Automobility and the challenging of Anthropocene's apparatus

Final essay

Anthropocene: Violence in Places, Worlds and Earth

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10. 6. 2024

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Introduction

When talking about Anthropocene, there are not that many perfect examples of what does it mean as the example of automobility. Anthropocene is characterized as an epoch in which lasting effect on Earth's matter caused by humans can be observed. (Hamilton, 2020) Automobility is considered to be an apparatus of the Anthropocene. Because of the infrastructure created for automobility, we are paving the Earth's crust with asphalt, burning fossil fuels that have been created in the span of million years and we can go as far as to say that the automobility is partially enabling us to live a consumerist lifestyle, that is extremely deterimental to the environment. All in all, creating lasting effect on Earth's matter. Mattering from a sovereign position.

Automobility has many downfalls, that can be seen at a glance. Findings in environmental studies have proven negative effects of combustion engines on the environment. Urban studies point out the negative effect of automobility on our shared spaces. Health specialists are alarmed by negative effects of sedentary lifestyle, which automobility is a part of, and of effect of pollution on our cardiovascular system. Article from earlier this year suggests, that 1 in 34 deaths worldwide is caused directly by cars and automobility, totaling at 1,67 million deaths yearly. From the moment of creation of the first car, it is supposed that 60 to 80 millions of people have died because of automobility, and more than 2 billions are believed to be injured by it. This number could be even higher, if we considered a wider sense of the word automobility, and not just deaths directly related to cars and car accidents. It is believed that for every 100 people on Earth, there are 16 cars, meaning there is around 1.5 billion vehicles worldwide. (Miner et al., 2024) Seems that given all the percieved negative effects of automobility on humanhood, there exists a discourse saying that automobility should be challenged by people in power. We see this becoming partly true in national governments and union governments, whole political parties are formed on the idea of challenging automobility. The question is: Is automobility likely to be challenged by governments? Can automobility be challenged by governments? And if it can, to what extent?

While governments have tremendous power over shaping the social reality, automobility reaches far over state borders. In this essay, I will go over automobility's influence over society and culture and how automobility can strengthten the sovereign position and offer a few benefits to some. Then I will go over automobility and politics, and finally I will try to answer the question if it is possible to challenge the automobility and if so, to what extent. Following will be the conclusion of this essay.

Society of the automobile

Automobility as we know it today is very complex mechanism. In the STS perspective, it could be seen as an element interacting with the social world. It has started with cars, automobiles as a focus, but the infrastructure built around cars creates automobility culture. Automobility seeped into our perception of time and space and transformed it. To be constantly on the go on an individual schedule is a norm today, but the norm is made possible only by automobiles. The shift from collective timetable, such as train schedules, or natural markers of time, to individualized perception of time, contributed to society we are seeing today. And this society needs cars to exist. If cars were not a possibility, the world would be behaving differently. Available car transportation created the normalization of frequent long distance travel. Therefore, cars mended the society in a way that having an automobile is not a luxury, but a neccessity. (Urry, 2004)

With the spread of cars, automobility has created a specific type of culture with car in the middle. This cultural change is reflected in public spaces and urbanism. Cars have taken over majority of public spaces, forcing pedestrians or other types of transport into an ‚alternative form of transport' category, implying that car transport is the preferred one. Also, with pedestrians occupying spaces primarily built for cars, even walking people are becoming a part of the automobility. (Sheller, Urry, 2000)

Sheller and Urry argue, that one might understand cars as the Weberian iron cage of modern world, confining an individual into moving private metal cube. This fast moving metal object is taking away the sensory experiences that can be lived when person moves in human speed, rendering life two dimensional. Also it takes away the experiences of socializing with other people in a natural way. The article states, same as Urry (2004), that in order to maintain social life, one must struggle with organizing small, unorganized pieces of time and put them together somehow. Thanks to flexibile nature of time in the automobility, every desire can be satisfied in very short amount of time, almost instantly. (Sheller, Urry, 2000) With automobility enabling the culture of instant gratification, same as with fragmented individualized time, the culture then produces the need for an automobile, fostering a never ending circle.

Automobility as a part of sovereign progress

One of the key characteristics of Anthropocene is the sovereignity of man. (Hoelle, Kawa, 2021) This sovereignity can include many aspects, but quite prevalent is the aspect of a constant progress, without too much of a focus on consequences for other actors. The beginning of Anthropocene can be dated to industrial revolution, that enabled massive possibility of progress, and of different enhacements in favor of people. Transportation became a key segment of society, facilitating a mobility of people and goods, that was vital for economic prosperity. (Hamilton, 2020) With the invention of a car, automobility slowly seeped into society. In today's age, automobility is quite necessary not only for maitaining the

quality of life of a modern man, but also for enabling further progress. With that in mind, it is in nobody's interest to meddle with progress of society, even more so if it is widely percieved as a positive endeavour.

With the concept of sovereignity, there automatically comes a need for hierarchy. In this regard, automobility can also reinforce inequality. Because of globalization, all the people inhabiting the Earth are subject to negative and harmful effects of automobility, but only some of the people are also experiencing the positives. In Global North, at first glance, the oppossite seems to be true. With the rise of the automobility, common man got the chance to travel further to seek better opportunities. In the Global South, however, cars are not that widespread to actually have a beneficial effect. In the Netherlands, even with being known as a ‚biker nation,‘ there are more cars than in Nigeria, even thought the population of Nigeria is dozen times the size. People in the Global South get to suffer the harms, such as poisoning from used lead batteries, that are transported there from wealthier countries as a hazardous waste. (Miner et al., 2024) Moreover, with growing abundance of cars in the Global North, more and more cities are adapting disadvantaging measures for car travelers into the city, therefore reinforcing inequality even in places where car was an equalizing thing before. (Sheller, Urry, 2000)

People who have partial benefits of automobility, stemming from their car usage, are less likely to want to give them up. The automobility culture also promotes car as a symbol of social standing. (Gatersleben, 2011) In practice, private motorized vehicles are favored the most in traffic, whereas pedestrians and cyclists are given less time and space. (Gossling, 2016) While in theory, inequality is an adverse phenomenon, using the theory of sovereignity, automobility can reinforce inequal social roles not only between different actors, both human and inhuman, but between people as well. Automobility can be therefore benefiting people with higher power, wealth and more resources.

Automobility as politics

Automobility is a political ontology in itself. It exists in a certain time and space, more specifically in the Anthropocene. (Braun, Randall, 2023) The mere fact that politicians are imposing regulations on automobility could seem to represent that the automobility is a part of national, maybe even international politics. That is not the case, for automobility is not a part of politics, it is politics in itself. It is possible to look at automobility as a politics of power, as a violence. Even by mattering, thinging the matter, violence is being done. (Heidegger, 2008) In relation to the previous paragraph, the sovereignity of man can be expressed as a violence in automobility. The violence in automobility is the constant battle for power, with humans winning in the Anthropocene. With every car ride, we are considering thousands of insects to be redundant, and are deciding their fate for them, therefore

commiting violence. Also, by automobilizing spaces we are violently taking space from wild animals and if they come closer, it is not unusual to crash into them with car, usually causing injury or death.

With broad view on the politics of Anthropocene and automobility, all regulations and political orders regarding automobility are not containing it, they are but scratching a surface of a way wider phenomenon/ontology/being.

When we say that automobility is the apparatus of Anthropocene, by the words of Focault it means it is a „strategic idea, that explains the said and unsaid, its the discourses, institutions that subjectify the human into roles," such as a driver, or pedestrian. Apparatuses can be also viewed as a various methods of enactments. Automobility is thus the method of enactment the Anthropocene; by automobility, Anthropocene is thinging, and according to Heidegger, to the thingliness of the thinging, violence has been done for a long time.

Challenging automobility

With culture, progress and sovereignty being influenced by automobility, also with automobility being political ontology in itself, one can see that to challenge automobility in a meaningful way, much more broad change would be necessary than to simply switch to another source of fuel. Changing the type of vehicle, or some parameters of vehicles to better suit government's environmental needs does not mean abolishing automobility. Abolishing automobility would be to shun Anthropocene, to effectively abolish many wildely accepted standards of our society. With that being said, it is important to note, that even electric cars can be considered automobility, the same as bikes can be considered automobility, and even pedestrians can be considered automobility, because they are a part of automobility's being, its ontology, its public space and cultural significance. The ingrainess of autmobility in the present culture is not restricted to one type of vehicle, nor it is restricted to vehicles only. The whole way of living in the Anthropocene is tightly intertwined with automobility and its specific characteristics.

Looking back to questions, whether automobility can be challenged and to what degree, many scientists and activists are failing in this task, because they are disregarding the complexity of the topic and the influence it has on social world. Gossling (2016) was trying to come up with more just policies regarding automobility, but he only took into account safety measures and rate of enviromental pollutants. Other sources, such as Miner et al. (2004) are looking at automobility from the perspective of preventing death by automobility. Recent regulations from EU are looking at the automobility from the perspective of minimizing attribution to climate change and global warming.(Haas, Sander, 2020) I have yet to find a source that would challenge the automobility in its whole complexity, with offering solutions and possible substitutions for a culture and society based on automobility.

In our society, the most prevalently accepted establishment is liberal democracy. (Fukuyama, 1991) In democracy, elected representatives, politicians, are expected not only to bring their own ideas and

worldview for the good of the people, but also to listen to people and in broader sense of the word, do what people want them to do. In today's social climate, there is very little possibility of a complex cultural and societal change away from automobility. It would require a big event to occur, something in the scale of the beggining of The Great Acceleration.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have discussed the automobility as an apparatus of Anthropocene and whether or not it can be challenged as a concept in today's society.

There is no doubt that automobility in itself has many downsides, and not only that, it altered our society in crucial ways, such as in perception of time and space – time came from structured and perceived in groups to unstructured and individual; in regarding to space, traveling long distances regularly became normalized, and public spaces has been restructuralized to accomodate for automobiles. Socialization transformed from meeting people around daily activities to scheduling specific time for socialization. The sensory inputs became supressed, and it became normalized to observe world from the shadow of the windsheild, in two dimensions rather than by all senses.

Automobility also serves as a vessel for demonstrating sovereignity and hierarchy. It can be, and frankly is, contributing to inequalities – both in human and inhuman actors. It perpetrates violence and automobility is also surrounded by death and injury of insects, animals and people.

Automobility is also its own political ontology, and has direct ties to politics, even is politics in itself.

To answer the question if automobility can be challenged as a concept, based on the sources I came upon during writing this essay, it seems highly unlikely, even though there are proven negative effects of automobility on society. It is probable that different actors from different backgrounds will be trying to announce that they are challenging automobility, but it probably will not be from complex perspective, only some aspects of automobility, that is so broad of a term as is Anthropocene.

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