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Installing Automobility

Emerging Politics of Mobility and Streets in Indian Cities

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OA Funding Provided By:

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding from Arcadia—a charitable fund of Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin.

The title-level DOI for this work is:

[doi:10.7551/mitpress/12399.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12399.001.0001)

Preface: Automobility as Anthropocenic Fluid

I write this book for the Earthbound, and I locate this book within the incredibly thorny human-dominated period in planetary evolution—the Anthropocene (Lewis and Maslin 2015)—that an overwhelming scientific consensus appears to suggest we, the Earthbound, have entered.¹ A looming environmental disequilibrium at the planetary scale, which is now conclusively related to human activities, is a notable feature of the Anthropocene. Its thorniness is a product of several interlocked and coarticulated human-driven phenomena. Addressing one phenomenon in isolation is ineffectual and even counterproductive because of the existence of robust linkages with other phenomena that often have radically different pathways of expression. Such a situation poses an enormous existential challenge not just because of the frightening consequences for a humankind teetering on the threshold of environmental catastrophe but more so because our tried and tested mechanisms of intervening could prove to be less than effective in pulling us back from the tipping point.

Resolving such situations is inherently knotty because its complex intricacies span multiple boundaries. Such boundaries are particularly enduring because they spring forth from the modernist cosmological order humans have constructed. Thus, ontological, disciplinary, jurisdictional, and legal boundaries have proliferated from our intent to reduce complexities, and, with it, intensely intertwined problems appear particularly intractable in their scale. The profusion of such problems and their mutual imbrication has given rise to a widespread portent of a systemic, even terminal crisis. While some see in this crisis an opportunity to remake the planet afresh through more comprehensive road maps (Hawken 2017), others see hope to pull back in the gentle living that indigenous peoples practice (Raygorodetsky 2018). The notion of a crisis also indicates a point of inflection when humanity has the chance to look in the mirror and describe what

the philosopher Isabelle Stengers (2015) refers to as “a second history” (25). Critical scholarship sees in the contemporary crisis a range of prognoses, both dire and hopeful—a future ordering that heralds a coming barbarism (Stengers 2015), new ways of thinking of the relations between society and nature that diminish the capital-centric mode of organizing (Moore 2016), and transcending the boundless modernist human experiment with the planet (Latour 2017). Across these writings, a common thread is deep dissatisfaction with the current modes of engaging with nature and humanity, which more than anything else have come to define the current anthropogenic moment. Indeed, for some, the Anthropocene falls short as a category to express the complex civilizational turning point (that spans nature, society, economy, and culture) humans face if we are to lead the planet in a different, more hopeful direction. From this standpoint, the Anthropocene is better understood as a period of transition rather than an epoch. Harking at a planet of thresholds and tipping points certainly connotes a period of change and transition; however, it does not say what should follow the Anthropocene. Haraway (2015) proposes the Anthropocene as a discontinuous boundary event that we the Earthbound should ford. She enjoins us to imagine the Chthulucene as a future epoch of refuges that shelter rich multispecies assemblages. According to Haraway, the Chthulucene would spell out planetary relations marked by attachments and limits.

Heeding these philosophers, if we, the Earthbound, are to fashion a less barbaric and more bounded arena for human activities, how can we use crisis as a trigger to spur our empirically grounded intellectual explorations to achieve a more hopeful future? Relevant to this book, Mimi Sheller has sought to situate mobility justice within planetary crisis. Basing her work on the relational ontology of the new mobilities paradigm, Sheller (2018) speaks of three interlinked crises manifesting in our contemporary world—climate crisis, urbanization crisis, and refugee crisis—that are fundamentally related to how we move ourselves and our commodities. She posits that in the current juncture, the triple crisis facing humanity revolves around the unequal power relations embedded within mobility (Sheller 2018, 1). For Sheller, combating the crisis of humanity requires articulating a multiscalar concept of mobility justice. Embedded within it is a multilayered politics of mobility, which includes dimensions ranging from the biopolitics of the body, transportation access, urban infrastructure struggles, transnational movement, and planetary ecologies.

Automobility is intensely entangled within Sheller’s architecture of mobility politics. It is a machinic complex (Sheller and Urry 2000) that powerfully organizes transportation arrangements in the Western world.

At a spatial level, automobility manifests in its imprint on urban morphologies and their infrastructural patterns. Thus, cities designed with dense downtown cores and expansive suburbs radiating away are imaginable only through networks of access-controlled highways spreading out from downtowns that ferry cars back and forth for daily commutes. Such a spatial manifestation is underwritten by a resource-extractive political economic system. But automobility exerts its imprints on society too. It shapes the (im)mobilities that diverse peoples experience when they navigate their way around cities. In multiple ways, it encodes into regimes the mobility of the dominant urban, white, male, and elite segments while simultaneously marginalizing the mobility needs of the rest. Despite its extractive and exclusionary footprint, the persistence of automobility lies in the complex momentum forged between cultural norms; national, political, and economic imperatives; and industrial and resource-extractive engines.

Although locating automobility within a trans-scalar typology of mobility politics is useful, it does not fully recognize the enormous reach that it mobilizes across boundaries—not just political and jurisdictional but also the ontological between society and nature. I believe that automobility has emerged as a key system of relationalities that flows across boundaries and emerges in places around the world, gathering resources, technologies, norms and discourses, actors and organizations as it manifests. Urry (2005), in his disquisition of the global, categorized two main forms of systems of relationality that circulate: global networks and global fluids. The latter, according to Urry, includes examples such as automobility and is produced within particular contexts on the basis of local relationships that at the same time have an impact on distant places. Fluids pooling in particular contexts, according to Urry, also generate situations that perpetuate their presence. As a fluid, automobility, flows across locations on the planet, creating conditions for its action. In the Anthropocene, automobility is a keystone fluid that is driving human domination of the planet. Its pooling in particular locations is orchestrated with engines of resource extraction and economic and political regimes that perpetuate the conditions for their action. These patterns of pooling may differ from one region to another, but they broadly replicate a machinic complex that is consuming the planet.

Installing Automobility delineates the pooling of automobility in Indian metropolitan cities. It describes how the machinic complex of automobility has come to be organized and the particular technopolitical strategies through which it has put down roots within the metropolitan soil in India. In what follows, I emphasize that the entrenching of automobility in the

Indian urban terrain is accomplished through the assembly of a technopolitical constellation. Much of what readers will find in the rest of the book is a fine-grained analysis of the dynamics through which this constellation has become energized in the city of Bengaluru in south-central India. If at some point, the reader feels overwhelmed by the overdose of the fluid of automobility in Bengaluru, it bears keeping in mind the larger motive behind the book: we the Earthbound need to displace automobility and other anthropocenic fluids before we can realize a planet that is not just humane but also terrane.²