1 *Introduction: (auto)mobility, ecology and global politics*

I get around just as nature intended – in a car.
(Meg Ryan, in *French Kiss*)[1]

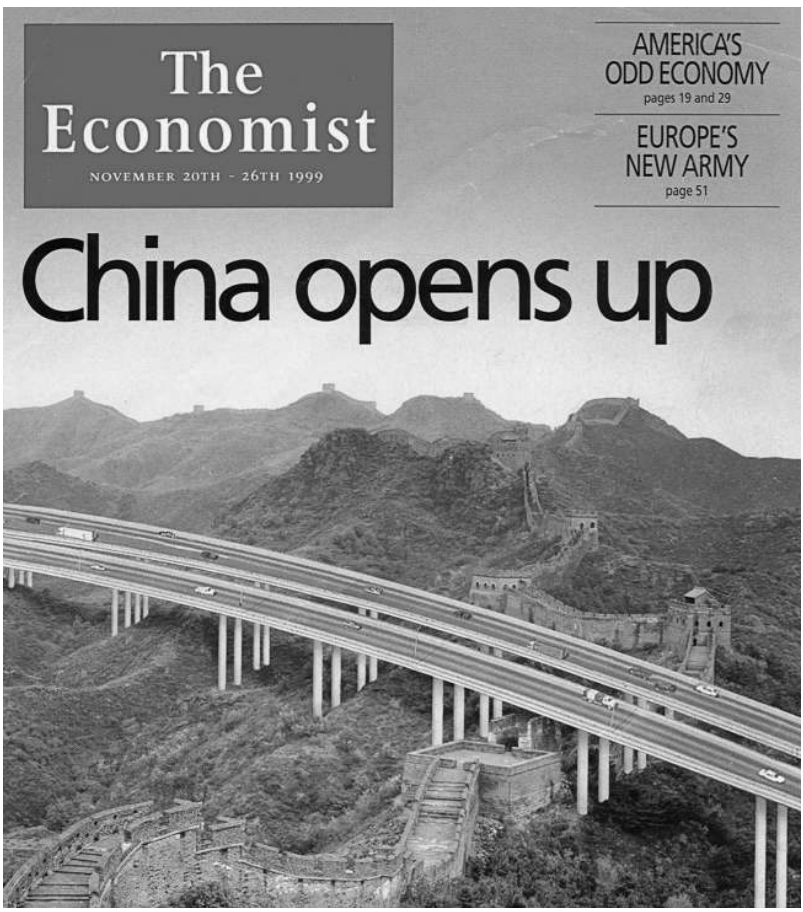
Roads girdle the globe
We all safe in your concrete robe
Hail mother motor
Hail piston rotor
Hail wheel.
(XTC, 'Roads Girdle the Globe', *Drums and Wires*, Virgin Music, 1979)

The problems of movement

In November 1999, *The Economist* had a striking front cover announcing a story about the opening up of the Chinese economy (see figure 1).[2] The image used to convey the sense of the story was a superimposition of a six-lane freeway on the Great Wall of China. A number of juxtapositions, with a multitude of meanings, can be discerned in this image. The new is contrasted with the ancient. The straight lines and flat spaces of modernity, with a modernist domination of nature and landscape, are imposed on the curves involved in an ancient accommodation with

[1] The irony of this statement in the context of this book is that it is made while Ryan's character is on a plane about to take off. She contrasts the car as natural to the aeroplane of which she is terrified, while of course air travel (for rich Westerners at least) has become naturalised in the same manner as the car.

[2] 'China opens up', *The Economist* (20–26 November 1999). As Hooper shows in detail (Hooper 2001, esp. chapters 4 and 5), *The Economist* is a key publication articulating the interests and values of a largely Anglo-American business elite (Hooper 2001: 117) and one of the key proponents of 'globalisation' (*ibid*.: 118), representing it as the new 'frontier' (*ibid*.: 160–3).



1 'China opens up'
Source: Reproduced by permission of *The Economist*.

physical–geographical features.[3] The physical flows, of both goods and people in general, and across borders in particular, which characterise contemporary political life are displayed transgressing the rigid spatial

[3] This is not the first time *The Economist* has used such an image. The cover of one of its periodic surveys, 'a survey on living with the car', entitled 'Taming the beast' (20 June 1996), similarly superimposed an image of the M25 London Orbital motorway on a painting of a bucolic scene from the Italian renaissance. The geopolitics of the China cover is missing but otherwise the juxtaposition of ancient–modern, 'nature'– 'technology' and so on, is strikingly similar.

separations of empire and nation-state invoked by the Wall. The Wall was, of course, built in the Early Han dynasty to keep out invading hordes (the Hsiung-nu), defined by their mobility in opposition to the stability and fixity of the Empire (Lattimore 1962).

The Economist's cover thus constructs a particular sense of a set of connections between what 'progress' is widely seen to entail and mobility or movement. But it is also more specific: it is the mass mobility of the car which is invoked as the image of progress, opening up spaces previously closed to trade. China's 'opening up' is depicted as the precise moment in which cars, and the mobility they (in the dominant understanding at least) make possible, are allowed to cross the border into and out of China, while by (probably inadvertent) contrast America has an 'odd economy' (whatever that means) and Europe focuses on developing an army. The fact that the Wall is on the ancient northern border of (Han-dynasty) China in an area where the nearest Chinese border (now further to the north) is with Mongolia is perhaps ironic, but tangential to the purposes here. The 'real' freeway being planned which will realise the image in the cover, is perhaps the 60 km bridge being planned to cross the South China Sea between Hong Kong and Zhuhai (Castells 2000: 439), the principal location of China's actual 'opening'. Nevertheless, as part of such an opening, the Wall has been rebranded, a monument laid beside it in 1989 declaring: 'once intended to ward off enemy attacks, today it brings together the peoples of the world. The Great Wall, may it continue to act as a symbol of friendship for future generations' (quoted in Mattelart 2000: 121).

For those with an interest in the 'classics' of western thought, it conjures up Marx and Engels' statement that 'the cheap prices of its [the bourgeoisie's] commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese Walls' (Marx and Engels 1848/1967: 84). For the ecologically inclined, the immediate connection is to the question of 'what happens if the Chinese all have cars?', often invoked (always highly problematically, in terms of its ethics and politics) in western debates surrounding consumption levels, climate change, or environmental politics more generally (Brown and Flavin 1996; Tunali 1996; Richard Smith 1997). The Chinese state clearly recognises the symbolism here, and how it is intertwined with economic strategy, since it has started to ban bicycles from certain Beijing streets in favour of cars, in part 'to promote the country's fledgling automobile industry' (Chu 1998). Cars at the same time symbolised for some the downside of

China's 'opening'. One of the touchstones for hostility to China's new rich, made so by the 'opening', has been what is known as the 'BMW collision affair'. A BMW driver escaped punishment for killing a pedestrian, which symbolised for many the inequalities inherent in the 'opening' to the global economy (e.g. Bodeen 2004; Engler 2004).

However we read *The Economist* cover, at its heart is the question of movement. The transgression of boundaries is taken as the key to 'modernisation', and that transgression is represented through the freeway. This symbolism is not an accident. Movement is at the heart of all contemporary political practices, whether or not articulated through the buzzword of 'globalisation': the physical movement of people, goods, missiles, animals, or occasionally territory, as well as the virtual movement of electrons, images, information and ideas. Movement or mobility has also been a symbolic or discursive force underpinning modern political practices, although its importance is usually unacknowledged, taken for granted, in discussions of the dynamics of global politics in either academic debates or public discourse. Where movement appears explicitly it usually appears in one of two forms. At times it appears as a question of how 'we' (the character of the 'we' here varies according to the context) prevent certain forms of movement – migrants in nationalist discourse, elephant tusks in conservationist discourse, CFCs in environmentalist discourse. More commonly it appears as a question of how the movement – of fruit, car components, images, dollars, explosives, etc. – can be accelerated. The imperatives of contemporary political economy – for firms to improve their competitiveness, for states to improve their position in a global political–economic hierarchy, or for individuals to meet their workplace performance targets – all require continuous investment in a variety of technologies of movement.

We can perhaps start with conventional accounts of international politics. Warfare has been fundamentally transformed by technologies of movement: one of the most famous (but, of course, highly contested) accounts of the First World War's origins is that it was caused by train timetables (Taylor 1969). Since train systems require a high degree of co-ordination and logistical precision, once a decision to mobilise troops was made a war was inevitable (*ibid.*). The emergence of armoured vehicles powered by internal combustion engines (ICEs) is also conventionally thought of as being one of the decisive elements in precipitating the end of the First World War (Virilio 1986). The

emergence of aeroplanes by the 1930s is similarly thought to have shaped the strategic possibilities available to military planners in the Second World War, facilitating both the fast overwhelming attack of '*Blitzkrieg*' and the ongoing attrition-at-a-distance of strategic bombing campaigns. In contemporary warfare, the crucial strategic advantage is with those able to penetrate air forces well into 'enemy' territory, to move troops at speed and to use virtual mobility – through surveillance and communications technologies – to full effect (Der Derian 1992, 2001).

The system of multilateral regimes currently in place to govern politics between states in the interstate system is, of course, highly dependent on extensive physical movement of diplomats, advisors, negotiators and lobbyists around the world, between their capital cities and the sites of negotiations. The irony of virtually continual dialogue between officials from many countries on climate change, moving from site to site as different governments host meetings,[4] at the same time contributing significant amounts of CO_2 to the atmosphere, is lost on few commentators.

Movement has perhaps been most obviously demonstrated in economic flows: those of food, raw materials, component parts and finished goods are all highly visible. The flow of people as tourists now constitutes the largest industry in the world (at least, according to the rhetoric of the tourist trade). But at the same time they are taken for granted, premised on the assumptions of classical economics which renders them the natural result of laws of comparative advantage. Only recently has it begun to be questioned whether it is rational for apples to be imported from Chile and New Zealand to the United Kingdom while apples growing on trees in Herefordshire, Suffolk, Somerset or Kent are left rotting on the ground (Monbiot 2004).

We can thus say, with Virilio (1986), that contemporary societies can be defined as *dromocratic*: ruled by movement and acceleration. Movement is not only *central* to contemporary politics – in the sense that many things would not happen without it – it is a *ruling principle* of contemporary life. If the Chinese state is to become a full member of the 'international community' it must subject itself unhindered

[4] For example, after the collapse of the formal negotiations in the Hague in November 2000 negotiators from OECD countries moved straight to Ottawa and then to Oslo for more meetings to try to resolve US–EU differences.

mobility. The central tension underlying what Virilio terms 'dromocratic' politics is that between the impulses of the masses for revolutionary action and the strategies undertaken by the military, the bourgeoisie and state builders (all closely interlinked) to repress the revolution while channelling the energy of the 'mobile mass' (the title of his opening chapter is 'From street fight to State right'). These impulses and strategies are all interpreted as principally orientations to *movement* – hence 'dromocratic' – which becomes simultaneously the rule *of* movement (mobility becomes an 'obligation'), *over* movement (it needs to be controlled and channelled) and *through* movement (it is through organising people's mobility that rulers pursue their particular projects and the maintenance of their power in general). In Virilio's words:

> The State's political power . . . is the polis, the police, in other words highway surveillance . . . since the dawn of the bourgeois revolution, the political discourse has been no more than a series of more or less conscious repetitions of the old communal poliorcetics [siegecraft], confusing social order with the control of traffic (of people, of goods), and revolution, revolt, with traffic jams, illegal parking, multiple crashes, collisions. (Virilio 1986: 14)

But 'dromocracy' is at the same time highly problematic, and does not go uncontested. We might problematise contemporary movement and mobility in global politics in several ways. The most prevalent is through debates about migration. For much of the twentieth century, the most widespread restrictions on movement were on capital (understood as finance). In the Bretton Woods period (post-1945) through to the early 1970s the movement of things and people was facilitated and accelerated while there were significant controls on the movements of money. But since the collapse of Bretton Woods and the onset of 'globalisation' the places of money and people in this scheme have been reversed. We are now faced with a securitisation of the movement of people where the contradictions in neoliberal globalisation are at their most extreme. Restrictions on the movements of people are increasing everywhere, and with them an intensification of the policing of borders on more or less obviously racialised lines (Bigo 2002; Walters 2002; Salter 2004).

In neoliberal globalisation's boost to the acceleration of global flows of dollars, microchips and so on, but also in the critical debates about the 'securitisation of movement', the unacknowledged ecology of these movements of both things and people is something that should be

highlighted. Embedded in globalising processes, and necessary for their reproduction, is a set of movements which are irreducibly physical and as such represent and enact flows of soil, water, food, minerals, energy, toxic waste and so on. For the most part, these represent an appropriation by a 'global middle class' of the subsistence potential of many of the world's poorest regions, and thus have both an ecological and a global justice dimension. The majority of these ecologically significant movements are daily and local yet are also intertwined with globalising processes: as a means to access consumption items produced and distributed transnationally; as consumption items (cars) with a high degree of transnational production and global symbolism; and as a potential for national integration into a global economy (transport infrastructure).

Such movements are thus simultaneously three things:

- First, they are necessary conditions of the reproduction of a globalising capitalism. They represent precisely the site where M–M′ cycles (those from investment, to production, to distribution, sale and consumption, to profit, to further investment) of various sorts are intensifying: the sites of both basic commodification (the bringing of new things – from genes to exotic fruits – to the marketplace) and heightened extraction of surplus value as low-wage labour is exploited in the name of 'comparative advantage'.
- Second, they are celebrated in terms of the 'freedom' of consumers, associated with progress and so on. This is most obvious in the term 'automobility' – the conjoining of 'autonomy' and 'mobility' in such a way as to legitimise the imperatives for movement that underpin modernity in general and globalisation in particular (a concept we shall develop later). Cars, the principal (although not the only) artefact of automobility, are the main daily form of movement for the world's upper-middle class, a significant element in a globalising economy and a signifier of global cultural convergence (as in Friedman's (2000) paean, which begins with the Lexus as the signifier of globalisation) and have particularly intensive ecological impacts and implications for global justice.
- Third, such movements are the very things that are accelerating the twin crises of ecological degradation and global injustice, especially famines. The throughput of energy embedded in cars (and, increasingly, aeroplanes) but also in the various commodities transported round the world to satisfy the consumer 'desires' of the global middle

> class, combined with relentless corporate attempts to drive down costs (where energy is itself underpriced), is a principal 'driver' of world-wide climate change, acid rain, urban air pollution and so on. The movement of foods (and cut flowers, etc.) and the embedded water and (degraded) soil they spring from makes a significant contribution to famines and starvation in many parts of the world – and, of course, the energy question provides, for many at least, a principal explanation for geopolitical adventures in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Movement is thus at the heart of *political economy*, *cultural politics* and *environmental politics*, the intersection of three themes or fields which inform the basic points of departure for this book. Movement is thus fundementally problematic, by contrast with proponents of neoliberal globalisation who seek to accelerate all movement, with nationalists–racists who wish to restrict movements of people across borders but accept many other forms of movement, or with traditional leftists who wish to restrict movements of capital but resist the racism in anti-migrant discourse. At the same time as contemporary forms of movement are fundamental to current political practice they operate on an (ever-increasing) scale which cannot be continued indefinitely. 'Carboniferous capitalism' (Mumford 1934; Dalby 2002), and the automobility which gives it expression in daily life, requires continually increasing consumption of fuels which have both a limited lifespan and are at the heart of contemporary environmental change which threatens radically to alter the conditions of existence of the large majority of humanity and the other organisms which inhabit the planet.

The particular way that the focus on movement in many discourses across the social sciences is framed, however, tends to obscure this aspect. As Urry (2004) suggests in the context of sociology, 'the car is rarely discussed in the "globalization literature", although its specific character of domination is more systemic and awesome in its consequences than what are normally viewed as constitutive technologies of the global' (2004: 25). This is partly because the focus on mobility has tended to undermine the notion of fixed, clearly bounded societies, economies, cultures, or polities and has thus been on those movements which transgress borders (trade, migrants and so on). It is partly also because of a general tendency to analyse and focus on the extraordinary, the spectacular, or the novel and innovative at the expense of the

mundane, the quotidian. The weakness Urry identifies in sociological discourse is similar in much contemporary debate in politics. As we shall see, the recent emphasis on movement in International Relations (IR) has similar weaknesses – concerned principally with undermining a statist conception of global politics, it ends up as a consequence uncritically celebrating movement. But the principal movements carried out on a daily basis are just as important in the reproduction of particular sorts of social and political order, and just because they do not physically cross established borders it does not mean that they are not in an important sense 'globally' organised.

Cars are globally the predominant daily form of mobility. Even for those who do not use a car, the conditions under which we move around are shaped fundamentally by car-led development strategies. Focusing on cars also demonstrates the ecological dimension to contemporary obsessions with mobility, with mass car use being at the root of a spectrum of ecological problems including urban air pollution, resource depletion for a wide range of materials (oil, iron, platinum, rubber, among others), climate change, soil degradation and loss of agricultural land. Such problems have significant impacts on human health but also present a substantial element in the fundamental unsustainability of contemporary societies.

This unsustainability of automobility is not uncontested. I discuss many of the arguments in chapter 2 in particular, but also elsewhere in this book. The initial stimulus for my interest in the questions I explore here is still a good illustration of the contested arena; in the early 1990s automobility was contested in the United Kingdom (in particular) in a most radical manner and in ways highly suggestive of precisely what is at stake in the politics of automobility.[5] From 1992 onwards,

[5] I should acknowledge that the material for the book comes predominantly from the United Kingdom and the United States. This is in part because I come from the United Kingdom and was living and working there while most of the research for the book was carried out, and because most of the literature on cars is American in orientation. There are obvious limitations of this focus. However, while all countries will have their specific nature in terms of car cultures, public policy, patterns of economic development, forms of political resistance and so on, I would argue that the striking similarities across countries, especially in terms of the political forces 'driving' car-dominated development, suggest that to talk of a 'global politics of automobility' is legitimate. It is not the aim of this book to provide a comparative analysis of different countries, but to suggest that a focus on the similarities is illuminating.

stimulated by the UK government's roads building programme and the perceived weakness of traditional environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs), a new generation of activists adopted direct action methods, first to oppose road building projects, then to reclaim urban space from the car and promote alternative forms of urban living. These protests involved a range of strategies, from physical occupation of construction sites, occupation of offices of companies involved in the projects, construction and habitation of protest camps, destruction of machinery, through to, in the most high-profile (and for many inspiring) cases, the construction of elaborate walkways between trees to protect woodland to be cleared for road construction (as at the Newbury Bypass and elsewhere), recreation of houses to be demolished as art work (in the M11 protest) and creation of networks of fragile tunnels under proposed construction sites (as in Fairmile at the A30 protest) (on the roads protests generally, see Seel *et al*. 2000).

The roads protests provide an important illustration of what is at stake in contesting automobility. They gradually moved from objections to particular impacts of car-led development – such as loss of forests or other ecosystems or valued countryside, loss of community and collective space in cities – to a total critique of automobility itself as implicated in a whole range of problems and contradictions intrinsic to modern society. The protests widened from objecting to road building, to objecting to the dominance of cars in cities, to mobilisation against neoliberal globalisation (one of the trajectories of Reclaim the Streets, a major network involved in anti-car activism, was towards 'Reclaim the summit' direct action at the Birmingham G8 summit in 1998) and to providing alternative models of modern urban life centred around community rather than commuting, place rather than mobility. They thus suggest that what is at stake in contesting automobility is precisely the need to question modern societies and polities themselves. They are also suggestive at times of re-articulations of global politics. UK anti-globalisation activism is one example, and the articulation by some of anti-roads actions in terms of global obligations concerning climate change (see, for example, www.risingtide.org.uk) is another. More unexpected forms of international solidarity and politics have also arisen. Protesters from Colombia visited the Newbury Bypass protest; while the Newbury protesters were amazed that the Colombians had actually managed to stop the Pan American Highway going through their territory, and that they had not been beaten by security guards and