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# Three Ages of the Automobile

## The Cultural Logics of the Car

*David Gartman*

**J**OHAN URRY (2000: 57–64) has recently changed the way we think about automobiles with his idea of automobility. With this concept focused on movement and process, he suggests that sociologists abandon their idea of the car as a thing, a simple object of production and consumption, and look at it as a system of interlocking social and technical practices that has reconfigured civil society. Among the dimensions of this system of automobility Urry includes the car as manufactured object, item of individual consumption, machinic (economic) complex, environmental agent, form of mobility and dominant cultural discourse. These dimensions have interacted to produce mobile civil societies with new kinds of space, time, dwelling and interaction (Urry, 2000: 190–3; Urry, 2004).

Without losing sight of the interdependence of these dimensions, I will focus on one of them – the automobile as an item of individual consumption in a broader culture of consumerism that charges objects with meanings and identities beyond their immediate utility. I hope to show that as a consumer object, the auto embodies a cultural logic that is relatively autonomous from and often contradictory to other dimensions of automobility. This does not mean, however, that this cultural dimension is independent. Revealing the ultimate interdependence of the dimensions of automobility, I argue that the emergence of the cultural logic of a particular automotive age is influenced by the exigencies of auto production and use. However, as this cultural logic grows and intensifies its effects on society, it ultimately comes into contradiction with itself and its concomitant practices of production and use, giving rise to a new configuration of automobility. Thus, the major purpose of my analysis is to add a dynamic dimension to the concept of automobility, to reveal a developing and contradictory system with changing effects on society.

In the following, I argue that there have been three ages of the

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automobile in the 20th century, each defined by a unique cultural logic of meaning and identity. To conceptualize these different logics I draw on three sociological theories of consumption. Pierre Bourdieu conceives of consumption as a game of distinction, in which different classes compete for cultural capital or status honor. For him, the automobile is a distinctive status symbol, marking off but ultimately misrecognizing the inequalities of class society. The Frankfurt School also argues that the culture of mass consumption legitimates class differences, not by displaying these differences in a symbolic hierarchy, as Bourdieu holds, but by hiding them altogether. For Theodor Adorno in particular, consumer commodities like the automobile obscure the class relations of their production behind reified facades of mass individuality, giving consumers different quantities of the same illusions to compensate for the denials of mass production. Finally, theorists of postmodernism argue that the diversity and individuality of consumer commodities undermine old class identities by forming the basis for fragmented subcultures. For them the car and its subcultures are part of a fragmented, liberated society of 'difference' that follows the collapse of modernity.

Although each theory claims to capture the one and only cultural logic of consumerism in modern societies, I hold that, with respect to the automobile at least, each is valid for only a specific historical period or age. This does not mean, however, that these successive logics are totally independent and completely annihilate the preceding ones. The relationship between them is best conceived as dialectical, in the original Hegelian sense (see Marcuse, 1960). Each stage and its logic represents not a replacement but a development of the preceding one. The problems and contradictions of the earlier stage are transcended in the later one – that is to say, they are incorporated into and overcome by a higher stage of development, without being solved in any final sense. So the old logic survives in the new, but in a higher form of development. In a sense, then, I postulate not a succession but a *progression* of stages, without postulating, as do Hegel and Marx, some end point or purpose to this historical progression. There is, however, a common theme or impulse underlying all three stages – the search for individual identity within a capitalist society that holds out the promise of autonomy but simultaneously denies it in the heteronomy of the economy.

Empirically, the periodization of these three ages is based mainly on my research on the automobile in American society, presented in my book *Auto Opium* (Gartman, 1994). However, I will also cite studies that lead me to believe that a similar progression of ages occurs in other countries, especially Britain, although the timing may be different. This article extends my previous research historically as well as nationally. While *Auto Opium* concentrates on the years up to 1970, here I include an overview of the last 30 years under the rubrics of postmodernism and post-Fordism. Thus, through a focus on the cultural logics of the car, I hope to show that automobility is a dynamic and contradictory system, whose effects on society are pervasive and ever-changing.

### The Age of Class Distinction: Bourdieu and Craft Production

The automobile entered American society in the late 19th century, a time of economic crisis and class conflict with which the vehicle was inevitably associated. The auto marked out these increasingly contentious class divisions, for its high price (\$600 to \$7500) put ownership beyond the reach of all but the high bourgeoisie. These prices were the result of a skilled, craft labor process, in which the aesthetic appearance of these cars was as important as their mechanical function. Their bodies, in particular, were works of the coach-building art, produced in elaborate styles to match the tastes of the upper classes. Not only the production but also the use of these early cars solidified their association with class privilege. In the United States, where freedom had always been conflated with geographic movement, autos gave their wealthy owners the freedom of a rapid, flexible and individual form of mobility, unencumbered by the collective regimentation of railway timetables and itineraries. But these beautiful, expensive vehicles were more often used not for practical transport but for leisure activities and public ostentation. They became an essential accessory of the leisure class, which used them for touring, racing and parading down fashionable boulevards. Consequently, the automobile quickly became defined in American culture as an instrument of freedom and leisure, and a symbol of the wealth that removed an entire class of people from the mundane concerns of work and functional effort.

The lower classes reacted to this symbolism with hostility and resentment. Farmers resented the ‘freedom’ of wealthy auto owners to intrude into rural communities, not only for the damage they did to land and livestock but also because they symbolized urban big-business interests, whose abuses caused radical agrarian protests during this period. Urban workers also resented bourgeois automobilists on city streets, where they disrupted street life and symbolized this class’s arrogant disregard for workers’ lives and livelihoods. At the same time, workers envied this possession of the rich, as indicated by the crowds that were attracted to movie theaters by early films featuring auto races and parades. In 1906 Woodrow Wilson worried about the class-divisive effect of the car, stating: ‘Nothing has spread Socialistic feeling in this country more than the use of automobiles’ (*New York Times*, 1906: 12). Sean O’Connell (1998: 11–42, 77–111) finds similar meanings of class privilege, leisure and freedom of mobility in the early period of the car in British society.

These early cultural meanings of automobility, conditioned by the car’s production and use, are congruent with Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of consumption as class distinction, developed in his book *Distinction* (1984). Building an elegant and subtle structural theory on the simple conception of consumer goods as status symbols, he argues that cultural objects carry socially constructed meanings that testify to an individual’s class position. But the symbolic connection between economic class and cultural taste is not direct but mediated by an embodied habitus, a set of durable

predispositions and ways of seeing the world. Thus, for example, the ample economic capital of the bourgeoisie determines a life removed from mundane material needs and the functions of things. This life determines a habitus that inclines members of this class toward cultural goods that reveal this distance from necessity by their formalization and aestheticization. By choosing goods that privilege aesthetic form over material function, the bourgeoisie unconsciously indicates that it has sufficient resources to be unconcerned with mundane functions and needs. The bourgeoisie's formalized culture distinguishes it from the working class, whose consumer goods are focused exclusively on immediate material needs and gratification. Lack of economic capital means that workers have to be constantly concerned with meeting material necessities, which ingrains in them a habitus that inclines them to goods that privilege material function over aesthetic form. Thus, cultural consumption marks off class identity, and consuming the 'legitimate culture' of the bourgeoisie brings the additional resource of cultural capital or honorability, which disguises and justifies the economic capital on which the class system rests. Cultural capital testifies to refined tastes and creates the illusion that its upper-class possessors are personally superior to others and thus deserving of their superior economic resources. As Bourdieu puts it, culture symbolizes class, but in such a way as to cause a misrecognition of its real basis.

Early automobiles clearly conferred cultural capital on the high bourgeoisie in American society by testifying to its removal from necessity. The beautiful forms of their craft-built bodies made it clear that these expensive vehicles were not merely mundane machines of transportation but also works of art, testifying to refined cultural tastes. And their use in leisure activities testified to a life free from the mundane, material concerns of earning a living. Another fact of this early period of automobility explained by Bourdieu's theory is the diffusion of ownership. Bourdieu argues that in an attempt to accumulate cultural capital for themselves, members of the petty bourgeoisie or middle class seek to appropriate the prestigious goods of the bourgeoisie. But lacking both the economic means and the cultural habitus of the latter, they settle for cheap imitations, which seem satisfactory to them but give away their inferior resources to their class betters. This process of class imitation explains the diffusion of autos to middle-class professionals and managers by the first decade of the 20th century in the United States. Anxious to mark their own growing prosperity, these petty bourgeois borrowed the automotive symbol of wealth, leisure and freedom. This growing but less prosperous market for cars stimulated automakers to add less expensive models to their product lines. Finding few lower limits to the demand for automobility, a few visionary producers like Ford and Olds were stimulated to pioneer mass production. In 1908 Ford Motor Company introduced its inexpensive Model T, and over the course of the next two decades pioneered a production process of specialized machines and assembly lines that brought the price of the car down within reach of the rising incomes of most of the petite bourgeoisie and even the top strata

of the working class. In Britain, however, the advent of mass production seems to have been impeded by a class system more rigid in both economic and cultural boundaries, leading automakers to shun standardized production for fear it would undermine the distinction of auto ownership (O'Connell, 1998: 18–38).

Mass-produced American cars were clearly distinguished from the grand luxury makes driven by the rich. But initially these differences did not seem to concern their buyers. Ownership of a car of any kind was still sufficiently rare to constitute a status symbol in itself. But as mass production spread cars further down the class hierarchy, mere ownership lost its ability to convey distinction. Increasingly the type of car owned conveyed status, and the simple, functional, mass-produced cars were clearly degraded and stigmatized relative to the luxury makes. The latter became the true mark of automotive distinction, testifying to the great wealth and refined tastes of their high-class owners. Their quantitative superiority in size and power immediately marked them off from mass-produced cars. But the refined eye also noticed qualitative differences in aesthetics and mechanics. The luxury classics, because of superior engineering and careful hand-fitting, were mechanically tighter and drove more smoothly. Their engines ran quietly, their transmissions shifted effortlessly and their brakes functioned at a touch, creating a refined, relaxed driving experience befitting the ostentatious ease characteristic of the upper-class habitus. The aesthetics of these cars, however, denied and negated their mechanical function in the name of art. Hundreds of hours of craft labor were lavished on their wooden bodies, which were molded into curving, often rococo forms. And their lustrous surfaces were finished with up to twenty coats of slow-drying varnish paint. The resulting cars were unified, elegant works of art, which raised the mundane function of transportation to a formal, aesthetic experience, testifying to the removal from necessity conveyed by great wealth.

The mass-produced cars, by contrast, were marked by a mundane concern for function and efficiency, which characterize working-class consumption, according to Bourdieu. The mass-production process was designed to produce simple, functional cars as quickly and as cheaply as possible, and these criteria were painfully obvious in the appearance and operation of its products. Cheap engineering and quick assembly led to loud, rough-running engines, laborious transmissions, and vibrating frames and bodies. These cars required considerable labor to drive, testifying to their owners' more physical occupations. Their fragmented, unintegrated appearance also testified to a hurried, unskilled labor process that wasted little time on fit and finish. The bodies were rigidly rectilinear and flat, for curved panels created problems for machines. And the drab, unimaginative black finishes, dictated by quick enameling, spoke of a lack of concern for aesthetic variety. Everything about these cars symbolized the immediate concern for cost-cutting efficiency and function that characterized the lives of classes with few resources to waste on luxury. In contrast to the luxury

classics, these cars were seen in the 1920s as degraded and stigmatizing. While Ford's Model T was welcomed in the 1910s as an instrument of democracy, bringing automobility to the masses, by the 1920s it was commonly ridiculed as ugly and poorly built. One contemporary joke asked why a Model T was like a mistress. The answer: because you hate to be seen on the streets with one.

In this early period of automobility, qualitative differences in cars symbolized and legitimated not merely the inequality of class but the inequality of gender as well. In both the United States (Scharff, 1991) and Britain (O'Connell, 1998), automobile production and use were influenced by the gender ideology of separate spheres. In general, automobiles were defined as masculine, both because they provided mobility in the public sphere and because they were utilitarian and mechanical objects of production. Women were supposed to confine themselves to the private, domestic sphere and to the nonutilitarian concerns of consumption and aesthetics. Consequently, car ownership and operation were considered culturally appropriate mainly for men. However, even when women in this early period gained access to automobility, gender ideology segregated them in a different type of automobile, the electric car. Gasoline-powered cars were said to be too smelly, noisy, powerful, and difficult to operate and maintain for women. Cars driven by electric motors were considered more appropriate for women, for they were quieter, cleaner and less mechanical. The major limitation of electric cars – their short range of travel between battery charges – was held to be unproblematic for women, since they were forbidden to stray far from home anyway.

When a combination of women's demands and gas automakers' self-interest finally brought the death of electric cars, gender ideology was reinscribed within the market for gas cars. The larger, more luxurious, higher-priced cars, with their concerns for aesthetics and comfort, were defined as more feminine, while the smaller, cheaper, mass-produced cars, with their concerns for utility and efficiency, were defined as masculine (Scharff, 1991: 49–58). So there was a definite superimposition of class and gender connotations in the culture of early automobility. And this was not only because women with more income were more likely to drive than those with less. Bourdieu (1984: 382–3, 402–4) recognizes a cultural basis for this confluence, arguing that class distinctions are naturally gendered. In general, the bourgeoisie is considered more feminine, because both the men and women of this class are removed from the realm of physical production and emphasize aesthetics and form. By contrast, the working class as a whole is defined as more masculine, due to its involvement in physical work and unconcern for beauty. Consequently, during this period the distinction between luxury cars and mass-produced cars served simultaneously as a class and a gender marker, legitimating both inequalities.

By the mid-1920s, the class-stigmatizing characteristics of mass-produced cars had extended the imitation process from mere auto ownership to aesthetics as well. As the upper working class began to purchase

mass-produced cars, the petite bourgeoisie lost its automotive distinction *via-à-vis* this class. Consequently, a clamor arose in the auto market for something different from and better than mass-produced cars, an inexpensive car with more ‘class’. General Motors head Alfred Sloan sensed the emergence of what he called this ‘mass-class market’ in the mid-1920s, arguing that many buyers were now willing to pay a bit more for a car beyond basic transportation. His corporation began to compete with Ford’s Model T by creating mass-produced cars with the superficial style of the luxury classics. One of the most successful of these was the 1927 La Salle, a smaller, cheaper model of the corporation’s luxury car, Cadillac. Unlike the craft-built Cadillac, the La Salle was mass produced to lower its price. But to borrow the prestige of the nameplate, Sloan wanted the car to have the look of handcrafted luxury. To design this ‘imitation Cadillac’, he hired a Hollywood coachbuilder, Harley Earl, who created custom bodies for the movies and their stars. Earl was so successful in capturing the superficial look of unity and integrity for the mass-produced La Salle that he was hired by Sloan to do the same thing for the entire line of GM cars. In 1927 Earl joined General Motors as the head of the new Art and Color Section, later to be renamed Styling.

Earl’s subsequent work at GM, however, raises questions about the validity of Bourdieu’s model of class distinction. He was not content merely to design imitation Cadillacs for the pretentious and upwardly striving petite bourgeoisie. At the behest of Sloan, Earl brought the look of the craft-built luxury cars to the entire hierarchy of GM cars, from the cheapest to the most expensive. This extension of style to even the lowest-priced cars undermines Bourdieu’s theory, which holds that workers have an ingrained taste for the simple and functional. The surge in sales during this period of the inexpensive Chevrolet styled by Earl revealed that workers also wanted goods with the aestheticized forms of the high bourgeoisie. This implies that Bourdieu is mistaken to exempt workers from the game of distinction. The working class also wanted to appear distinctive and superior and, given the chance, imitated the goods of the bourgeoisie to do so. Workers may have initially consumed simple, functional cars because they could afford nothing else, not because they had an ingrained taste for them. The rising incomes of American workers during the 1920s, however, allowed them to abandon these goods and demand cars with style, thus entering the game of distinction for the first time.

The diffusion of cars with style and beauty beyond the bourgeoisie threatened, however, to breach rigid conceptions of separate gender spheres. While it may have been culturally acceptable for the ‘effeminate’ men of the upper class to be interested in aesthetics and beauty, these traits threatened the more masculine self-images of middle- and especially working-class men. Indeed, in both the United States and Britain during this period there emerged fears and admonishments that automobiles were becoming feminized, as concerns for appearance and fashion began to outweigh those of engineering function and efficiency. But, conveniently, the same gender



ideology that seemed threatened by this attempt of lower-class men to grab the distinction of upper-class goods also provided them with an alibi for this consumption decision. Men blamed their preference for stylish cars on their wives. Backed by the unproven assertions of marketing experts, males claimed that women exerted increasing influence on family auto purchases due to their dominance of the sphere of consumption. Consequently, men could buy the cars that brought them distinction while avoiding the taint of femininity that came with them (O'Connell, 1998: 63–70; Scharff, 1991: 57–66).

Although gender distinctions remained largely intact, the extension of the game of automotive distinction to larger and larger numbers ultimately contradicted the cultural logic of class distinction. Bourdieu's logic of distinction depends on real qualitative differences between cultural goods to symbolize qualitatively different class positions. Formalized goods symbolize a position of command that exempts its holders from work, while functional goods symbolize a subjection to efficient effort commanded by others. The mass production of superficially styled or aestheticized cars began to undercut these qualitative differences within the auto market. Increasingly there was little symbolic advantage to owning and driving an expensive luxury car produced by the craft process when inexpensive, mass-produced cars looked superficially just as good. The distinction of a qualitatively superior car disappeared among the throngs of look-alikes driven by the lower classes. Further, the divided and deskilled process of mass production undermined the sensibilities necessary to distinguish qualitatively different machines. Consequently, the handcrafted luxury makes began to decline in the mid-1920s. Some, like Cadillac and Lincoln, were acquired by mass-production firms and integrated into their product line-ups. Others downgraded their products to compete with mass producers or went out of business entirely, especially during the Great Depression of the 1930s, when the demand for luxury cars dropped precipitously. Luxury automakers found it almost impossible to compete with the large mass producers, with their market power and economies of scale. By the mid-1920s the three largest mass-production automakers in the US accounted for 72 percent of total automobile output. Consequently, there were very few qualitative differences within the market to symbolize superior taste and convey cultural capital. The car as a symbol of real, qualitative class differences was finished in America.

In Britain, however, a similar qualitative leveling did not occur in the car market until the post-Second World War period. Some manufacturers like Morris started on the road to mass production in the mid-1920s, but full mass production was hindered by a more unequal income structure as well as more rigid cultural boundaries between the classes. Consequently, no great demand emerged among the working class for mass-produced cars with the look of luxury. Workers were generally forced to settle for second-hand autos from the middle class (O'Connell, 1998: 19–38).

## The Era of Mass Individuality: The Frankfurt School and Fordism

The collapse of distinctive, qualitative differences between cars did not mean, however, that the market dominated by mass producers became homogenized. Indeed, the large American automotive firms began in the late 1920s to offer a large variety of models that, although qualitatively similar, were superficially differentiated by aesthetics and accessories. All these mass-produced cars imitated the smooth, integrated look of the increasingly rare luxury cars, but they were differentiated into price grades by the quantity of valued attributes, like chrome trim, size and power. Why take the trouble to create artificial differences among qualitatively similar cars? The answer lies in the demand for cultural legitimization of the new system of mass production. As Regulation theorists like Michel Aglietta (1979) argue, the new process of mass production required a new mode of mass consumption to distribute and consume all of the goods pouring off specialized machines and assembly lines. They label the combination of the new organization of production with the new organization of consumption Fordism, for they attribute the initiation of both to Henry Ford. In 1914, shortly after introducing the assembly line, Ford instituted the Five Dollar Day program, drastically increasing the wages of his workers and thus creating thousands of new consumers for his cars. But this program was an attempt not merely to create more consumers but also to produce more stable and compliant workers. The wage increase was implemented largely to quell the wave of worker discontent instigated by his new, more intense and exploitative production methods. In return for the Five Dollar Day, Ford demanded of workers acquiescence to mass-production methods as well as a stable home life centered around major consumer durables that made them dependent on their high-paying jobs (Meyer, 1981).

But what kind of consumer goods would workers consider sufficient compensation for their increasingly alienated and exploited work? This was the question that the American automobile industry was trying to answer beginning in the late 1920s. Harley Earl and other auto designers were bringing the look of luxury cars to their mass-produced vehicles to satisfy not merely the masses' desire for distinction but also their demand for escape from the dehumanizing aspects of mass production. In this period the American working class was beginning to construct with their higher wages a separate realm of consumption in the home, where they could find respite from and compensation for the realm of work. The automobile was the keystone of this narcotizing edifice of consumerism. Social reformers and capitalist philanthropists argued that automobility would solve labor and social problems by allowing workers to escape from urban congestion into the countryside for recreation and relief. They also hoped that auto ownership would overcome class tensions by turning workers into 'property owners', thus giving them a stake in capitalism. But neither could be accomplished as long as the autos workers purchased brought with them into the

realm of consumption symbolic reminders of mass production. The rectilinear, fragmented homogeneity of mass-produced cars was a symbol of the rigid, boring, heteronomous production process workers sought to escape. By molding the surface of these cars into the smooth, rounded, varied shapes of luxury cars, car stylists like Earl covered over the offending reminders of work and allowed them to perform their escape function unobtrusively. As Earl put it, he tried to 'design a car so that every time you get in it, it's a relief – you get a little vacation for a while' (quoted in Sloan, 1972: 324).

But auto consumers wanted their goods not merely to obscure work but also to fulfill needs denied them there. And one of the most important of these was individuality. The mass-production process reduced work to standardized, repetitive tasks with little room for the expression of personal uniqueness and difference. Not surprisingly, therefore, people subjected to this process sought to compensate in their consumption lives by buying goods that were individual and unique, that made them seem different from but not necessarily superior to others, as in Bourdieu's notion of distinction. As GM's Alfred Sloan stated in 1934: 'People like different things. Many people do not want to have exactly the same thing that the neighborhood has' (Sloan, 1972: 207). Consequently, it became the policy of GM and other mass producers to build many different types of cars to accommodate consumer demand for individuality, or, as Sloan put it, to produce 'a car for every purse, purpose, and person' (1972: 520). One method used by automakers to create individuality was to produce several makes of cars that were graded by price. Thus, for example, in the mid-1920s Sloan carefully arranged General Motors' makes in a price hierarchy to appeal to consumers of all income levels. Cadillac was at the high-priced end, followed by Buick, Oldsmobile, Pontiac, then Chevrolet, which occupied the low-priced extreme. There were few differences of real quality between them. All were mass-produced, even the Cadillac, and the different makes shared some of the same components. But styling allowed automakers to differentiate these models and still meet the high-volume demands of mass production.

When Sloan hired Earl in 1927, he instructed him to maintain a strict stylistic division between GM's makes in order to justify differential pricing. All the makes were given the unified, rounded look of luxury, which covered over the signs of mass production. But in addition to this, the brands in the price hierarchy were differentiated by relatively inexpensive styling cues, such as chrome strips and grilles. These arbitrary features made the mass-produced body shells shared between makes appear different. Beyond these cues, what differentiated the top makes from the bottom ones was not quality but the quantity of their features – they had more of what everyone wanted. The high-priced Cadillac was longer and heavier and had more cylinders and accessories than the low-priced Chevrolet. So the Cadillac buyer felt not only different but somehow 'better' than the Chevy buyer, not due to superior taste but because he or she could afford more of what everyone recognized as desirable.

A second policy devised by Sloan and implemented by GM's styling department provided consumers with a superficial substitute for another desire denied in production – progress. Sloan knew that consumers wanted not merely different things but also products that were constantly changing in order to symbolize progress. The solution that Sloan devised to deliver symbolic progress was the annual model change. Each year the appearance of every model was slightly changed through the manipulation of the body and accessories, thus giving it a new look. Beneath the surface, however, the mass-produced mechanical parts stayed the same for years. Harley Earl coordinated these annual model changes with the hierarchical differentiation of the makes into an ingenious trickle-down scheme that played upon consumers' desire not merely for progress but also for social mobility. In the first year of the cycle, Earl introduced a style feature in the top make of GM's product hierarchy, Cadillac, thus associating it with prestige and high income. In the following year, he transferred it to the next lower make, Buick, thus lending this car some of the Cadillac's prestige. He continued this trickle-down styling in successive years, until the feature reached the cheapest make, Chevrolet, and thus became commonplace, at which time he introduced a new feature at the top, starting the cycle anew. Consumers of the lower makes thus were persuaded that their cars were getting better because they looked more like Cadillacs and, thus, that their lives were getting better as well.

These developments in the industry further undermine the validity of Bourdieu's theory of consumption as determined by habitus and ultimately symbolic of class position. In his theory, the production of goods to match the habitus of different classes is the result of an unconscious, structural homology of the positions of goods producers and consumers. Each class has its own producers, which stand in the field of cultural production in a similar position – insider versus outsider, new versus old – as that of its consumers in the field of social classes. As a result, these producers are motivated by competition with other producers to provide the type of goods that match the habitus of a class that is competing against other classes for cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984: 230–4). But this was clearly not the case for the different car makes of this period. Almost all of these were produced by the same large, mass-production firms, and within each firm the different makes in its hierarchy were designed in the same styling department. There stylists *consciously* manipulated the makes' designs to differentiate them, but not by appealing to different habitus. The same stylists with the same class habitus could not, according to Bourdieu, appeal to different consumer habitus. What these stylists appealed to, in all of the makes they designed, were the same needs denied all classes, albeit in varying proportions, by the system of administered mass production. The higher classes could just afford more of what everyone wanted, especially individuality and the concealment of the telltale reminders of mass production.

Bourdieu's theory does recognize the type of style cycle implemented in the auto industry, in which the distinctive features of upper-class products

are imitated by the lower classes in order to borrow their prestige. When these features become so widespread that all distinction is lost, the bourgeoisie goes back to the field of culture to appropriate new innovations unsullied by the taint of commonality and commercialism (Bourdieu, 1984: 372–84). But for Bourdieu, the cycle is an unintended, uncoordinated outcome of the competition between classes for distinction. He does not provide for the possibility that this cycle could become a conscious policy, intentionally manufactured to provide consumers with a sense of progress and mobility in a society whose fundamental structure remained the same (Gartman, 1991).

There is, however, a theory of consumption that captures the cultural logic of this Fordist stage of automobility. It is the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. From the beginning, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno conceptualized the products of mass consumption not as means to satisfy lower-class status striving but as means to compensate workers for the inhuman conditions of mass production. They write in ‘The Culture Industry’ that the products of mass amusement are ‘sought after as an escape from the mechanized work process, and to recruit strength in order to be able to cope with it again’ (1972: 137). These consumer products offer satisfactions, but only inauthentic, substitute gratifications for the needs denied by an alienated production process.

Whatever remained unsatisfied in them [consumers] through the order which takes from them without giving in exchange what it promises, only burned with impatience for their gaoler to remember them and at last offer them stones in his left hand for the hunger from which he withholds bread in his right. (Adorno, 1974: 148)

And what hungers are these that are denied by the system’s right hand of production only to be placated with empty substitutes offered by the left hand of consumption? Foremost among these are freedom, individuality and progress, all casualties of ‘the administered society’ of capitalist mass production.

Frankfurt School theorists realize that this attempt to provide in consumption satisfactions for needs denied in production raises an immediate dilemma. Consumer goods are themselves mass produced and necessarily bear all the marks of this production process, including standardization, homogeneity, and unchanging design. When mass production seizes culture and subjects it to the imperatives of exchange value, the result is the ‘dumbing down’ of offerings, reducing the qualities of products to the lowest common denominator in order to facilitate long runs of standardized goods on machines. One of the prime examples of such cultural leveling cited by Adorno is the automobile. He recognized in the mid-1940s that there were few real, mechanical differences between the cars in the hierarchies of mass producers, and that the craft-built luxury cars were increasingly extinct as a breed.

While a Cadillac undoubtedly excels a Chevrolet by the amount that it costs more, this superiority, unlike that of the old Rolls Royce, nevertheless itself proceeds from an overall plan which artfully equips the former with the better cylinders, the latter with the worse cylinders, bolts, accessories, without anything being altered in the basic pattern of the mass-produced article; only minor rearrangements in production would be needed to turn the Chevrolet into a Cadillac. So luxury is sapped. (Adorno, 1974: 119–20)

This passage raises a deeper question about the function of culture that sets Adorno and the Frankfurt School apart from Bourdieu. For the latter, luxury goods have no inherent value beyond the maintenance of class inequalities. For Adorno, however, luxury, the needlessly and uselessly beautiful and refined, is the epitome of culture, and naturally plays a subversive role in society. For him, culture is the ‘promise of happiness’ in an unequal and oppressive world, and provides an implicit critique of an ugly society that denies human desires (Adorno, 1984: 17–18). In capitalism, culture is a valuable counter to the market’s tendency to reduce all people and things to their immediate ‘usefulness’ in exchange. The superfluity of the beautiful and luxurious in culture counters the quantitative reductionism of the market and asserts human qualities that cannot be fulfilled through exchange. For Adorno, consequently, the loss of luxury in mass production is not progressive but reactionary, the subsumption of the last contradictory force into a repressive capitalist society (Adorno, 1974: 120).

If luxury is leveled, however, if it becomes just another homogenized exchange value on the market, how can the mass producers of culture provide their consumers with substitute satisfactions for the real needs denied them in production? The answer, Adorno tells us, is artificial, manipulated differentiation of the type offered by the auto industry.

The same thing is offered to everybody by the standardized production of consumption goods. But the commercial necessity of concealing this identity leads to the manipulation of taste and the official culture’s pretense of individualism, which necessarily increases in proportion to the liquidation of the individual. (Adorno, 1978: 280)

Legitimation of the system is secured by providing consumers of all classes with the illusion of free choice between seemingly different goods, while beneath the surface the mass-production process levels the real qualitative differences between things as well as people. Adorno holds that the need for such illusory compensation for denied needs is characteristic of even the high bourgeoisie, the so-called ruling class. While it may be true, as Bourdieu holds, that this class was once distinguished by its removal from economic necessity, Adorno argues that ‘[high] society life is . . . thoroughly stamped by the economic principle, whose kind of rationality spreads to the whole’ (1974: 187). The bourgeoisie’s formalization and aestheticization of life, he states, represents not a removal from economic necessity but an attempt to escape from the boredom and heteronomy that result from its

own subjection to the system of exchange, which it shares with all other classes. This class is now distinguished from others only by its greater means to effect this escape (1974: 187–90).

The Frankfurt School's theory of consumption as mass individuality and progress is similar to Bourdieu's theory in arguing that the ultimate result of this culture is to legitimate and maintain the class system of capitalist society. But it postulates that legitimation is secured in a different way. For Bourdieu, consumption prominently displays the economic inequalities between classes, but in a symbolic form that *misrecognizes* their origins. Legitimate consumption tastes, determined by internalized class habitus, seem to testify to the personal superiority of their individual bearers, thus justifying their larger share of economic resources. The Frankfurt School, by contrast, argues that consumption legitimates classes by obscuring their real differences altogether, making them *unrecognizable* by burying them beneath an indistinct mass culture shared by all. As Adorno writes (1976: 55), 'today the existence of classes is concealed by ideological appearances'. The culture industry eliminates the qualitative differences between goods, which testify to different class tastes, and substitutes for them artificially manufactured, quantitative differences of the same compensating characteristics demanded by all. What these quantitative differences symbolize is not class, properly speaking, that is, qualitative distinctions of social power rooted in production, but mere 'strata', that is, quantitative distinctions of market income rooted in consumption. Thus, for the Frankfurt School, mass culture legitimates class structure by reifying it, by hiding social relations behind the relationships of things, commodities in the marketplace (Gartman, 1991).

Although the Frankfurt School does not explicitly extend its theory of consumption as reified, mass individuality to gender relations, it is possible to do so, as revealed by the insightful work of scholars like Susan Willis (1991). The automobile reveals the empirical validity of such an extension. The age of mass individuality saw the narrowing of gender differences in both the use and consumption of automobiles. As the benefits of automobility became clear, more and more women took the wheel. By the post-Second World War era in America, the suburbanization of the population facilitated by the car also made it an essential tool for fulfilling women's domestic role in the newly dispersed landscape. The suburban housewife who did not drive was a rarity. Further, as styling and beauty became the primary means of competition in an increasingly oligopolistic automotive market, it became difficult to maintain the notion that women alone were concerned with aesthetics. This did not mean that notions of automotive gender differences disappeared, just that they were redefined as quantitative rather than qualitative. Men were increasingly willing to admit that they too liked style, beauty and comfort. But, judging from auto ads, it was assumed that women preferred and demanded *more* of these characteristics. So, for example, ads of the 1940s and 1950s often promoted the general style and comfort of the car interior in gender-neutral terms, but when they

touted the fashionableness of specific colors and fabrics, they addressed women alone. When General Motors launched a marketing campaign to target women in the late 1950s, it commissioned a series of ‘Fem’ show cars from its few women designers. These cars did not differ qualitatively in style from GM production models; they simply offered a quantitative excess of stylish accessories. One had four sets of seat covers to change with the seasons. Another ‘Fem’ car was furnished with a set of luggage to match the pastel upholstery, while a third was painted in metallic rose with upholstery of red and black leather with plaid inserts (Bayley, 1983: 99–108). More accessories, brighter paint, more multi-colored upholstery – this was what women were thought to want. So the qualitative, social differences between the genders in power, occupation, opportunity were reified, reduced to merely different quantities of the same commodities so as to better capture them for the marketplace.

Just like the cultural logic of class distinction before it, however, the extension and intensification of the logic of mass individuality produced contradictions that ultimately spelled its transcendence. By the late 1950s there were signs that all was not well with the program of trickle-down individuality offered by the quantitatively differentiated product hierarchies of American automakers. The Fordist system of automobility was falling victim to its own success. The Keynesian demand management policies of postwar Fordism were enormously successful in increasing and equalizing incomes, bringing millions of working-class consumers into the market for new cars. This more equitable market exerted a leveling effect on the quantitative differences between makes in corporate hierarchies. The largest market was now comprised of the lower-priced makes like Chevrolet and Ford, and to increase their profit per car in this market, automakers began to upgrade these autos. The low-priced cars added more size, power and accessories until the gap between them and the expensive cars was minimal. The same leveling pressure was also exerted on automotive style. The orderly passing of individual style traits down the hierarchy of makes fell victim to both consumer demand and producer competition. Working-class consumers, anxious for symbols of their new prosperity, clamored for the look of individuality exemplified by the pricier makes. Each manufacturer knew that if its stylists did not quickly give these consumers what they demanded, its competitors would. GM’s Harley Earl tried, for example, to maintain an orderly trickle-down of the tail fin, a feature introduced on the 1948 Cadillac to borrow the connotations of technological progress and escapism associated with aeronautics. He slowly brought it down to the Buick and Oldsmobile makes in the early 1950s. But working-class consumers of low-priced makes were impatient for this symbol of aeronautical freedom, and Chrysler tapped this pent-up demand by offering soaring fins on all its makes beginning in 1956. The style wars that ensued ultimately undermined the system of quantitative differentiation between cars.

Under competitive pressure to quickly bring prestigious traits to the lucrative lower market, stylists abandoned incremental changes in the late



1950s and vied with one another by making bold innovations. Fins soared, bodies lengthened and chrome proliferated in an unprecedented orgy of automotive change. All semblance of aesthetic difference between makes was lost. The implications of this aesthetic leveling were evident in the colossal failure of the new make launched by Ford in 1958, the Edsel. In order to make their new car stand out in an overcrowded market, Ford executives instructed their stylists to create a car that looked unique from every angle. Thus, the Edsel was given concave sides to counter the usual convex ones; horizontal fins to counter the vertical ones; and a vertical grille to counter the horizontal ones. Taken separately, these styling elements were not that bizarre or different. But the combination of all this cloying, attention-grabbing newness was too much. The Edsel protested its difference so loudly and superficially that it exposed the underlying similarity of all Detroit's large, lavishly decorated family sedans. The car became a lightning rod for the gathering discontents with the automotive excesses of the decade. Sales were so low that the make was forced off the market in three years. This episode indicated that consumers were beginning to see through the aesthetic disguise of mass production, a trend also apparent in the popularity of exposés like Vance Packard's *Hidden Persuaders* (1980/1957) and John Keats's *Insolent Chariots* (1958). The aesthetic and structural convergence of American autos provided consumers with so little individuality that a growing number began to buy imported cars. The cultural elite ridiculed the 'balloon-like chromium-encrusted bodies' of American cars as the pretentious status symbols of middle-class housewives and expressed a preference for lithe European sports cars (*Fortune*, 1947: 184). Well-heeled businessmen appropriated European luxury makes like Mercedes-Benz to individuate themselves. Even working-class youth rejected homogenized American sedans and sought difference and individuality by modifying stock cars, touching off the hot-rod and custom-car subcultures. Some middle-class youth and adults embraced the simple, unchanging Volkswagen as a mark of difference, turning it into the 'anticar' in American culture.

The contradictions of the Fordist age of mass individuality were not confined to consumer aesthetics but also spilled over into use. When all Americans sought to express individual freedom and escape from mass production by taking to the roads, they created unintended collective effects that undermined these pleasures of automobility. Crowded roads increased breakdowns, accidents, noise and pollution, and generally despoiled the pristine countryside to which motorists sought to escape. By the 1960s several movements appeared to fight these consequences of the automobile, most importantly, the environmental movement and the consumer movement. The automotive age of mass individuality was drawing to a close, collapsing under its own contradictions. Out of these struggles and contradictions, however, emerged a new synthesis of elements, a new era of production, consumption and use that would carry the automobile into the new millennium.

## The Era of Subcultural Difference: Postmodernism and Post-Fordism

Beginning in the 1960s both the American government and the automobile industry responded to the contradictions of Fordist automobility. Congress responded to the environmental movement in 1965 by passing the Motor Vehicle Air Pollution and Control Act, which set emission standards for automobiles. And addressing the safety concerns of the consumer movement, Congress passed the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966, which empowered a federal agency to set safety standards for new cars. While simultaneously fighting these governmental regulations, American automakers undertook changes in their products to stem their loss of market share to foreign competitors. Sensing that the ultimate problem was the lack of product individuality, they abandoned the Fordist emphasis on mass-produced but superficially differentiated autos and began to offer a greater variety of cars that differed fundamentally in structure and engineering. Between 1960 and 1970 American manufacturers increased model offerings by 50 percent and, in the process, introduced a plethora of totally new types of vehicles: compacts, subcompacts, intermediate-sized cars, muscle cars (powerful performance cars), pony cars (sporty, youth-oriented cars), sports cars and personal luxury cars. Each type targeted not, as previously, to a broad income group but a small, more specific market niche, based on non-class characteristics like age, gender and family status. Many of these types were based on pre-existing automotive subcultures like hot rodders, customizers and anticar dissenters. Thus, the artificially differentiated and hierarchical mass market that obscured real class differences broke up into a plethora of leveled but distinctive niche markets. On this flattened playing field, aesthetic distinctions no longer spread from higher to lower products, but from peripheral subcultures to mainstream markets (Gartman, 2002).

It became quickly evident, however, that this new, more differentiated mode of consumption of automobiles was incompatible with old Fordist methods of production. The increased diversity of products threatened the foundation of Fordist mass production – product standardization. As the number of models grew, a specialized plant had to be built to produce each one. Further, the increasing number of options available on each model caused variations in assembly time for cars on the same line. This variation increased workers' discretion and allowed them to slow production in their continuing struggle with management over the effort bargain. The results of increased variety in the context of contentious labor relations were increased unit production costs and decreased unit profits. Automakers during the late 1960s and early 1970s sought to boost sagging profits through their traditional cost-cutting measure, speed-up. But these measures fell on a working class insulated from the threat of firing by strong unions and Keynesian programs like unemployment insurance and social wage programs. So when managers stepped up the work pace, secure Fordist

workers revolted, sending rates of absenteeism, turnover and stoppages skyrocketing. Automakers and other manufacturers realized that they could not offer consumers greater product variety profitably without restructuring not only the production process but also the entire Fordist apparatus of labor relations and social programs (Bowles et al., 1984).

Automakers began restructuring their production process in the 1970s in order to restore profitability and compete with escalating foreign competition. Foreign automakers gained an even stronger foothold in the American market after the oil embargo of 1973, which sent gasoline prices soaring and placed a premium on the small, fuel-efficient cars that Japan and Germany had been producing for years. Disadvantaged in this competition by rigidly standardized Fordist production processes and bureaucracies, American automakers scrambled to cut costs and find more flexible production methods capable of producing a wide variety of constantly changing products. Taking their cues from Japanese producers, especially Toyota, these corporations began closing plants and shifting parts production to independent contractors, many of which operated in low-wage, Third World countries. And within the remaining plants, attempts were made to render production more flexible and accommodating to variety by using general-purpose machines and workers trained to handle a wide variety of tasks. Sometimes called 'lean production' or 'flexible specialization', this new organization of production substantially cut the costs of manufacturing and allowed automakers to shift a larger proportion of their capital to the increasingly important nonproduction functions of design and marketing. All of these corporate restructuring measures were facilitated, however, by a neoliberal restructuring of the state, which attacked organized labor, cut social programs, slashed taxes on corporations and the wealthy, and deregulated the financial sector of the economy. These measures not only facilitated the technological restructuring of the workplace but also allowed the capital mobility necessary to cut the high fixed costs of an organized workforce with legal protections and shift production to low-wage, casual workers with few rights and protections (Klein, 1999; Milkman, 1997; Rubenstein, 2001; Womack et al., 1991).

During this period of restructuring in the 1970s and early 1980s, the American market for cars was stagnant and sober. The energy crisis and environmental concerns created a practical, no-nonsense attitude toward cars for the first time in decades. Further, the stagnant economy and inflation of these years eroded consumer buying power. But beginning in the mid-1980s, the restructured economy began to grow, creating a bifurcated economic boom in which the wealth and income of the bourgeoisie and professional classes grew rapidly while those of the working class stagnated or fell. It was the consumption of the former that revived the automobile market in the late 1980s and 1990s. Seeking to display not mainly their wealth but their lifestyles, the newly enriched yuppies crowded into the auto market demanding some symbol of their individuality and difference from an older generation of business professionals. And American automakers

rapidly responded to this demand with their new flexibility. An explosion of diverse auto types, each testifying to a 'lifestyle choice', emerged on the market – minivans, retro cars, sports-utility vehicles, eco-cars, multipurpose vehicles, hybrid cars. Each appealed not to the masses with varying quantities of what everyone wanted, but to a small niche market based on a specific leisure interest or identity. These lifestyle cars were considered not 'better' or 'worse' than one another, but just different, in a market no longer hierarchical but fragmented and tolerant. In such a market, automakers did not merely sell cars, they sold a 'brand', an entire identity, meaning or image of life (Klein, 1999; Rubenstein, 2001: 217–50, 287–306; Sparke, 2002: 198–243).

This leveled and pluralized culture of automobility is best explained by postmodern theory. Although there are many theoretical tendencies that fall within the rather elastic boundaries of 'postmodernism', I will concentrate on that type elaborated by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, within which the work of Stuart Hall and Dick Hebdige is especially useful. Their brand of postmodernism engages directly with the literature on Fordism to argue that postmodern culture coincides with a new form of production called post-Fordism. For these theorists, the new postmodern society emerges in advanced capitalist countries that 'are increasingly characterized by diversity, differentiation and fragmentation, rather than homogeneity, standardization and the economics and organization of scale which characterized modern mass society' (Hall and Jacques, 1989: 11). They argue that during the 1960s the class identities that defined and positioned people in society began to break up, giving rise to a number of new political and cultural groups. The social movements of the 1960s are generally credited with this fragmentation, for they pioneered nonclass political identities around a number of noneconomic issues like gender, sexuality, age and counterculture. Along with this disruption of class identities came a challenge to the hierarchical culture that expressed them. Postmodern culture is defined above all by a collapse of the distinction between elite and mass culture. For many young artists of the 1960s, high modern art had become discredited by its integration into the administered society of corporate capitalism. They began to embrace aspects of mass culture, blending high and low in new, diverse forms that expressed the proliferating nonclass identities of society (Hebdige, 1989).

At this point, mass-production industries began to fall into crisis due to the diversification and fragmentation of cultural identities. Fordist production depended upon a mass market for the production of standardized goods by unchanging machines and assembly lines. These standardized goods could be artificially differentiated in quantitative attributes to sell to different income classes, but the system assumed that everyone wanted basically the same things. The rise of a diversity of nonhierarchical, nonclass subgroups fragmented the mass market, for each group demanded different goods to express its unique identity. The new nature of consumer demand stimulated, according to the postmodern theorists, a new

post-Fordist production method based on economies of scope rather than economies of scale. Employing the new technologies of computers and other microelectronic innovations, manufacturers replaced mass production with flexible specialization, a manufacturing system that produces small runs of a large variety of products on machines that can be quickly changed (Mort, 1989; Murray, 1989). Under the escalating demand for product diversity in a leveled and fragmented consumer culture, more and more manufacturers in all advanced capitalist countries were forced to eschew outmoded Fordism for this new production system of post-Fordism (Amin, 1994).

Some postmodern theorists, such as Jean Baudrillard, draw dreadfully bleak political implications from this collapse of class identities and the rise of a culture dominated by an ever-changing array of consumer spectacles expressing the identities of a populace fragmented by lifestyle concerns. The Birmingham School, however, is optimistic about the political configuration of postmodernism/post-Fordist society. Dick Hebdige, in particular, has elaborated an analysis of subcultures defined by consumer style that argues for their subversive potential. He welcomes the collapse of class identities and the bifurcated culture that accompanies them. Both are based on hierarchical models that reproduce the passivity of the masses at the bottom, who await deliverance by the experts at the top. The fragmentation and leveling of class identity and culture create, Hebdige (1989) argues, a plethora of subcultures that transcend class and nation and have the potential to subvert the totality of capitalist society. In his landmark study, *Subculture* (1979), he analyses the consumption-based subcultures of British working-class youth, arguing that their cobbled-together styles represent a serious disruption of the cultural codes that underlie a hierarchical society.

Hebdige also applies his model of lifestyle subcultures as subversive difference to motor vehicles in his collection entitled *Hiding in the Light* (1988). Here he argues that cars, like other consumer objects, have a multitude of meanings assigned by different groups that appropriate them for their own purposes. There are no essential relations of production to reveal or conceal, only a multitude of competing, surface meanings that can cancel and undermine an oppressive, totalizing hierarchy (1988: 77–80). In his essay on the British reception of American mass-produced cars in the 1950s, he argues that these cars were perceived as and actually were a threat to the established hierarchy of tastes that legitimated class differences. Many upper-class Britons saw in the popular consumer affluence of the postwar period a pernicious ‘leveling down process’, in which elite moral and aesthetic standards were eroded. Large, superfluously decorated American cars like the Cadillac El Dorado were considered particularly decadent and offensive, for they catered to the vulgarity of the masses and destroyed true elegance and refinement in design. For workers, however, these cars were symbols of progress, that is, the improvement in their standard of living and the advances in science making this possible. Hebdige argues that these mass-produced American cars did hasten the

liquidation of the distinctive cultural heritage on which the authority of the elite rested. But he asserts that the conservatives were wrong about the homogenizing effect of this leveled consumer culture.

Rather, American popular culture . . . offers a rich iconography or set of symbols, objects and artefacts which can be assembled and reassembled by different groups in a literally limitless number of combinations. And the meaning of each selection is transformed as individual objects . . . are taken out of their original historical and cultural contexts and juxtaposed against other signs from other sources. (Hebdige, 1988: 74)

This multiplicity of meanings freely constructed by different groups to express their own identities makes this leveled consumer culture ‘a new language of dissent’ (1988: 71).

A similar but more recent postmodern analysis of automobiles as the expression of fragmented and subversive subcultural identities is offered in Daniel Miller’s collection entitled *Car Cultures*. Miller asserts that people see and express themselves through the car, which thus assumes a ‘different cultural form or experience among different groups’ (Miller, 2001: 12). Since these subcultural expressions are intimate and diverse, ‘the car has become more a means to resist alienation than a sign of alienation’ (2001: 3). The volume contains a number of ethnographic studies of autos that seek to validate this postmodern approach, including one of young, working-class Swedish males called *raggare* or greasers. This subculture is centered on the restoration and driving of big, chromed-up American cars of the 1950s and 1960s. The author of the study, Tom O’Dell (2001), argues that working-class youth adopted these cars specifically to mark their difference from and contempt for the standards of ‘good taste’ enforced by the Swedish middle-class, which defined American cars as vulgar, pretentious and hedonistic. He also holds that this automotive subculture was nationally specific, since it was defined against the peculiar values of the Swedish middle class – practicality, rationality and reserve. O’Dell also sees the *raggare* as subversive, since the middle class saw them and their cars as symbols of danger and moral decline.

But in his rush to assert the uniqueness of this subculture, O’Dell curiously omits any reference to American hot rodders, who appeared at about this same time. As Moorhouse (1991) makes clear, these American youth also were largely working class and sought to assert their difference from mainstream Americans’ standardized cars. And they too were the subject of moral panics and fears. Hot rodders’ highly modified and altered cars were different from *raggare* vehicles, which were mainly stock restorations of American cars. But American hot rodders had to modify their cars to differentiate them from the large, decorated sedans that were common in the United States; the *raggare*’s unmodified American cars achieved the same difference against sober and efficient Swedish cars. So the cultural expression may have been different, but the meanings were the same – freedom,

escape, difference. Neither does O'Dell explore in any depth the real impact of this subculture on society. Just because these youth were *perceived* as a threat to bourgeois society does not mean they were. In the United States, many of the 'subversive' automotive differences pioneered by hot rodders were incorporated into the models of the mainstream automakers. Thus, this subculture became just another source of individuality and difference for the more pluralized and leveled automotive market.

Similar questions about the automotive expression of subcultural difference can be raised with respect to gender. Pauline Garvey's contribution to *Car Cultures* argues that the automobile provides young Norwegian women with means to transgress established gender roles. Through reckless and illegal driving these women achieve freedom and escape from their restricted routine of domestic chores and social isolation. Such behavior also has the meaning in Norway of defying state authority, since the government in this country has from the beginning of automobility sought to regulate car ownership, by first restricting and then facilitating it. But Garvey also seems to realize that these women use the car just as often to facilitate, not challenge, established gender roles. The daring drive on the wrong side of the road provides merely a temporary relief from domestic chores that makes them a bit more tolerable. And at least for one woman interviewed, driving does not create social relations to destroy domestic isolation but 'occasionally substitutes for absent social relationships . . . act[ing] as a pressure valve to release the oppressive isolation of long periods inside the home' (Garvey, 2001: 140).

Cindy Donatelli has argued, in fact, that one niche-market car aimed specifically at women does not facilitate their freedom but more securely entraps them in traditional gender roles. She sees the minivan, one of the first and most successful lifestyle vehicles, 'as a material shell for the retrograde conservative agenda of "family values" which became one of the dominant themes in political discourse when Ronald Reagan was elected at the beginning of the 1980s' (Donatelli, 2001: 85). This suburban home on wheels reasserts the ascendancy of heterosexual marriage and procreation in this age of backlash against feminism. The very structure of the vehicle is tailored to gender stereotypes. It is large enough to accommodate lots of children, whose production and care defines woman's traditional role. Yet it is close to the ground and handles easily, for women are considered too delicate and weak to drive a traditional truck, a clearly masculine vehicle. Loaded with all the feminine comforts of home, the minivan allows women to efficiently perform their traditional domestic roles while at the same time squeezing in eight or more hours in their new-found 'freedom' as wage-earners.

Paul Gilroy similarly argues that autos associated with the subculture of American blacks do not serve to break racial stereotypes but merely to maintain and bind them to mainstream consumer culture. He recognizes that the history of African-Americans' enslavement and coerced labor makes them receptive to the auto as a means of mobility, often allowing

blacks to escape racism and move to employment opportunities. Further, their material deprivation has inclined African-Americans toward products like luxury cars, which publicly display the wealth and consequent status generally denied to them. Despite recognising this, however, Gilroy sees the African-American auto subculture of expensive cars, chrome rims and elaborate car stereos as corporate race-branding that maintains stereotypes while simultaneously salving African-Americans' chronic injuries. And more importantly, black automobility diverts energy from collective, political struggles against racism into individualistic, consumerist assertions. Consequently, cars

... have helped to deliver us to a historic point where blackness can easily become less an index of hurt, resistance or solidarity in the face of persistent and systematic inequality than one more faintly exotic life-style 'option' conferred by the multi-cultural alchemy of heavily branded commodities and the pre-sealed, 'ethnic' identities that apparently match them. (Gilroy, 2001: 86)

The postmodernists have identified a distinct age of automobility, in which the car is produced, purchased and used not as an expression of class distinction or mass individuality, but as the mark of identity in one of a multitude of lifestyle groups, none of which is necessarily superior to another. But their assertion that this leveled and fragmented culture logic somehow liberates people from the confining roles of class, race and gender is questionable. As the polarization of wealth and income proceeds rapidly, affirmative action is dismantled and women's reproductive rights are whittled away, the appearance of consumer difference may merely provide a smokescreen of freedom and diversity (Jameson, 1991). Thus, this age of automobility is best seen not as a replacement of the reification postulated by the Frankfurt School in the age of mass individuality, but its transcendence into a higher form. The basic need addressed by postmodern difference is the same as that found in the Fordist age of mass individuality – that of compensatory individuality in a society that deprives people of economic autonomy. However, with the collapse of Fordist restraints on the economic market over the last two decades, people need an intensified dose of consumer individuality to overcome the loss of autonomy in the production sphere. The quantitative differentiation within a mass of similar consumers no longer suffices, and is replaced by a qualitative differentiation between infinitely divisible lifestyle groups. But once again, this intensified individuality of things serves to obscure the real human relations of class, gender and race, which have become more homogenized and polarized than ever.

This does not mean, however, that automobility has now stabilized into a balanced system. On the contrary, the transcendence of the cultural logic of mass individuality into that of subcultural difference also generates contradictions, both within and between its constituent parts. First, there



are signs that the proliferation of models to differentiate a plethora of lifestyle subcultures is contradicting the demands of even the flexible production system of post-Fordism. As automakers in the 1990s produced more models to please consumers demanding difference, the profit per vehicle dropped, especially among Japanese producers, because of shorter runs and reduced economies of scale. Their response was to move toward a system of 'optimum lean production', in which productivity and economies of scale were re-emphasized as goals. To achieve these, however, corporations had to sacrifice model diversity and innovation. Thus, for example, to cut costs and achieve longer runs of parts, producers under optimum lean production began to design new models to use more and more components from the old ones. Further economies of scale were achieved by reducing the number of different platforms (the structural foundation of a car) and the trim levels and option packages available on each model. Finally, in search of greater scale, companies began to consolidate through mergers or joint ventures, so that the same platform could be used by more nameplates. For example, due to its acquisition of other brands, Ford now uses the same luxury platform to produce Lincolns, Jaguars and Volvos. These measures, however, threaten to reduce the real differences between cars that drive the niche markets of postmodernism (Rubenstein, 2001: 42–55).

A second contradiction of the current age of automobility has emerged between the culture of difference and the use of cars. When every individual driver demands a car expressing his or her unique identity, the number of cars on the road grows and creates frustrating impediments to automotive expressionism. This problem is further exacerbated if, as the postmodernists claim, each individual has a number of identities that cry out for expression at different times. So, for example, the yuppie software executive may express his high-tech corporate persona by driving a BMW to work, but on the weekends he wants an off-road vehicle to express his back-to-nature leisure persona. Consequently, in the United States there are already more automobiles than licensed drivers. So the car takes over more and more of the environment, and the roads become so jammed that driving becomes an experience of frustration, not liberation and individuality. It is hard to feel like a free individual in a massive gridlock of cars. The roads of advanced capitalist countries become battlegrounds for limited space, where tensions flare in ugly incidents of road rage. When the culture promises drivers effortless speed and escape, any impediment becomes intolerable (Michael, 2001: 72). To secure individual advantage in the Darwinian struggle for space, some drivers up the ante by buying large, powerful, military-like sport-utility vehicles, lording it over the lower species of the road in an aggressive grandeur that only makes driving more competitive and dangerous.

This decline of civility on the roads may also reflect a third contradiction of postmodern automobility, one internal to the realm of culture itself. When individuals withdraw from public life into a multitude of lifestyle enclaves, associating only with others exactly like themselves, it

becomes difficult to identify with the other driver. He or she is seen not as a fellow with commonly shared rights and obligations but as an alien other with a different lifestyle competing for scarce space and recognition. Robert Bellah and colleagues have argued in *Habits of the Heart* (1996) that the United States is becoming a collection of ‘lifestyle enclaves’ and losing that sense of shared fate and culture that makes collective effort and identification possible. Such cultural atomization, not environmental exhaustion or unprofitable production, may provide the ultimate limit of the age of post-modern automobility.

### Conclusion

In his book on mobilities in the 21st century, John Urry (2000: 205–11) argues that these complex systems are transforming societies in unpredicted and nonlinear ways. Within a given complex system, actors repeat the actions that reproduce its order, but over time the cumulative effects of individual actions begin to produce nonlinear, unintended results that disrupt the system and send it into disequilibrium. My research on the cultural logics of the car reveals that such disruptions and contradictions of automobility are not new to 21st-century societies, but have occurred twice before in the history of the car. Both the logics of class distinction and mass individuality were undermined by their own extension and iteration, forcing a restructuring between the elements of automobility. But, unlike Urry’s, my analysis of automobility reveals a dialectical linearity to development, not random, unpredictable fluctuations of a system. The three ages of the automobile that I postulate all evidence an underlying dynamic that drives the system of automobility and its cultural logic. This dynamic is the confrontation of potentially autonomous human beings with an economic market system that thwarts their self-determination with an alien logic all its own. The development of the laws of the market over the last century has forced humans into the realm of consumption to satisfy their needs for identity, autonomy and individuality. And the ultimate expression of this compensatory consumption has been the automobile, the individualized means of mobility that has become synonymous with freedom. Each stage of the automobile has ultimately foundered due to the inability of this thing to satisfy human needs, to provide identity in sheet metal and autonomy in movement. So the contradictions pile up from one stage to the next, intensified and exacerbated but not solved. This automotive folly will end not through some inevitable, objective development of the system but only through the actions of humans to reclaim their fate from their own machines.

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