

«On the Road: individual, Society and the State in the Appropriation of Public Space»

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Introduction

The overall aim of this paper is to draw attention to a potential new domain of research - relevant within European national contexts – generally stated as ‘the impact of motorisation in society’ [by **motorisation** I mean the massive phenomena of automobile diffusion and its uses, as an important dimension that accompanied urbanization process in different world regions].

More specifically, the tentative proposal presented here outlines a collective project on the theme of road behaviour in Portugal, in which I collaborate and that is being carried out by a small research team of anthropologists, supervised by M. João Ramos e António Medeiros (from ISCTE, Lisbon). [In Portugal, it should be emphasised, there is an excessive number and gravity of road accidents – one of the highest rates of road accident fatalities in the EU – which constitutes a worrying epidemic of injury].

As this project is in the early stage of development, I won't be able to give any substantive account on the subject. My purpose is solely to contribute to this workshop on the ‘Anthropology of Europe’ by bringing to discussion main key-issues involved in our approach to this theme, hoping that this exchange of ideas might fuel the interest of colleagues from other European countries to embrace this field of studies, whose long-term research and comparison between different European contexts will certainly enhance our knowledge on important dimensions of contemporary societies and human behaviour.

The Portuguese case study and the State of Art

Mass car use is quite recent in Portugal (Branco & Ramos 2003); the model of transport and mobility that took shape during the 1970s was consolidated in the 1990s. The process of understanding the social and cultural consequences of these structural changes is still in its early stages.

The published national scientific production in this area is scarce, and mainly empirical and sectorized (Gaspar 1994; Lemonde Macedo, Cardoso & Santos 1998; Reto & Sá 2003); but there is a growing number of yet unpublished PhD and MSc thesis and

technical reports – on the economics of mobility, transport engineering and modelling, social psychology, territorial management of the territory, etc.

In other countries, where the motorisation process is older and more stabilized (Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand), scientific epistemological premises such as comparability and interdisciplinary are important guiding principles in this area of research (Davis 1992; Dupuy 1995; Automobile 2001; Wollen & Kerr 2002).

The “Smeed Law”, for instance (one central figure in the world of transport and road safety research) appears to indicate a regularity in all the countries that have experienced motorisation over many years, suggesting that there is a relationship between a country’s rate of road accident fatalities (deaths per registered vehicle) and level of motorisation (registered motor vehicles per head of the population) in a country. This generalization is based on statistical evidence of the large differences that exist in the death rate per vehicle between the least motorised countries (relatively high) and the most motorised countries (relatively low). The differences are similar to those between the highly motorised countries at early stages of motorisation and their current levels. The implication is that a trend from high to low levels of fatality per vehicle is apparently followed in all countries, which could be interesting to test by means of triangulation of research methods.

Although international anthropological research has seen too little systematic research of the general subject of road and car culture (Goussieux and Barjonet 1990; Ross 1996; Miller, 2001) - unlike, incidentally, the related discipline of cultural studies -, it has recently developed a relevant number of theoretical and empirical analyses on the subjects of culture of violence and ritualized conflict, of media and communication in contemporary societies, and of usage and representations of public spaces, both in comparative studies and in monographic case studies (Schmidt and Schröder 2001; Dayan & Katz 1992; Delgado 2003; Le Breton 2004). The results achieved in these areas can be put to use in the development of a new field of research: that of the anthropological analysis of the culture of road violence.

This new field appeals to an intense dialogue with other disciplines that have already shown results in the understanding of the subject (such as social psychology, medical epidemiology, and traumatology, social studies), and will bring in the domain a fresh

perspective, methodologies that were rarely applied to the subject, and hopefully the kind of results that only the holistic approach typical of anthropological analysis allows.

This proposed field of research is essentially threefold:

1) Study of the cultural dimensions that affect social relations on the road,

considering the main components of the automobile environment: individual, society and the State. The project thus focuses on multi-sited field research, complemented with bibliographic and archival research. Through this various levels of discursive production related with aggressive road behaviour, will be collected, integrating different implied social actors, such as police authorities, local and central administration's representatives, members of social-professional-economical groups.

2) Identification of patterns of socially accepted, frequently ritualized, violent

behaviour, with emphasis on different age groups, namely younger motorists, in the under-25 age group, who appear to have particularly high reported accident and casualty rates, due to inexperience and/or to a higher level of risk-taking on the part of people of this age. Key-issues for addressing this target group would then be related with *power relations* of different road users as well as with the testing of prevalent *risk theories*. [e.g. Briefly, according to the theory of risk homeostasis (Adams 1985), everyone's propensity to take risks is influenced by the potential rewards and losses of risk-taking and a cause of road users behaviour. As summed up by Davis (1993: 46) we act «as if we have a type of “risk thermostat” in us which regulates our behaviour. Unless our willingness to take risks changes, accidents will be redistributed rather than eliminated by environmental or circumstantial changes», concluding that «risk compensation, in its broadest sense, suggests that there is a persistent process of adaptation to changes in the environment where there is some kind of thread» (Davis 1993: 48)].

3) Understanding of the implied humanitarian and traumatic consequences, which

could lead us to offer a set of recommendations to be delivered to national and local road authorities, in which a critical - and self critical – stand may indirectly help reducing the number of victims of car accidents in Portugal and promote a kind of anthropological research that comes closer to the public but still keeps the theoretical debate open with the profession and in connection with kindred disciplines such as sociology and social psychology.

It should be stressed that not only such field of research is new in Portugal but there's also only few examples of this approach in the international literature.

Furthermore, it must be said, we are aware of the old and unsolved debate in the anthropological profession about the validity of promoting an applied approach that supports any political decisions regarding the observed community (Goldschmidt 1987; Ervin 1999; Ferraro 2003). But, inevitably, when we're dealing with a subject where trauma, death, suffering of the individuals and families concerned (the victims of road violence), and when it becomes obvious that the generalization of the humanitarian consequences of the culture of road violence has an impact on society as a whole, the researchers cannot push the issue aside.

Discussion and conclusions:

The title of this paper, suggestive and appealing as it might be, addresses a topic rather neglected and even unpopular that has not deserved much attention of the social scientists for generations of scholars. At least we could understand this lack of interest as intriguing. With hindsight it is difficult to understand how an object - so valuable (in economic and symbolic terms); so dominant (in our everyday lives) and so powerful (in the transformation of time and space) – has been far the most neglected as research subject...

This same question has been assessed by the sociologist Pierre Lannoy (2003) in a recent article published by *Review Française de Sociologie*. Discussing why the automobile phenomenon has been marginalised by the social sciences – as a sort of ‘non-object’ – the author invokes the paradigmatic example of the Chicago School. Paradoxically, Chicago sociologists, although reputed by their innovative and profuse research on the processes of change in urban settings, have never carried out a systematic research program on the subject of motorisation (the single exception being a thesis from a certain John Mueller in 1928, who has never been published and has been rarely cited...).

Several interpretations for the minimization of this field of studies have been advanced, although none convincingly enough.

On the one hand we have explanations that suggest a repulsive characteristic inherent to the object “motorisation”. On the other hand it is the complexity of the phenomenon that

is invoked. Hawkings (1986), for example, in his suggestive article «A road not taken: sociology and the neglect of the automobile», sees in this lack of emphasis of the subject, the result of a moral condemnation of the car, considered a decisive factor of social disruption. He supported his interpretation with an emblematic quotation from Park: «The automobile is probably the most mortiferous and demoralizing instrument of contemporary civilisation». John Urry (2000) adopts a similar position, arguing that although the Chicago sociologists saw mobility as the key-issue from urban reality, they were afraid that its uncontrolled development, especially through motorisation, caused urban “degeneration” due to the destruction of *residence* – the fundamental element of the city. In other words, the sort of sociological indignity that was devoted to the topic would arise not from intellectual reasons but from controversial moral considerations... We prefer to accept the neutral position of Lannoy, when he sustains that among other factors, the pertinence of a phenomenon for scientific research purposes is by itself a social construction. Stated in his own words: «The scientific interest for a certain mundane phenomenon doesn't depend only on its quantitative diffusion or on its normative appreciation. Its dignity in terms of research investments doesn't derive primarily from a factual or moral judgement, but it is related with the social configuration, always historically unique and changing, in which it is produced» (Lannoy 2003: 523).

So, taking Portuguese case-study as a starting point, we propose to extend the anthropological analysis of the cultural aspects of violent road behaviour to other countries (or regions) in Europe, considering it as an integral part of the historical process of (car) motorisation, which could be complemented through a comparative account of different national road environments.

Our aim would be then to explain the workings of the system of cultural representations that interact with automotive forms of transportation in a situation where this model of mobility is extensive.

Traumatic road accidents are direct humanitarian consequences of the culture of road violence that has spread, particularly, in the Portuguese street and road network, but also elsewhere where mass car use has become one of the most visible faces of urbanization

and “progress”. With this research we also expect to attain the practical goal of producing substantive knowledge resources that may contribute to the design of new policies in order to reduce these grievous humanitarian and social consequences.

Despite the intrinsic dehumanisation of statistics, and moreover their vulnerability to manipulation, the statistical approach to the subject has been the most systematic and persistent account that provides insights into the less benign consequences of motorisation. Even when we do not know by direct experience, it is well known through official statistics continuously published in the daily press, that road fatalities are still a leading cause of death, namely in Europe. This should suffice to indicate that this important topic deserves our attention, not only as social scientists but also as common citizens.

One possible avenue to explore this new field could be opened by questioning whether those figures represent “accidents” at all or could be avoidable, in the sense that they are predictable. This conjures up possible links between the development of a new research field and a well-established anthropological background in the domain of research on hazards and disasters, where refreshing perspectives are emerging.

With hindsight, as Oliver-Smith writes (1996: 304) «new perspectives on hazards, view them as basic elements of environments and as constructed features of human systems rather than as extreme and unpredictable events, as they were traditionally perceived». Several authors (Malinowski 1922; Sahlin 1972; Torry 1979) had already considered disasters as integral parts of environmental and human systems, sustaining that if a society fails to give adequate responses to those events, that society has not developed in a sustainable way.

Thus, accordingly to these perspectives, the exposure to risk tends to be a totalizing process, eventually affecting most aspects of community life. Indeed, this seems to be the case with road traffic “disasters” - which makes the holistic, developmental and comparative perspectives of anthropological research particularly suitable to explore the potential of this new domain of studies.

To conclude, the challenge we launch is the development of a comparative anthropological research of the cultures of road violence in Europe, based on a fruitful

intertwining of different national research teams, engaged in this collaborative approach from the conception of the project until the publishing of the results. In our opinion, this convergent dialogue would be the condition for the establishment of an innovative research agenda, which by articulating different local participations, without losing the idiosyncratic context where data are collected and knowledge produced, would contribute to the better understanding of a social and human phenomenon with unquestionable impact in contemporary societies.

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