



In Place of an Afterword

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Report from an Ongoing Self-experiment

Claus Leggewie

Three years ago—I didn't note down the exact date nor did I take a farewell photo—the last automobile I owned was taken away. It was a 1996 silver-blue-grey *Jaguar XJ-6*. The upscale car was already quite old and would have needed an overhaul for a few thousand euros. If my love for automobiles had been as pronounced as half a century earlier, between 1955 and 2005 for example, I would have invested the money without grumbling. The same goes for the sinful purchase price, which is, of course, now exceeded by every 1-year-old Passat. But the looming TÜV (roadworthiness) inspection strengthened the temptation to try out a life (almost) without a car. And to bring the knowledge I had accumulated about the overall harmful effects of gasoline-powered individual transport halfway into line with my actions. As long as the vehicle—which is a pleasure to drive—was parked outside my front door, it's not likely I would have switched to public transport, taxis and the occasional rental car.

C. Leggewie (✉)

Justus Liebig University Gießen, Gießen, Germany

e-mail: claus.leggewie@zmi.uni-giessen.de

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Harmonising Knowledge and Actions

My decision was made easier by the fact that my wife owns a car, so I was still able to take the daughter to school in the car and to the usual afternoon events or to the children's birthday party, for example, or to transport heavy loads in the station wagon. But the car wasn't always available for these purposes either, so the bottom line was that, while my life wasn't dramatically disrupted, the change was noticeable.

Gain in Quality of Life

I survived the renunciation and got used to the absence of one of my cars. I'm not missing much, and I'm in the process of acknowledging that there has been a gain in my quality of life. I don't yearn for the Jaguar, I'm hardly likely to buy another car, only occasionally I miss—the CAR.

Initially I would have rated the loss of prestige and reputation higher than the practical difficulties. To think of myself without a car at all seemed to me and my friends hardly possible after such an intensively car-centred life. Since the first Ford 12M (1968), after various sets of wheels in the 1970s (VW Beetle, Renault R16) and a history of sports cars in the 1980s and 1990s (Alfa Romeo Guilia, BMW 525, Jaguar XJ6) it was clear that I didn't use vehicles with internal combustion engines solely and not even primarily as a means of transport, but I identified with them and used them as self-adornment. As I described elsewhere,¹ this went back to the experiences of the post-war period and reconstruction that I share with my whole generation of baby boomers. I liked to use a car for pure driving pleasure, I liked to drive fast (although almost never aggressively) and had myself photographed with my cars (Fig. 7.1). One of my first part-time jobs during my student years was to polish up wheel rims and bumpers at a dealer for luxury sedans and sports cars to promote sales (and take the fancy cars for a spin). I went on pilgrimages to car races, favouring the *Gran Turismo* sports car category, I hung around in pits and repair workshops for the sights and smells. I could pursue this eulogy—I find it neither strange nor embarrassing. But I lost my close affinity with cars once engine blocks were sealed up so that it was no longer possible to repair anything oneself anyway.

¹ *Mut statt Wut. Aufbruch in eine neue Demokratie*, ch. 5 ("Fat Cars"), Hamburg 2011, p. 92 ff.



Fig. 7.1 The author in the VW 1200 Export with folding roof, ca.1961 (Source: Leggewie)

Loss of Relationship as a Result of Abstract Technology

There was still the fun of driving, though. And the fact that it faded away and turned into its opposite has to do with the self-destructiveness of the “unrestricted mobility for free citizens” movement (*freie Fahrt für freie Bürger*)—increasingly annoying were the eternal traffic jams, the never-ending road and bridge repairs, the company representatives roaring up behind you in their Audis and BMWs, wildly flashing their headlights in order to get past. Buying extravagant and good-looking cars for myself also had to do with the fact that I abhorred the streamlined, monotonous models on offer. Anyway: the fun had long since passed me by, for almost all longer journeys I voluntarily switched to the train, which I experienced as consistently stress-free, more reliable and faster. This became the rule when I became a commuter again and had to go on many business trips. Trains are certainly not perfect, but the bottom line is a gain in the quality of travel.

Being a Passenger as a Gain in Quality of Travel

It was much more difficult for me to wait for the bus in bad weather with a heavy bag, to cover short distances on foot or by bicycle, not to spend the money saved on insurance and fuel for taxis and rental cars. Whether I spend more or less since getting rid of the car is something I have deliberately never calculated—saving

money was not the main reason for dispensing with the car. Rather, I wanted to try out for myself how difficult it is to practice new forms of mobility. That's why I wasn't interested in hybrid and electric cars, which (as the present book shows) simply replace one drivetrain with another and then continue as before. That's why VW's "blue motion" economy models left me relatively cold, reducing diesel consumption almost to the legendary three-liter level.

New Forms of Mobility

I don't want to be praised or mocked for having (half) done away with my car. It's my business, I don't go around moralizing and absolutely don't see myself as a role model. What was more important to me was that I would draw conclusions from realizing how much I had internalized the automobile as a kind of mental infrastructure and made myself dependent on it. The same applied to the last cigarette a few years earlier, or the introduction to a healthier diet and lifestyle, and giving up other bad habits. As always, this leads to lazy compromises and setbacks. After all, *I'm human*.

Liberation from Dependence: The Car as a Mental Infrastructure

The self-experiment has been anything but perfectly successful, but it's not about perfection, and I don't imagine that I could save the world with the greenhouse gas emissions I've avoided, or even serve as a role model in my milieu. The main aim was to avoid cognitive dissonance. I no longer wanted to be a part of the ridiculous central position of the automobile for the economy, society, politics and culture.

The most difficult task is giving up deeply habitualized individual transport. "Using the car" was and is the *default option*. I still have to think hard about how to get from A to B without the Jaguar (or the replacement car). How will I cope with the possible loss of time and elude the infantile promise made possible by the automobile to have or be able to do everything immediately everywhere? Will I realize what the gains of a "less is more" approach consist of and learn to enjoy the advantages of slowing down and the advantages of the partial renunciation of mobility, which I'm now practicing? Let's see if it works out.