, my thoughts on the subject have also been enriched enormously through working with Steffen Böhm, Campbell Jones and Chris Land as we co-organised the Automobility conference at Keele in 2002, and then as we co-edited the book *Against Automobility* which came out of the papers from that conference.

Some of the material in this book has already been published. For the most part, it has been heavily reworked. A few paragraphs which appear in each of chapters 2 and 4 first appeared in ‘Car Culture and Global Environmental Politics’, *Review of International Studies*, 26, 2000: 253–70 and are reproduced by permission of Cambridge University Press. Several paragraphs in chapter 5 first appeared in chapter 5 of my *Understanding Global Environmental Politics* (London: Palgrave, 2000) and are reproduced by permission of Palgrave. The passage discussing adverts from the BMW advert onwards in chapter 5 first appeared in Matthew Paterson and Simon Dalby, ‘Empire’s Ecological Tyreprints’, *Environmental Politics*, 15, 1, 2006: 1–22 and thanks are due to Simon Dalby and to Taylor & Francis for permission to reproduce it. The material on ‘Swampy fever’ in chapter 6 was first published as ‘Swampy Fever’, in Benjamin Seel, Matthew Paterson and Brian Doherty (eds.), *Direct Action in British Environmentalism* (London: Routledge, 2000) and thanks are due to Ben, Brian and Routledge, for permission to re-use it. An earlier paper which became the basis for chapter 7 was presented to the AUTO21 conference in Ottawa (2003) and published as part of the proceedings of that conference and thanks are due to Maureen Molot for permission to reproduce the passages which remain as traces from it.

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Acronyms

AA	Automobile Association
ABD	Association of British Drivers
AEI	American Enterprise Institute
BRF	British Roads Federation
CEI	Competitive Enterprise Institute
CIT	Commission for Integrated Transport
CJA	Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994
CNG	compressed natural gas
CVC	Coalition for Vehicle Choice
DBFO	Design, Build, Finance, Operate
DETR	Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, now
DEFRA	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
DfT	Department for Transport
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
EU	European Union
FCCC	Framework Convention on Climate Change
FIA	Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile
FoE	Friends of the Earth
GCC	Global Climate Coalition
GDP	gross domestic product
ghg	greenhouse gas
GM	General Motors
I&M	Inspection and Maintenance
ICE	internal combustion engine
IPCC	International Panel on Climate Change
IPE	International Political Economy
IR	International Relations
IT	information technologies
JIT	just-in-time
LNG	liquified natural gas

LPG	liquified petroleum gas
MAD	Motorists Against Detection
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NCC	National Consumer Council
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NICs	Newly Industrialising Countries
NIMBY	Not In My Back Yard
NMAA	National Motorists Association of Australia
NOPE	Not on Planet Earth
OPEC	Organisation of Petroleum-Exporting States
PEM	Proton Exchange Membrane
PFI	Private Finance Initiative
R&D	research and development
RTS	Reclaim the Streets
SACTRA	Standing Advisory Committee on Trunk Road Assessment
SMMT	Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders
SUV	sports utility vehicle
VOCs	Volatile Organic Compounds
WCC	World Council of Churches
WMD	weapons of mass destruction
WRI	World Resources Institute