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Concerning Cars: Automobility and the Contours of Control, Order, and Harm

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Abstract

Criminology has been coincident with the motor age, at least in the Global North. The history of automobility is bound up—in mutually conditioning ways—with changing patterns of crime and social control. Yet the car has remained in relative obscurity as a focus of criminological attention—often present, sometimes investigated as a niche topic but at the same time somehow absent. Against this backdrop, this review describes some key elements of the close relation between automobility and the changing contours of control, order, and harm and offers some preliminary conceptual resources for identifying and investigating the criminological resonances of that most pervasive and mundane of modern objects: the automobile. By treating auto-dominance as a form of slow violence, we can, I argue, make the car into a vehicle for rethinking how to practice criminology in a time of climate breakdown.

> The type of individual produced. . .by industrial modernity. . .and the productivist welfare state has been brutally plunged into a new world, with all the strange psychological and social consequences that this can have. One striking example of this discrepancy is the attachment to individual mobility, and its main technical realization, the automobile. The abundance of energy and the policies of urban sprawl associated with it have given shape to infrastructures and anthropological profiles, to forms of desire, whose inertia over time is at present coming into violent collision with the reality principle of the climate. The psychosocial attachments to automobile autonomy and the sense of self that it cultivates are being called into question by the rise in energy costs, and urban infrastructures, however recent, appear unsuited to the new ecological regime.
>
> —Charbonnier (2020, pp. 250–51)

> Driving is what normal people do.
>
> —Paterson (2007, p. 223)

INTRODUCTION: ON THE CAR AS A CRIMINOLOGICAL OBJECT

Criminology has been coincident with the motor age, at least in the Global North. The history of automobility is bound up—in mutually conditioning ways—with changing patterns of crime and social control (Headworth 2023). The car first transformed, and has since structured, the design and ordering of city space as well as the prospects of urban community. The car has been a target of crime (an object to be damaged or stolen) and the means of criminal activity (the getaway car, the car bomb, the car as weapon). It is a leading actor in cultures and practices of predominantly male transgression—speeding, joyriding, drunk driving, road rage, the police chase. It has transformed people's relation to police authority in particular and state regulation in general: The motor age brought the middle-classes into a new antagonistic relation with policing while intensifying the social control of minorities. The car is a cause of mass injury and death, in ways that problematize standard distinctions between crime and harm and dominant representations of lawbreakers and victims. It has been marketed and sold as a cocoon protecting its occupants from a dangerous environment. But it is also now viewed—and contested—as a significant agent of ecological damage.

Yet you would not learn much about all this by glancing at the collective output of criminology. The car has remained in relative obscurity as a focus of criminological attention—often present at the scene, and on occasions written about as a niche topic, but at the same time eerily absent. Across much of the planet, the car has become the quintessential technology of everyday life, taken for granted as an all-purpose means of getting around. For this reason—and despite having become a normal and serious risk of modern existence (Garland 2001)—road traffic danger tends not to feature very prominently in the discursive framing of crime, disorder, and social control. Remedying this neglect requires two kinds of problematization—two simultaneous efforts to "exoticize the domestic" (Bourdieu 1984, p. xi). We must first treat the car—that most banal and taken-for-granted of objects—as if it were strange, or at least as if its dominance over modern urban life was odd and in need of explanation and evaluation. But we must also seek some distance from the field of criminology to ask the following questions: Why have the automobile and its harms been largely relegated to other forms of inquiry and discourse? And what would happen to our field if we made the car into one of criminology's focal objects of concern?

Since it appropriated urban streets and marginalized or expelled other street users in the early decades of the twentieth century, the car has become a dominating fixture of the urban landscape.[1] Cars are the fulcrum of socio-technical systems of automobility (Urry 2004) comprising the following interconnected elements: a manufactured object; a major item of individual consumption; a socio-technical complex of roads, industries, filling stations, service stations, etc.; a hegemonic form of quasi-private mobility that subordinates other mobilities; a dominant cultural representation of the good life; and a significant cause of environmental resource use and degradation. The key here is not simply to focus on the car as object but on this system of material and psycho-social entanglements (Rajan 1996, Seiler 2008), a system shaped by power relations and embodying particular social and political values. Automobility has, in particular, become pivotal to how people navigate towns and cities and how urban space is designed and ordered. Cars have made themselves an indispensable means of getting around for those who have access to them and an inescapable object to be watched and negotiated by all of us, owners and nonowners alike. We are, as Miller (2001, p. 3) puts it, "socialized to take them for granted, so that we think our world through a sense of self in which driving, roads and traffic are simply integral to who we are and what we presume to do each day."

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[1] For histories of this appropriation in the United States, see McShane (1994) and Norton (2008), and in the United Kingdom, see Plowden (1973) and O'Connell (1998).

As Rajan (1996) notes, with reference to the US case, automobility has become part of the formative context of modern social life, part and parcel of its basic institutional arrangements and imaginative preconceptions. Yet although cars are pervasive in most of the world's cities, automobility in its US low-density environment variety is not the norm everywhere and for everyone. Rather, auto-dominance is a geographically variable quality. Consider the densely populated centers of cities such as Chicago, New York, and San Francisco in the United States; Amsterdam, Barcelona, Copenhagen, Gothenburg, and Paris in Europe; Beijing, Hong Kong, Seoul, and Tokyo in Asia; and Bogotá in South America. All these have significant levels of car use but are organized, in their central areas, on a multi-modal basis. Moreover, even in cities characterized by auto-dominance, there is a (very) significant share of the population that does not own or drive a car for reasons of age, financial resource, health, or criminal conviction, and large numbers of urbanites who are routinely exposed to the externalities of automobile dominance—traffic risk as non–car user, air/noise pollution, etc.[2] We need an analysis of automobility that carefully attends to these global inequalities from the start.

Against this backdrop, treating the car as a criminological object is a discursive move that shifts—and begins to contest—its dominant social meanings. It is to take an object of everyday necessity and scrutinize the effects of a system of car dependency that is commonly regarded as benign or inescapable. It is to take a commodity treated in modern consumer societies as a source of personal freedom, efficacy, pleasure, and social status and to relocate it in a register of harm and criminal behavior, hyper-regulation and control, and even violence and death. It is to refuse the aura of inevitability that has come to surround auto-dominance and, instead, "theorize and politicize it" (Böhm et al. 2006, p. 4).

But focusing attention on the car—and systems of automobility—is also to think afresh about, and potentially destabilize, the field of criminology and its constitutive questions: Why are laws made? Why are they broken? What do we—and what should we—do in response? (Cohen 1988, p. 9). We can also connect criminology's remit to broader questions to do with the organization and regulation of daily life. By following the car, we can begin to interrogate the field's development; ask questions about its organizing categories of offender and victim and who comes to populate them; rethink how we define and understand crime and violence; examine the boundary work that has relegated harms and accidents to other registers of discourse and action; and extend key criminological ideas—denial, neutralization, labeling, etc.—to novel settings. We are able, in short, to pose new questions about criminology's history, present condition, and future prospects. We might also disclose something about the self-understanding of criminologists, accustomed more to studying marginal populations and the institutions that control them than practices of everyday life in which they are themselves embedded. When I present on this topic or mention my interest to colleagues, I am struck by how people often respond in ways that imagine they have been addressed as a driver rather than as a social scientist taking part in an academic conversation. I am also commonly asked if I drive a car (I do). These reactions are instructive.

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[2] There exist significant urban–rural divides in this regard. Although many city dwellers are able to rely on public transport or active travel, most rural populations are basically forced to own a car if they want to get around. The analysis that follows in this review is principally focused on cars in urban settings.

Centering the car in criminological analysis is not, however, without risk. In this review, I take methodological inspiration and guidance from several efforts to decipher social life by "following the thing" (Marcus 1995), an approach that attends closely to the forms, uses, and trajectories of material objects (Appadurai 1986) and treats nonhuman objects as agents (or what Latour terms actants) with productive effects (Bennett 2009, Latour 1992). The first risk here is that of choosing inconsequential objects. A skeptic might observe that whenever crime is committed, or policing or punishment enacted, the relevant parties are typically wearing shoes. But no one, they insist, seriously thinks that criminology should devote more attention to, still less be transformed by, the shoe! The thought is that cars are akin to shoes, a largely inert or "neutral technology, permitting social patterns that would happen anyway" (Sheller & Urry 2000, p. 738). I hope to show, instead, that cars are fatefully productive objects, or as Paul Gilroy (2001, p. 82) put it, "probably the most destructive and seductive commodities around us" with the capacity to reorder and reorganize social relations and hierarchies.[3]

A second risk in rendering the car an object of criminological concern is recentering the United States as the focus of analysis (in contradistinction to recent efforts to Southernize or decolonize the field; Aliverti et al. 2023, Carrington et al. 2019), not least because of the centrality of the automobile to American life and culture and the fact that much of the literature on the car is rooted in that context (Headworth 2023). My engagement with that literature begins in the US context, focusing on how automobility transformed people's relation to police authority in particular and state regulation in general, especially with respect to the middle class, while at the same intensifying the racialized control of Black Americans. What follows then is less a review of an existing field than an investigation into how attending closely—and more globally—to automobility allows us to re-evaluate some established criminological debates and open up some new lines of inquiry. By treating auto-dominance as a form of slow violence (Nixon 2011), we can, I argue, make the car into an object through which to rethink how to practice criminology in a time of climate breakdown.

ROADS TAKEN: AUTOMOBILITY AS CARCERALITY AT LARGE

Over the course of the twentieth century, the United States developed into a "uniquely automobile-dependent" society and "the world's foremost car culture" (Headworth 2023, pp. 2, 214). In 1910, there were 500,000 cars in the United States, a figure that had risen to 18 million by 1935. By 2020, that figure stood at 290 million. 91% of US households have access to a car; 60% have access to two cars. 75% of Americans get to work by driving alone; the average American drives 39 miles per day. The average American household spends 17% of its budget on transportation; low-income households spend as much as 30% (Knowles 2023, Livingston & Ross 2023).[4]

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[3] There is, however, analytical value in trying to disentangle the consequences of adopting a mobility approach to criminology that is more agnostic to the specific transport mode that is used/normalized from the specific effects that automobility in its historically and currently manifest forms has generated.

[4] The United States may be a global outlier in its auto-dependence, but it is far from unique. In 2020, the United Kingdom had 38 million registered cars, a figure projected to double by 2050. In India, car numbers

For the most part, however, car dominance is not understood as dependence but as freedom. Cars are ideologically and commercially promoted by oil producers and automobile manufacturers and commonly experienced by their users as vehicles of personal autonomy (Lomasky 1997). Cars are significant rites of passage, modes of expression, and status symbols. They hold out the promise of freedom to travel where one wishes, when one wants, on a route of one's own choosing, without being at the mercy of timetables set by authorities (Dant & Martin 2001). The privately owned car is a form of personal mobility that is dry, warm, and—for its occupants at least—relatively safe. It offers valuable "me time" in a soundscape and with companions of one's choice and permits travel without the discomfort and (perceived) risks of strangers, risks that, in a US context especially, come racially charged. This mix of autonomy, efficacy, pleasure, and convenience has long been celebrated in American culture (Flink 1988), as it has across other national cultures (Appleyard 2022, Davison 2004, Sachs 1992). As Sarah Seo (2019, pp. 9–10) put it, "Cars radically changed daily lives and aspirations, culture and the built environment, and people's relations with each other and their communities. Even more profoundly, the car came to represent solitude and freedom."

Yet the car is also among the most criminogenic and harmful devices ever invented. In an American context, these criminogenic effects were evident from the earliest days of the automotive age. Cars soon became tools in the commission of various forms of crime, enabling offenders to make quick getaways, store and move the proceeds of offending, and operate across state lines (Headworth 2023, Seo 2019). Cars became valuable targets that could be stolen for use or profit. People began deploying them as weapons: In Philadelphia in 1925, police arrested nearly 9,000 people for using vehicles to commit assault and battery (Heitmann & Morales 2014). Cars created new sites of illicit behavior—a juvenile magistrate is cited in the Lynds' famous study of *Middletown* describing cars as "houses of prostitution on wheels" (Lynd & Lynd 1929, p. 114). Finally, of course, cars brought unprecedented danger to the roads.[5] According to Clay McShane (1994, p. 129), by 1905 in New York City, "death on the streets" had become "a routine part of metropolitan life." Between 1920 and 1929, more than 200,000 people were killed on US roads (Norton 2008). In 1930, four times as many people were killed on the roads than died from crime (Seo 2019).

Against the backdrop of the criminal activity and mass chaos that it brought to American life, the car became an object, not only of freedom but of regulation and control. Sarah Seo (2019) meticulously details how mass mobility, and the growth of traffic laws, fundamentally altered twentieth-century American policing and police relations with the public.[6] Traffic, she argues, became the dominant factor in the growth of local and state police forces, as the car helped to reshape and bolster the image of the police as (mobile) professional crime fighters (see also Headworth 2023). Mass mobility, and its attendant disorder, generated new problems of how to discipline that seemingly paradoxical criminological subject: the law-abiding citizen who kept violating traffic laws. As private property on public roads, the car threw up novel and challenging

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jumped threefold in the decade from 2004 to 2014. In Mumbai, the numbers rocketed from 320,000 in 1981 to three million in 2018; road space has not grown, and the city's transport is routinely gridlocked (Knowles 2023). On the Chinese case, see Zhang (2019).

[5] Or at least signaled a dramatic technological shift from horse-powered to machine-powered movement. The car was immediately preceded by horse-drawn carriages that brought their own specific forms of danger and pollution and generated a regime of regulation and criminalization (McShane 1994).

[6] Emsley (1993, p. 360) details similar developments in England and Wales. The car, he argues, "was central to the process whereby the English state encroached more and more on the lives of its inhabitants." It especially brought the upper and middle classes into a "new relation to the law" (Emsley 1993, pp. 368–69). On traffic chaos as a spur to police intervention in urban life in late-colonial India, see Arnold (2012).

constitutional quandaries, problems the US Supreme Court resolved—in *Carroll v. United States* (1925)—by creating the automotive exception to Fourth Amendment protections against warrantless searches. That case remains the controlling precedent to this day. In so doing, the court "effectively introduced the vehicle stop as a new category of citizen-state interaction" (Headworth 2023, p. 56) and made driving into an abiding locus of discretionary policing (Seo 2019).

These developments meant that "the automobile was not quite the unmitigated freedom machine it was celebrated to be. In fact, driving, even just being in a car, was the most policed aspect of everyday life" (Seo 2019, p. 8). This was not and is not, however, simply a matter of police. Cars have never been a symbol of the right to be left alone. Rather, one further paradoxical aspect of the equation of driving with personal freedom is that to drive is to exist in, and submit to, an environment "under the strict supervision of a public power" (Rajan 1996, p. 35). Let us consider its various dimensions, applicable not just in the United States but across most modern driving societies. Cars are required to meet safety and (today) emissions standards. They must pass annual inspections by state-authorized garages. If a car fails the test, its owner is prohibited from using their personal property. Drivers must be trained, licensed, and insured, and their behavior is subject to ongoing oversight by government and insurance companies (Headworth 2023, Seo 2019).

When they take to the road, drivers enter a transportation network that is the result of political choices about how best to allocate and use scarce urban space, one that is permeated by instructions and prohibitions. They and their passengers must wear a seat belt. They cannot drink excessive alcohol (Gusfield 1980, Lerner 2011) or use a mobile phone (Savigar-Shaw & Wells 2023). "A plethora of regulatory schemes" (Böhm et al. 2006, p. 6) tells motorists where, in what direction, and at what speed they can drive. Rules govern when they can stop and go. When it comes to parking, an extensive range of micro-controls and sanctions instruct drivers as to where, when, and for how long they are allowed to appropriate portions of public space with their property (Woolgar & Neyland 2014), albeit that noncompliance is extraordinarily high (Newburn & Ward 2022). Today, motorists' movements can be monitored by networks of speed and automatic number plate recognition cameras (Headworth 2023, Wells 2012); disciplined using autonomous simulated justice (O'Malley 2010); and subject to citizen policing aided by smartphones and dash-cams. The modern car has itself become an active agent in the governance of its users—alerting occupants who fail to belt up, warning against or even preventing certain forms of (bad) driver behavior, and sending data to corporate servers (Eski & Schuilenburg 2021, Headworth 2023, Livingston & Ross 2023). Autonomous vehicles—should they ever become commonplace (Knowles 2023, Norton 2022)—will for the most part intensify these trends.[7] Automobiles may be promoted and experienced as objects of personal freedom. But the mundane reality of car use is subjection to regulation and surveillance.

This paradoxical relation between freedom and control has long been experienced with particular intensity by Black Americans, as a rich historical and empirical literature attests. In the mid-twentieth century, middle-class Blacks were among early enthusiasts for the freedom and independence of the automobile. As Sorin (2021) has shown, cars offered a form of spatial mobility whose value was heightened by a brutal history of confinement-in-place and that meant escape from the dangers and daily humiliations of segregated public transport. Car travel for Black motorists was not, however, without risk—of being refused food, fuel, or repairs; finding nowhere to stay; and even encountering a White mob. Blacks therefore tended to buy larger, dependable vehicles that could carry ample provisions and offer a place to sleep if required. Guidebooks sprung up listing businesses where Black drivers and their families would be welcome and served—most famously, the *Negro Motorists Green Book* (see Alderman et al. 2022). Cars have retained a prominent presence in Black American life and culture, often infused by a "strong democratic and countercultural charge" (Gilroy 2001, p. 87). A taste for certain makes, styles, and add-ons has also given vehicles consequential social meaning—for both users and police authorities. Given memories of enslaved constraint and ongoing injuries of racialized hierarchies, cars provide Black Americans with visible signs of (compensatory) belonging and status—a joining in with the "allure of speed, autonomy and privatized transport" (Gilroy 2001, p. 86). Gilroy poignantly records his uncertainty as to whether this represents a victory for Black freedom or car culture.

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[7] One does not have to buy into Silicon Valley visions of transportation futures (Marx 2022) to see that automobility in the long term may be quite different from what we have become habituated to, at least in particular geographical contexts. Partial automation of vehicles is one element here. But we also need to reckon with the ways in which cars become increasingly digitally connected to all kinds of infrastructures and each other. This will create new ways of regulating, securitizing, and punishing vehicles/drivers—not only by public authorities but also by insurance companies. On the potential implications of autonomous vehicles for criminal law and justice, see Gless et al. (2016), Westbrook (2017), and Günsberg (2022).

In *Cars and Jails*, Livingston & Ross (2023) report that these automotive "freedom dreams" are fondly shared by the Black prisoners they interviewed: Inmates yearn for the cars they have lost and those they might one day drive. Yet the "obvious pleasures they derived from their cars coexisted," Livingston & Ross (2023, p. 7) observe, "with an acute awareness of the perils of driving them." Car use and ownership are central to what Livingston & Ross (2023) call "carcerality at large"—the numerous ways in which discipline and control are exercised, especially over Black men, outside of prison (see also Bloch 2021). A key feature of that control is "the overpolicing of cars" (Seo 2019, p. 5), i.e., being targeted for what has come colloquially to be known as "driving while black." As mentioned, traffic enforcement also brings many White and middle-class people into contact with the police for the first time. But being pulled over in a vehicle by cops is "not an equally distributed experience" (Headworth 2023, p. 105). For the most part, it is also not a traffic stop. Rather, traffic law violations serve as pretext for stops, following which police conduct a "miniature roadside investigation" (Headworth 2023, p. 107) that can involve searching the car and questioning its occupants with a view to checking for any signs they are up to no good.

Epp et al.'s (2014) study in Kansas City found that investigatory stops are an entrenched, institutionalized practice that is the main source of racial disparities in policing (their data showed that traffic safety stops are racially equitable) and widely perceived as unfair regardless of the procedural politeness of the officers involved. It is a practice, they found, enabled by traffic laws containing voluminous potential infringements but one whose motives, meanings and effects have close to nothing to do with road safety (see also Baumgartner et al. 2018).[8] Across the United States, pretextual, investigatory traffic stops are a substantial means of revenue extraction for municipal and county authorities (Livingston & Ross 2023). They are also a leading precursor to police use of force—in 2015, nearly one-third of police shootings began with a traffic stop (Seo 2019, p. 266). Black and minority drivers typically come away from them having learned that the car is a durable and "arbitrary site of police power" (Livingston & Ross 2023, p. 59).

Livingston & Ross (2023) also show how US car dependency creates paths into (and back into) the American penal state, not only through traffic stops and revenue policing but also via the operation of a wild subprime car loans market directed at poor and Black Americans. Almost the first thing ex-prisoners do on release from prison is get a car. In all but a few American cities, cars are indispensable to finding (and then holding down) a job and repairing and maintaining contact with partners and children; in effect, just doing everyday life. Most will take on large loans for this purpose: The average amount financed for new vehicles in 2022 was $40,000 and for used vehicles it was $30,000; that year, the average monthly car loan payment exceeded $700 for the first time (Livingston & Ross 2023). Doing so means entering an unregulated market rife with predatory practices, e.g., punitive interest rates, hidden fees, and the enticement of further debt to cover repairs and replacement tires. It is a market set up on the expectation that most creditors will default—one company uses GPS trackers and a kill switch to cover this eventuality. The result is a "highly sprung debt-trap unevenly afflicting low-income and minority drivers" (Livingston & Ross 2023, p. 99) who face repossession, reduced credit scores, and potentially a jail sentence. Ultimately, Livingston & Ross (2023) show that poor Blacks are coerced—at great financial cost and often with dire consequences—into a car-dominated conception of American freedom. The system of automobility thereby makes its own small but independent contribution to the production and reproduction of carceral citizens, something that happens in part because to be without a car is to be deprived of transport justice, or what one might call infrastructural citizenship.

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[8] For related evidence on the pattern of police traffic stops in England and Wales, see Pearson & Rowe (2023).

One effect of these practices of racialized control is the systematic neglect and active delegitimation of road-related public safety. The structural injustices of American criminal justice operate in ways that tarnish or undermine what might otherwise be considered appropriate tools for achieving road safety, thereby amplifying traffic risk. American police have an established track record of using their traffic regulation responsibilities not to make roads safer for drivers and nondrivers but as a conduit for, inter alia, regulating Prohibition in the 1920s, waging a War on Drugs in the 1980s and 1990s, raising revenue for tax-starved municipalities in the 2000s, and generally subjecting minority populations to spatial and social regulation. The prospects in an American context for the success of road injury reduction programs like Vision Zero may depend on reckoning with these ingrained habits of racist and lucrative policing (Livingston & Ross 2023; see also Fliss et al. 2022, Vis. Zero Netw. 2024). License suspension and revocation are further cases in point. The removal of the permission to drive is a legitimate—and arguably underutilized—road safety measure.[9] But in the United States, it is seldom used for that purpose, at least since the 1970s (Headworth 2023). Instead, licenses are commonly removed as a collateral sanction of crimes that have nothing to do with driving: Between 2004 and 2018, 90% of revocations in New Jersey were for nondriving offenses (Headworth 2023). Many states suspend licenses for unpaid financial obligations; twenty-four states restrict driving privileges for drug convictions, and all fifty states restrict driving privileges for nonpayment of child support (Headworth 2023).[10] In a car-dependent society, one result is that millions of Americans are driving without a license—and therefore without insurance. Using license suspension as a collateral punishment for crime serves, in effect, to make American roads more dangerous.

In his recent overview of the topic, Headworth (2023) offers what he terms as a car-window perspective on American criminal justice—a viewpoint at least implicitly shared by much of the rich, critical literature on the regulated freedoms of automobility.[11] It is a standpoint that "uses the car to think through major changes in criminal law and its enforcement" (Headworth 2023, p. 4). This is one way of treating the car as a criminological object. But the view from inside a car offers a partial, protected, and often perilous outlook on the social world. It is the vantage point of those who enjoy—in mobility terms—the privileges of domination. It is not the same as apprehending that object and its effects from the multiple perspectives of those who dwell or get around outside it. In the present case, the car-window view gives rise to a tendency to treat car dependence as an inescapable fact of American life rather than something amenable to intervention and change, or else carries a residual attachment to the ideals of American automotive freedom, in thrall to "the heady promise of the open road" (Livingston & Ross 2023, p. 173). The effect is a literature that seems more comfortable deploying the car as a vehicle for the critique of American criminal justice and governance than in extending that critical sensibility to systems of auto-dominance and their disorderly and harmful effects. One never quite manages to shake off the "authoritarian force of that stern American obligation to drive and lead a driving life" (Gilroy 2001, p. 83).

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[9] For a counterview describing how driving licenses operate as a form of social and spatial control of First Nations peoples in Australia, see Masterton et al. (2023).

[10] See McElhattan & Headworth (2024) on the racialized character of the "incongruent" removal of licenses for nondriving offenses.

[11] Headworth's book is one of the few book-length accounts of the field; the only other of which I am aware, focusing on the United Kingdom, is Corbett (2003). Excellent treatments of particular aspects, such as on car theft (Heitmann & Morales 2014), driving offenses (King 2020), drunk driving (Jacobs 1989, Lerner 2011, Light 1994), and speed enforcement (Wells 2012), can also be found.

ROADS TAKEN FOR GRANTED: INFRASTRUCTURES OF CRIME AND DISORDER

> This new highway system will affect our entire economic and social structure. The appearance of the new arteries and their adjacent areas will leave a permanent imprint on our communities and people. They will constitute the framework within which we must live.
>
> —Moses (1956, p. 31)

That stern obligation to get around by car is inscribed in the physical infrastructure of American cities—indeed, most towns and cities around the globe (e.g., Gopakumar 2020), although the force of the attendant instruction to drive is more insistent in some cities than in others and is in certain places today being countered. But auto-dominance of the urban landscape has not always been the case, and the history of that dominance is a story of bitter conflict over the meanings and uses of public space and the relative value of human life. It was, as Peter Norton (2008, p. 2) has shown, a story of "blood, grief and anger in American city streets."

The fateful historical moment in that story is the 1920s. Over the preceding two decades, cars were introduced to streets that custom dictated were shared by pedestrians, horses, trolleys, cyclists, and children playing and used for assorted purposes by the community at large. "Cars violated prevailing notions of what a street is for" (Norton 2008, p. 7) and radically imperiled those who used them for other legitimate purposes. During the 18 months that the United States fought in World War One, twice as many Americans were killed on the country's roads as died in that conflict (Headworth 2023). In 1925, cars and trucks killed approximately 7,000 American children (Norton 2008). As car ownership spread, a battle waged between the interests of pedestrians, anxious parents, police, traffic engineers, and a newly formed alliance of motor lobbyists, and over competing ideologies of safety, order, efficiency, and freedom (Norton 2008). New labels were mobilized in cultural struggles over this dangerous intruder on urban streets, e.g., road hog, speed demon, and gasoline madness. Public memorials were erected for slain children (Norton 2008). Various police, legal, and design efforts were made to control the speed of these new vehicles. At the same time, new criminal categories and laws—notably jaywalker and jaywalking—were created to discipline pedestrians (Norton 2008), as a fierce campaign was fought to make roads safe for auto-freedom and traffic safety a problem not of invasive drivers (save in respect of the new category of reckless ones) but for everyone else.

By 1930, Norton (2008) shows, the motor lobby—and the car—had largely triumphed in its battle with other street users over the allocation and meaning of urban space. As the conflict was brought to a rhetorical close, a new kind of city emerged and a new kind of urban common sense took shape. It was "a city that conforms to the needs of motorists," Norton (2008, p. 7) concludes;

one whose built infrastructure was to be reconstructed with ramps, bypasses, tunnels, expressways, and roundabouts and where the mundane experience of all urbanites (drivers and nondrivers alike) was to become inseparable from the flexible coercion wrought by the dominance of automobility (Sheller & Urry 2000, Taylor 2003). It was a common sense that adjusted to life in cities given over to cars and in large measure decided that mass injury and death were prices worth paying for the freedom, comfort, and convenience of mass motoring. We are still living—and dying—with that twin settlement today, albeit that there are signs of it being recontested, as we shall see.

A second key historical moment in the story of auto-dominance was inaugurated by the Interstate Highways Act of 1956. The act allocated $26 billion of federal money to build a 47,000-mile network of highways that, over the ensuing decade, entrenched the place of the car in American life and further transformed its cities. It did so in ways that flattened, disfigured, or disorganized often poor, Black neighborhoods while cementing racial segregation in the built environment (Lewis 2013).[12] It is estimated that 475,000 households and more than a million people were displaced by highway construction. Further millions were left living and working in hollowed-out communities (Archer 2020). I-95 tore out the center of the large and vibrant area of Overtown in Miami when an eight-lane highway destroyed 87 acres of housing and commercial property and displaced 32,000 people. I-20 in Atlanta formed a barrier between Black neighborhoods to the north and White ones to the south. St. Paul's I-94 displaced one-seventh of that city's Black residents (Archer 2020; see also Henderson 2006). The list goes on. Across the country, "highways were built through and around Black communities," Archer (2020, pp. 1267–68) argues, "to physically entrench racial inequality and protect White spaces and privilege." Roads, she continues, were physical "boundaries that could withstand the evolution of civil rights laws." The new highway network also underpinned the movement of millions of fearful White residents who materially and ideologically abandoned US urban centers for the suburbs (Henderson 2006, Knowles 2023, Kruse 2005). In Simmel's (1994) terms, highway infrastructure offered a bridge out of the city for middle-class Whites and Blacks while erecting doors within and between the disadvantaged neighborhoods of those left behind.[13]

Criminology has highlighted various relevant consequences of the automotive transformation of modern (American) cities. Cars, as mentioned, have been acknowledged as an active agent in the extended mobility of offenders and offending, spreading big-city problems to smaller towns and rural areas (Headworth 2023). The mass ownership of automobiles in the decades after 1945 created millions of valuable and portable objects, the theft of which contributed enormously to the exponential rise in volume crime from the 1960s to the mid-1990s (Felson & Boba 2010, Garland 2001). The subsequent crime drop has been a consequence of a significant measure of ongoing (although only partially successful) efforts to make cars more difficult to steal (Farrell et al. 2011). Suburban sprawl was an indirect cause of property crime becoming "a prominent fact of modern life" (Garland 2001, p. 106) during the latter third of the twentieth century: By separating where people lived from where they worked, suburbs became collections of homes containing suitable targets in relatively empty neighborhoods lacking capable guardianship (Felson & Boba 2010, Singer & Drakulich 2019). Sporadic attention has also been paid to the ways in which highway construction "produced isolation and immiseration in the neighbourhoods they cut through" (Headworth 2023, p. 80), with concentrating effects upon levels of poverty, property crime, and violence (Kim & Hipp 2018, McCutcheon 2021). Marshall Berman's (1982) analysis of the impact on local neighborhood life of Robert Moses's Cross-Bronx Expressway offers an evocative case-in-point of highway-induced social disorganization.

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[12] This is very much a tale of automobile appropriation of cities—one that is echoed in modernist postwar urban development across North America and Western Europe (Gunn 2013, Klemek 2011). But a counternarrative can be told about communities that were spared highway-related despoliation. Jane Jacobs's (1961) successful defiance of Robert Moses's proposed Lower Manhattan Expressway is perhaps the most renowned case-in-point (Flint 2011). Nor is this only a US story. On the case of London's abandoned mega-motorway and the urban blight it created, see Walker (2022); Verlaan (2021) offers a contrasting account of Dutch planners reckoning with the threat of auto-dominance from the 1960s to the 1980s.

[13] There is today increasing acknowledgment of how US cities were segregated by design in the mid-twentieth century (**https://segregatedbydesign.com**; see also Pyke 2016, Smart Growth Am. 2023). This recognition animates the claims of community leaders campaigning to decommission highways, many of which—a half-century on—need either repairing, replacing, or tearing down (see Kimble 2024).

It is an often-overlooked detail of Wilson & Kelling's (1982) influential account of urban disorder that the eponymous "broken window" is a car window. The neglect of this small fact is telling. For the most part, auto-dominance and its infrastructures are taken for granted in research on collective efficacy and urban disorder and treated as the immutable backdrop against which crime and disorder play out (something so buried in our sense of the city that we barely notice it) rather than active causal agents in the process. It is as if "the movement, noise, smell, visual intrusion and environmental hazards of the car are seen as largely irrelevant to deciphering the nature of city life" (Sheller & Urry 2000, p. 738). Robert Sampson's longitudinal study of neighborhood effects in Chicago has little to say about the impact of the motor age on the social life of the city (Sampson 2012).[14] A recent textbook on *Urban Criminology* contains not a single index entry on cars, infrastructure, or road traffic (Atkinson & Millington 2019). The car, it seems, has remained an odd blind spot in social disorganization and related theories of urban crime (although see Lynch & Boggess 2015). Its absence is especially surprising given that Jane Jacobs—a key animating figure in this literature—was so attentive to the effects of car-centric planning: "Not TV or illegal drugs but the automobile has been the chief destroyer of American communities" (Jacobs 2007, p. 37).

So what avenues of inquiry might open up if environmental criminology stopped taking cars for granted? One possibility is treating auto-dominance and its infrastructures as one of the "factors beyond the locality" (Bottoms 2012, p. 469) that shape spatial patterns and social meanings of inequality, violence, and disorder. Automobility fundamentally alters the interactional order of urban environments, not just for those "autoselves" who pass through town or cityscapes at speed in enclosed boxes insulated from strangers (Randell 2017) but also because of how the car "imposes itself on the psychological state" of all other uses of urban space, demanding of them "constant self-control and vigilance" and "compulsory wide-awakeness and alertness to danger" (Freund & Martin 1993, p. 99; see also Taylor 2003). It is hard to imagine that these automotive dynamics have nothing to do with the patterns and meanings of informal social control and urban safety: At the very least, car dominance is an impediment to exploring the city in ways that generate everyday encounters across class, race, and gender divides and stimulate mutual respect (Bannister & Flint 2017).[15] One might, in this regard, attend more closely to those "situated moments wherein infrastructures impinge on social relations" (Harvey & Knox 2012, p. 525), with particular reference to the production and dynamics of those many residual spaces of urban danger that are by-products of the road network (e.g., Bahceci et al. 2023).

But we might also want to investigate the possibility that cars are objects of disorder—or "malign antisociality" (Gilroy 2001, p. 85)—in a more direct sense. Research on crime-related public anxieties has tended to overlook the car as a source of mundane insecurity. It has long been acknowledged that social and physical incivilities are important indicators of neighborhood decline (e.g., Farrall et al. 2009, Lewis & Salem 2017). Yet theorization of the sources and meanings of everyday security, and of related problems of disorder, antisocial behavior, and quality-of-life offending (McKenzie et al. 2010), has been largely silent on the ways in which cars occasion disorder and unsafety in urban settings. The car does not appear to fit into the publicly available categorization systems through which people see disorder (Sampson 2012). But what if, instead, criminology attended more closely to the ways in which auto-dominance can be—and is being—treated as a consequential component of people's sense of (their) neighborhoods, towns, and cities as safe and livable places? The field might, in this regard, direct inquiry toward concerns about where cars are driven (on roads or residential streets, in ways that endanger children at the school gate); how they are driven (their speed in residential settings, whether drivers navigate urban space as guests or owners) (Appleyard 1980); how often they are driven (with all that entails in terms of congestion and air/noise pollution); and where they are parked (with all its aggregate consequences for the layout and feel of urban environments).[16]

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[14] For a partial exception, see Sampson & Levy (2022)—although this review is focused on the criminogenic effects of everyday urban mobility, not so much on how people move and its impact on neighborhood life.

[15] Part of the objection Jane Jacobs (1961, p. 83) made to the auto-dominance of urban space was the damage it wrought to the walking and cycling infrastructure that formed part of the "built-in equipment that enables strangers to dwell in peace together." Gilroy (2001, p. 100) more pointedly contends that "the institution of American apartheid is closely connected to the extinction of the walking city."

If we are to treat automobility as a criminological topic in a manner attuned to the ways in which cars are seen as agents of disorder and accorded a more prominent place in urban harmscapes (Holley et al. 2020), a car-window view of criminal law and its enforcement will not suffice. It must be coupled with a theoretical and empirical sensitivity to the deleterious effects of auto-dominance on the lived experience and security of those who exist outside of automobiles—pedestrians, cyclists, children, urban dwellers, and, arguably, the planet.

ROADS TO TAKE: ON THE SLOW VIOLENCE OF AUTO-DOMINANCE

> This means. . .asking for each movement enacted how much violence and (human and nonhuman) suffering goes, or has gone, into making that specific form of mobility possible.
>
> —Verlinghieri & Schwanen (2020, p. 6)

There are signs today of a reckoning with the motor age, one that disrupts the normalized dominance the car has assumed over modern life and brings to the fore its damaging impact on the livability and safety of urban environments, and the wider planetary ecosystem. A century on from the decade of bitter struggles that ended with automobility's triumph, city authorities around the world are experimenting with measures aimed at generating "cracks in the car-system" (Urry et al. 2017, p. 14). These include restricting cars from cities or city centers (e.g., Ghent, Groningen, Ljubljana, Milan, Oslo, Pontevedra, Tokyo); congestion- or emission-charging schemes (London, New York, Paris); default 20-mph/30-kph speed limits on urban roads (Amsterdam, Bologna, Brussels, Scotland, Wales); low-traffic neighborhoods, superblocks, and 15-minute city initiatives (Barcelona, Montreal, London, Oxford, Paris); and reallocating urban space for dedicated walking and cycling infrastructure (beyond its heartlands in Denmark and the Netherlands, one can cite schemes implemented or proposed in Bogota, Brussels, Helsinki, Hyderabad, London, New York, Paris, Portland, San Diego, Taipei, and numerous other places).

We must take care not to overstate these trends, and it would be foolhardy to suggest we are approaching peak car, at least on a global scale. Most cities around the world continue to treat driving as "what normal people do" (Paterson 2007, p. 223). Powerful manufacturing and fossil fuel interests are invested in maintaining the pre-eminence of the car as a consumer object (rather than transforming cars into a pooled local resource). Cars are getting larger, heavier, and more polluting—the trend to electric vehicles notwithstanding. To all other than their occupants, they are now more dangerous; in the United States, pedestrian road deaths have risen 77% since 2010 and stand at a 40-year high (Gov. Highw. Saf. Assoc. 2023). Car-taming measures are seldom implemented without a political fight and are commonly framed as a culture war in which the rights of motorists are loudly and insistently defended. But there is little doubt that automobility is today subject to new forms of contestation, social conflict, civil disobedience, and struggles for and against criminalization. Against the backdrop of a climate crisis, the car is, once again, becoming a fraught reference point in struggles over equality and freedom and violence and domination, to which one might now add security and sustainability.

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[16] Mandatory parking minimums have had a marked dispersing effect on the design and social life of American cities (as well as making parking the only good the American state makes universally available). The result, Daniel Knowles (2023, p. 125) points out, "is a stupendous oversupply of parking spaces, to the detriment of literally everything else" (see also Grabar 2023).

The automobile, in this context, becomes an object of criminological attention in new and urgent ways. It also enables us to reframe, in concrete terms, the question of how criminology relates to the threat of climate breakdown. That relation currently takes several forms. Much of the field remains in effective denial, carrying on doing the same criminological work, as if the climate crisis were a matter external to the field and of little concern to its practitioners. Others have adapted their pre-existing interests in various ways, studying green prisons, for example (Jewkes & Moran 2015), or policing responses to climate emergencies (Blaustein et al. 2023). Some have abandoned criminology altogether, preferring to study harm and conflict in the Anthropocene under the umbrella of environmental security (Shearing 2015). The most lively and well-known response has been the formation of an active new specialism of green criminology, which has brought new harms—pollution, wildlife crime, environmental damage, ecocide—to the fore. This has generated important new work (South & Brisman 2020, White 2020) while leaving the rest of criminology relatively unchanged (Lynch & Long 2022). What has happened rather less, and is arguably needed, is what one might call a reckoning with the field—of the kind that has recently been undertaken in political thought (Charbonnier 2020) and history (Chakrabarty 2021)—in terms of both an environmental history of criminological thought and practice and a capacious reflection on new ways of practicing criminology in the midst of a planetary crisis.

What might it mean to treat the car as an object through which such an environmental reckoning with the field might be attempted? One option—rooted in everyday life—is to investigate the ways in which the automobile is implicated in what Agnew (2020, p. 52) calls "ordinary harms," by which he means acts "performed widely and regularly by individuals as part of their routine activities" that are "generally viewed as acceptable, even desirable" but that "collectively have a substantial impact on environmental problems." Agnew (2020, p. 52) explicitly mentions "using a gasoline-powered automobile" as a case-in-point. But maybe a more adequate departure point—politically, imaginatively, and theoretically—is to be found in the idea of slow violence. Such violence, Rob Nixon (2011, p. 2) writes, is "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all." Slow violence, he continues, is not "explosive and spectacular" but "incremental and accretive." Its "relative invisibility" is "seldom dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention" (Nixon 2011, p. 3). Its "slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes" present "formidable representational obstacles that can hinder our efforts to mobilize and act decisively" (Nixon 2011, p. 2).

I want, in what remains of this review, to chip away at those representational obstacles by reframing the automobile as an object of harm—to public safety, to livable neighborhoods, to planetary futures—and sketching the research agendas that follow from doing so. Three roads can be taken here. The first involves thinking afresh about some relatively well-trodden criminological terrain to do with the phenomenology of driving and the place of car cultures in practices of everyday transgression. A second involves bringing questions of traffic injury and death under a criminological gaze to see what new lines of inquiry and theorization emerge. The third requires exploration of what is animating—and at stake in—contemporary social conflicts over auto-dominance as a source of ecological harm. We are concerned, in sum, with speed, safety, and sustainability.

Speed: Re-Framing Automotive Transgression

Speed is a recurring criminological issue. A rich body of research in (especially) the sociology of deviance and cultural criminology has focused on how cars—both in general and as specific material-semiotic conglomerates—have become vehicles of expressive masculinity, subcultural commitment, and criminal transgression (Thalia & Tranter 2018). This focus has given rise to closely observed studies of hot-rod enthusiasts (Moorhouse 1991) and of the seductive place of cars in youth culture (Best 2006; see also Carrabine & Longhurst 2002). There are studies documenting practices of street-racing (Lumsden 2013) and joyriding from English cities to Belfast and Riyadh (Campbell 1993, Menoret 2014, O'Connell 2006). But as Matza & Sykes (1961) taught us long ago, such delinquent practices are often subterranean means of acting out values that are, in fact, widespread and mainstream. So it is with driving.

The car occupies a prominent position in everyday lives and livelihoods and a celebrated location in popular cultures, not only in its North American and European epicenters (Flink 1988, Sachs 1992) but in varying respects across the globe (e.g., Green-Simmons 2017, Young 2001). Against this backdrop, a parallel literature has conveyed the range of "auto-emotions" (Sheller 2004) that routinely attend the phenomenology of driving—from the seductions and banal acceptance of speed (Ferrell 2003, Morris 2010, Wells & Savigar 2019) to daily experiences of frustration, boredom, irritation, and resentment and moments of violence and rage (Katz 2001, Michael 2001). There is little deviant, subcultural, or transgressive about any of this. Rather, it seems, there is something about the way in which automobility situationally couples the promise of individual freedom with the congested denial of that freedom that fuels anger among drivers. Which of them (us?) is not tempted, as Adorno (1984, p. 40) once observed, to project that anger onto the "vermin of the street—passers-by, children, bicyclists?" It is what normal people—or is it normal men?—do.

In a time of climate breakdown, these sentiments take on renewed significance and can be analyzed in new ways on both micro and macro scales. We now need to investigate and seek to understand not merely the phenomenology of driving but the full range of "psychosocial attachments to automobile autonomy and the sense of self that it cultivates" (Charbonnier 2020, p. 250). This requires appreciation and appraisal of the lived experience of car dependency, whether in terms of the feelings of personal sovereignty, comfort, and flexibility that lead drivers to experience a system of dependency as a form of individual autonomy; of how automobility is wrapped up with gendered understandings of what it means to be a good employee, parent, or carer; or of how—in sharply divided and unequal societies—driving is one of the few ways, and cars one of the few places, in which those subject to structural domination along axes of class, race, gender, or disability get to experience dignity, or feel, at least momentarily, in control. Automobility is thoroughly differentiated and differentiating. But there may nonetheless be something peculiarly equalizing about how auto-freedom is experienced. Because everyone is compelled to use the same roads, abide by the same rules, and form part of the same traffic jams, automobility forces all drivers to experience an equivalent world, with little or no option of buying private routes out of it. Not much else is like that. Rich and poor, Black and White, each get the same glimpse of (auto) freedom and share, in cities across the world, the same congested, frustrating denial of that freedom.

But we also need to attend to not only how the freedoms and frustrations of auto-dependency are understood but how the costs of auto-dominance to nondrivers, urban environments, and the planet are denied, or—to borrow another Sykes & Matza (1957) term—neutralized. Is our capacity to recognize and fully appraise automotive risks and harms conditioned, as Walker et al. (2023, p. 22) have suggested, by motonormativity, i.e., "shared, largely unconscious assumptions about how travel is, and must continue to be, primarily a car-based activity?" To what extent does it flow from the construction of the driver-subject as a pervasive cultural identity and the driver-citizen as a powerful political subject, one whose interests have from the beginning of the motor age been well-organized (Norton 2008) and whose rights have been loudly articulated and resolutely defended in the fora of modern politics? Against this backdrop, in situ understanding of "the sensual, erotic and irrational wellsprings of automobility" (Freund & Martin 1993, p. 164) needs to be coupled, at a macrolevel, with "sustained readings of the ideologies underlying driving and its relation to the urban form" (Rajan 1996, p. 34). As Rajan (2006, p. 114) suggests elsewhere, it is puzzling that automobility has not been the subject of scrutiny in liberal or indeed any other political theory, given that it "secures a particular form of social and material life for both drivers and nondrivers and intense regulation of how drivers and nondrivers live." The history of the car—politically speaking—is a history of freedom and equality, and of violence and domination, all key concepts in legal and political theory.

Safety: Beyond Reckless Drivers

In 2016, approximately 1.35 million people in the world were killed in road traffic collisions. Around 50 million were seriously injured. Road traffic injuries remain the leading cause of death for children and young people aged 5–29 (World Health Organ. 2018). The slaughter is unevenly distributed. Deaths and injuries have been generally trending downward in the richer countries of the Global North (with the aforementioned recent exception of the United States) but getting worse in low-income countries across the Global South (on Africa, see Lamont 2012). Death and injury also remain much more likely to befall vulnerable road users (pedestrians, cyclists, and motorcyclists) as well as the poor and racialized minorities (Schmitt 2020).

Criminology has paid relatively little attention to traffic injuries and fatalities. Insofar as it has, its focus has been on the minority of dangerous or reckless offenders who may be criminally responsible for causing injury and death due to excessive speed, drug-related impairment, or driving while distracted (Corbett 2003, King 2020). The rest can be—and generally have been—relegated to specialists in accident prevention. Why then make road safety an object of criminological attention? And if we do, what might follow? Braithwaite (2022, p. 55) has recently defended the idea—against the claims pressed by zemiologists (Canning et al. 2023)—that criminology's field of vision should focus on crime rather than harm, as the former "marks off certain kinds of wrongdoing as particularly harmful because they are acts of domination." He makes a powerful case. But it risks criminology making arbitrary or morally questionable decisions as to the kinds of harm it draws within its ambit and struggling to make sense of those harms where it is obfuscating to draw clear dividing lines between offender and victim, or, in Braithwaite's lexicon, dominator and dominated. Such is arguably the case with respect to traffic harm or road violence.

Traffic injury and death can always be reduced to spectacular acts of individuated harm or crime. That is often how they are depicted. But as a social problem, traffic harm shares many of the properties of slow violence: attritional, incremental, relatively invisible, unlikely to rouse public sentiment and political intervention, and typically represented in ways that forestall decisive action (Nixon 2011). It is also one of those public health or environmental issues (see also vehicle pollution) that "defy the easy naming of agents who could be discerned as primarily responsible for the problem," but instead seem to flow out of the "entire social experience of spatiality and mobility" (Rajan 1996, pp. 71–72). With respect to such problems, Rajan argues, citizens often make a double gesture: They demand (in this case) road safety while hoping or actively seeking to head off solutions that may involve sacrifice, "especially when it involves setting limits on automobile use" (Rajan 1996, p. 89). Faced with their daily complicity as risk generators and the potential challenges to infrastructures of auto-dominance (such as that posed by the prospect of fewer, smaller, or slower cars), the majority of drivers succumb to the temptation to name-and-blame a minority who drive dangerously. Criminology has a venerable history of attending to labels and what they tell us about those doing the labeling. It is well-placed to diagnose what is at stake, and the forms of denial in operation, when road violence is laid solely or mainly at the wheel of criminally reckless folk-devils.

Criminology and criminal law theory may also be well-placed to deal with the motonormative juridical assumptions that arguably condition how the law responds to errant drivers (King 2020)—assumptions that earmark roads as distinct bracketed socio-juridical space and treat car-related aggression less seriously than cognate violence committed using other means (Braun & Randell 2022). But having done so, we need to transcend a range of common-sense notions that perpetuate systems of road violence: the idea of traffic accidents, the insistence on the sole agency and responsibility of drivers, and the treatment of road safety as a law enforcement problem. A body of social theory—taking its cue from, inter alia, Latour's (1999) analysis of gun crime—has shown that the relevant actor is neither a (human) driver nor a (nonhuman) car (the latter being a common sole culprit in media depictions of road death) but, rather, a new hybrid actant—the driver-car—that dangerously combines human and machine elements (e.g., Beckmann 2004). An adequate "theory of distributive agency" (Bennett 2009, p. 21) with respect to road violence would not, however, stop there. We might also want to include—and fold into attendant inquiries—the decisions of motor manufacturers and lobbyists, the police, urban planners, and traffic engineers as well as dominant ideas of street design such as the ideology of flow (Schmitt 2020). Each of these is implicated in a causal chain that has over recent decades made cars safer for their occupants and these objects and their operating environments more of a danger to everyone else (Braun & Randell 2022).

One compelling reason for making road violence a proper object of criminological attention is that, at least inside towns and cities, it is not only or mainly a question of transport. "Never make transportation an issue by itself," André Gorz (1973, p. 7) warned half a century ago, "always connect it to the problem of the city" (for a contemporary articulation of the same idea, see Moreno 2024). Once such connections are established, the issue of road safety seeps into problems of public safety, and automotive disorder is subsumed into wider matters of concern to do with the uses and meanings of public space and the character of safe and livable neighborhoods.[17] Road safety and violence are thereby lifted from the specialisms of injury prevention and traffic engineering, and their technocratic idioms (Marohn 2021), and rendered inseparable from contemporary struggles over the right to the (good) city (Lefebvre 1996).

Sustainability: Automobility as Ecological Harm

In the 1990s and early 2000s, a brief flurry of criminological writing treated the growing popularity of the sports utility vehicle (SUV) as, in part, a defensive reaction to fears of urban crime and more generalized middle-class social anxieties (Lauer 2005). They were a case of what

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[17] Livingston & Ross (2023, p. 167) suggest that we treat the redesign of urban infrastructure as a question of reparation for the "trauma and social damage of transportation policies of the last 70 years."

Goold et al. (2010, pp. 22–23) termed “a securitized good.” “These vehicles [are] designed to give the driver an experience of security,” Simon (2010, p. 270) suggested, “by providing a higher stance, the appearance of lots of protective metal, and the ability to drive off road.” They seemed to offer material and symbolic protection that was immensely seductive in a hostile urban environment; a kind of gated-community-on-wheels. It was never in fact clear exactly how highly security considerations figured in the rapid global ascent of SUVs to the status of archetypal automobile (Bradsher 2003). It is becoming apparent today, however, that this is no longer their dominant or uncontested meaning.

SUVs are increasingly treated not as a form of security against the world but as endangering the security of that world. They are the leading—if not only—culprits in automobility’s threat to public health and safe and livable environments (Miner et al. 2024). SUVs crystallize fears about the car’s active part in urban despoliation: too bloated to easily get around in or park and a menace for parents and children in crowded streets around schools. Their weight and height amplify the risk and impact of road violence: Those hit with them are eight times more likely to be killed than those struck by a standard passenger car (Edwards & Leonard 2022). They have ramped up the automobile’s damaging ecological impact in terms of air pollution and carbon emissions—road vehicles account for 16% of global carbon emissions (Miner et al. 2024). If SUVs were a country, they would rank as the sixth most polluting in the world, according to International Energy Agency estimates (Cozzi et al. 2023).

The SUV’s share of the global car market continues to expand (they accounted for 46% of total new car sales in 2021). They are actively pushed by manufacturers due to their larger profit margins and embraced by consumers as a safe and comfortable cocoon in which to conduct everyday life (Wells & Xenias 2015), even if that security comes at the cost of increased risk to others. But SUVs have also become a potent symbol of “the unsustainable way in which humanity”—or at least its richest subset—“interacts with the physical world” (Paterson 2007, p. 10). They are, as such, fast becoming the focal point of a regulatory environmental politics waged by city authorities to control emissions and improve air quality and face calls for weight-based registration and parking fees or a ban from urban areas. Such proposals are commonly opposed by owners seeking—on occasions violently—to shore up the harmful privileges of the motor age. SUVs have also, relatedly, become a target for environmental protest and civil disobedience. An eco-group called The Tyre Extinguishers has acted in several cities across the world to disarm these environmental hazards using lentils to jam open air valves (Anthony 2023, Zipper 2023).

With respect to the environmental hazards that cars generate, we remain confronted with auto-centric social and urban systems supported by powerful and entrenched economic interests—oil producers, motor manufacturers, and the like. These are also systems whose harmful ecological effects are typically met with passive acceptance and sometimes active celebration by those whose lives and livelihoods have come to depend on them or who have simply become habituated to the convenience that auto-centricity appears to offer. Criminology has some established terminology for understanding aspects of this—notably, denial and neutralization (Loader 2023). But auto-dominance entails a set of harms that draws in and makes complicit the majority of the population (Rajan 1996). Although many harms of cars are concentrated on marginalized and excluded groups and communities, the environmental damage they wreak essentially comprises harm against all perpetrated by the majority (at least in large parts of the Global North). We need new conceptual registers to deal with this, not least because crime and harm (at the street or boardroom level) are almost always construed as being perpetrated by a minority against the rest. Relevant resources can be found within green criminology (in Agnew’s concept of ordinary harms, for example) and by thinking on a global scale (at which level the conventional binary of minority versus the rest more or less reasserts itself). But we also need new analytical tools—of the kind provided by the concept of slow violence—for handling questions of acceptance, complicity, and even active engagement at the population level and responding "politically, imaginatively, and theoretically" (Nixon 2011, p. 2) to the predicaments they pose. Overcoming acceptance and complicity is one of the most pressing issues facing efforts to reduce environmental and social harm, not just of cars but of the wider infrastructures that they create, depend on, and reproduce.

CONCLUSION

Against the backdrop of an urgent climate crisis, the politics of urban transportation seems set over the coming years to become more fractious and contested. It is in that context that SUVs in particular, and socio-technical systems of automobility in general, are likely to resonate as matters of criminological concern. By following the car (Marcus 1995), we can not only ground the study of control, order, and harm in the rhythms and emotions of everyday life; we may also have found an object through which to conduct an ecological reckoning with—and further the greening of—the field of criminology.

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