



Introductory Remarks

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Plea for a New Mobility Culture

Oliver Schwedes and Marcus Keichel

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The electric car is coming. The German government decided to support the expansion of electric transport beyond 2012 with millions of euros in funding—one million electric cars are meant to be on German roads by 2020.

A lot has happened since the first funds from the *Economic stimulus package II* were released, which got the *National Electromobility Development Plan* underway. The German automotive industry started developing electric cars and was promoting its concepts even before sales started. It promised that, by the end of 2014, 15 different German-produced models would be available. The topic is also prominent in the media. The national newspapers in particular regularly report on the activities of the participating actors from politics, research and industry. However, after initial euphoria, the reporting has become increasingly dispassio-

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nate and sometimes sceptical. At the beginning of 2013, for example, it was reported that from January to November 2012 only 2695 electric cars were registered in Germany—equivalent to 10% of the number planned by the industry. At about the same time it became public that the premium manufacturer Audi had discontinued its development projects in view of the sluggish demand for electric cars. The German Association of the Automotive Industry expected that a “boost in the market with higher unit sales” would not occur until the second half of the decade.¹ So the electric car will come, but at the moment it is open as to whether and how quickly it will prevail in larger numbers and thus become a serious carrier of our mobility culture. The question is: on what does this outcome depend?

Actors from Politics, Research and Industry



Picture 1.1 Elektricity Berlin [IVP]

¹*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 12–13 January 2013.

Electric Car as Carrier of Our Mobility Culture

Electric transport, i.e. the electric car including the associated infrastructure, is a complex matter, with various participants endeavoring to bring it about. The mere fact that participants from fields as diverse as research, politics and business are involved in shaping the process and contributing their perspectives and interests obviously entails the potential for friction. Even within the individual disciplines unqualified consensus is the exception to the rule, and by their very nature different approaches compete with each other. Against this backdrop, there is not only uncertainty regarding *whether* the electric car will establish itself as a vehicle of mobility culture but also concerning *how* it will do so. Quite apart from this state of uncertainty, it is becoming apparent that the current debate on electric transport is strongly positivistically oriented. In many cases there is a belief that the electric motor will sooner or later either supplement the combustion engine (hybrid technology) or simply replace it. Consumers would thus gradually switch from the conventional car to the electric car without major changes or even restrictions in the use of the car as such. Publications on the matter are characterized by a belief in technological progress, which can supposedly resolve the conflict between the need to conserve resources and unlimited individual mobility. It is obvious why this position is dominant: the promise that ‘technology’ will resolve the problem and that people in the highly developed societies can go on living as before is clearly extremely attractive (see Schwedes, Chap. 3).

Conflict of Goals Between Resource Conservation and Individual Mobility

This volume takes up this point. The authors have their doubts about a one-sided standpoint that places its trust in progress and instead assume that the initiative for electric transport can only be successful in the sense of meeting its ecological objectives if it is accompanied by a process of political and cultural reforms. In this perspective, a comprehensively revised energy policy (renewable energies) and a change in individual mobility behaviour appear to be necessary criteria for the initiative to be successful.

The transport sector in particular has impressively demonstrated that technological progress and economic prosperity do not automatically lead to sustainable development. Although technological innovation has been successful for decades, for example in the construction of ever more efficient engines, transport is the only

sector today in which CO₂ emissions will continue to rise. Efficiency gains from technological innovations are repeatedly more than counteracted by the absolute growth in traffic volume, which continues to this day. In order to avoid a similarly contradictory development in electric transport, there is an obvious need for courage in the sphere of political regulation, even when this involves highly unpopular measures such as the reassessment of subsidies for private transport in favour of other modes of transport.

Primacy of Politics

Last but not least, historical developments make it clear that real progress can only be achieved if the primacy of politics over the economy is asserted and if the political will to shape society has an impact on long-established social traditions. Thus, for example, the introduction of the sewage system for private houses at the end of the nineteenth century—today considered an undisputed achievement of civilization—was part of the political clashes in the context of the hygiene movement and was accompanied by fierce conflicts. For various reasons, people resisted intervention in their everyday lives, which ultimately delayed the implementation of technical innovation for decades. At the time it was the city authorities who imposed the sewage system for the common good and against the massive resistance of the population.

Achievement of Civilization

However, there are also recent examples that illustrate the power of politics to act in the common good. Who would have thought that a Europe-wide smoking ban could be imposed overnight? A widely established cultural practice was thus quickly banished from the public sphere by politicians for the benefit of the general public—in this case, however, without having to overcome extreme resistance. In contrast to the historical example of sewage disposal, the population in this case, contrary to the prevailing impression, was obviously mentally prepared for the change. Here, politicians were assigned the task of finally bringing a decade-long process of enlightening civil society to a collectively binding decision. The politically-induced phase-out of nuclear power would also be worthy of consideration in this context. As contradictory as it is, this process—initiated by the Democratic Socialist-Green Party government in the late 1990s and ultimately confirmed by the Christian Democratic-Liberal government in the wake of the

Japanese nuclear catastrophe in 2011—impressively underscores the potential scope for political action. At the same time, the phase-out of nuclear power marks a shift in energy policy towards renewable energies, which are nothing short of an indispensable criterion for the ecological success of the electric car.

Political Control and Enlightenment

Since in a democratic society changes—for example in the mobility behaviour of the population—cannot simply be imposed or enforced through far-reaching prohibitions, measures of political control must be accompanied by educational initiatives. A re-examination of the sometimes mythical cult of the car would be an important goal in this respect. In turn, for this to happen it is indispensable to undertake a cultural-historical, critical examination of the emergence and significance of this cult as well as the historical fixation on the car as a leading product of modern traffic development and as an object of conspicuous consumption (cf. Ruppert, Chap. 2). Furthermore, the critical examination of current design developments in the field of electric cars is of great importance. The symbolism created by the designers has a considerable influence on the nature of the emotional relationship to the product. The design of electric cars will play a decisive role in determining whether it will be possible to temper the mental fixation on the car as an object of extravagant longings for power, speed and prestige and instead to create new and ultimately more humane meaning for the car (cf. Keichel, Chap. 4).

The Leading Product of Modern Traffic Development

We are convinced that the ‘ecological question’ today represents a challenge comparable to the ‘social question’ of the nineteenth century. As in the past, it is a question of value-related, comprehensive cultural change in the interest of the common good. The transport sector is of major importance for meeting environmental challenges. If it is to be successful, the introduction of electric transport must be linked to far-reaching cultural reforms of individual mobility behaviour (cf. Ahrend and Stock, Chap. 5). Due to the importance of the car as an economic object and the frequently demonstrated libidinous character of private car ownership, the actors involved must reckon with considerable resistance from interest groups as well as certain parts of the population, as was the case in the past and in other contexts. Ultimately, this resistance can only be attenuated through clearly

articulated political resolve, by educating the public and through the development of positive alternatives.

The Ecological Challenge

The authors of this volume would like to make a contribution to this process. They argue that the decision to opt for electric transport should be used as an opportunity to critically examine all the experiences associated with the more than 100 year history of ‘automobility’. The electric car, we argue, should be the starting point for a reform of the mobility culture of modern societies. The aim of this reform should be to alleviate the sometimes irrational cult of mobility and to encourage a better balance between the use of collective transport systems on the one hand and private cars on the other.

The Cult of Mobility

For this, the mobility form of ‘being a passenger’ in relation to ‘being at the wheel oneself’ would have to be emotionally re-evaluated. This may seem difficult, but here too historical developments make it clear that reinterpretations of this kind are possible in principle: for a long time horseback riding was associated with the strength and power of warriors and rulers. When in the sixteenth century “ceremonial carriages” were developed, the rulers changed from horses to carriages. Being driven around in a carriage was now regarded as a sign of a privileged position in society and was therefore more attractive than riding a horse. This perspective remained valid until the beginnings of auto-mobilisation: it is claimed that Gottlieb Daimler, for example, still assumed that a maximum of 5000 automobiles could be sold because at the time more chauffeurs were not to be found.

Tempering the Mental Fixation on the Automobile

If over a long period of time being a passenger was more highly esteemed than holding the reins oneself, it is conceivable that this could be the case again in the future. The decisive factor is the meaning that people assign to the respective form of mobility. As an expression of a modern lifestyle based on reason and responsibility, using public transport systems could become as important as conserving heating energy or separating waste. However, this would require an attractive range

of collective transport systems and a tempering of the mental fixation of a large part of the population on the automobile. The car should not, however, be demonized or even abolished. Rather, it is a question of rediscovering its actual qualities by using it in a more moderate, less obsessive way.

There is some evidence that a less excessive and at the same time less frenetic use of the car increases rather than decreases the quality of life—quite apart from the positive ecological effects. If it were possible to combine the introduction of the electric car with a paradigm shift in mobility culture, the criteria by which the (everyday) suitability of electric cars would be assessed would shift. What has so far always been interpreted as a weakness in comparison with cars powered by an internal combustion engine may well prove to be a strength.