The Brazilian and his I-car

An European sociological view on car-driving
in a "land of the future"[1]

Martin Gegner

Professor visitante com apoio do Serviço Alemão de Intercâmbio
Acadêmico /Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD),
Universidade de São Paulo, Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo,
+55 (11) 3061-5331, martin.gegner@daad.org.br

Abstract

Urban transport is a quite uncommon topic for a sociological anlaysis – not only in Brasil. The issue is considered belonging to urban planning and not to sociology. With the establishment of modernist urban planning as the hegemonic model in the aftermath of World War II its airm was to guarantee a rapid individual fluxus based on the private property of a automobile. But aside of this functionalist aproach, transport is also a "fait sociale". Urban transport is constitutive for the urban public space – especially in Brasil. There is hardly any other place where we could watch social codes and conditions of the Brazilian society presented so obviously: the severe class distinctions and the quoditian violence. ...*

Key-words: transportation, modernist city planning, brazilian city.

[1] Referring to Stefan Zweig (2006 [1960/1941]): Brazil - the land of the future. This is a completely revised and enhanced version of an article that originally had been directed to European readers (Gegner 2008).

* (continuation of abstract) Whereas sociologists are referreing to violence mainly with respect to increasing numbers of weaponed assaults in Brazilian cities, this essay is focusing on forms of violence on a low level: the violence of car-drivers against weaker participants of Brazilian street transport like pedestrians, bicyclists and motor-bikers. Based on the methodology of the Visual Sociology (Gegner 2007) this research approach also integrates ethnographic methods in the traces of Claude Levi-Strauss (1955). (continued on next page)

Coming to Brazil for a European almost everything seems to be three times bigger than he is accustomed to. This impression is the same if he visits Brazil as a social scientist and researches nowadays daily life in Brazil in the traces of Claude Levi-Strauss.[2] When he enters the major over-sea gateways, Rio de Janeiro for leisure and São Paulo for business, the differences are obvious. Not only that these cities do not fit to the vision of a "European City", consisting of a medieval centre surrounded by thoroughly planned 19th century boroughs with houses not higher than 7 floors like in Paris, Berlin or Vienna (Gegner 2006). Most Brazilian cities are not only missing historic centres, the whole social and functional structure of Brazilian cities is different from European ones. The symbols of Brazilian cities, skyscrapers, large scale motorways and *favelas*, indicate Brazil as a country of the Americas. The different material structure very often conceals the fundamental differences in the social structure of its cities comparing them to European well-fare state cities.

Despite of the differences in a globalised world of course we find many habits and attitudes in the daily life of Brazilians that are similar to those found in any other region of the world, in Europe, the USA or in East-Asia. But to a certain extend some attitudes that are widely known all over the world occur to be more radical in Brazil. One of these is the possession of the common Brazilian with his car.

Universal and special developments

Having an intimate obsession with an automobile is indeed a very universal attitude. US-Americans, Germans and Japanese are known to have a strong relationship to their private car, sometimes stronger than the relationship to close relatives. In these countries this passion had been encouraged during the last century by state und business propaganda[3]. The high valuation of the artefact "automobile" is linked to the fact that the automobile industry worked out to be the most important sector of

(continuation of abstract)
The scientfic alienation of the researcher is backed by the cultural gap between European and Brazilian urban traditions. This allows to discuss habits and circumstance critically that are "normal" for most Brazilians and that are therefore not even questioned. So the Chicago School type of the "sociological eye" (Hughes 1971) is enforced by the "natural" alienation of the researcher. With these European eyes – accustomed to very different codes in the sociabilities of transport – Brazilian habits on the street seem be a permanent violation of human rights, e.g. the right of personal integrity and the right to live without fear for life. As urban transport is a dominant social space in the life of most Brazilians, it effects on the mental life of the individuals cannot be neglected. This essay stresses that agressiveness and counter-agression in transport is rather a symptom but not the cause, it is rooted into structural problems of the Brazilian society. The hypothetical explanation of this "low-level-violence" links it with modernist urban planning. As this has been implemented in Brasil in the most radical form its effect on the mentality of the urbanites is also most radical: Combined with the individual psychological constitution based on the deep class distinctions and the social inequality, the featured individals within modernist planning, car-drivers, show hardly any respect for "the other", they behave like "masters" on the roads.

[2] This essay is based on cumulative ethnographic research worked out in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Recife, Salvador de Bahia, Curitíba and Brasília in between 2001 and 2011.

[3] See Canzler (1996), Rammler (2001), Zenone (2002), Canzler /Schmidt (2008). These authors represent a critical research approach on the "ideology" of the automotive society that had been worked out prominently in the Social Science Centre Berlin (WZB) in which also the author of this article contributed from 2001-2004. Nevertheless the most famous archetype of this research tradition comes from outside the WZB: Sachs (1984).

these nations´ economies[4]. One could assume that in Brazil this passion is more discrete, because there might not be such a national pride on a Brazilian-made Volkswagen or Fiat as they are brands from abroad. But it remains the personal pride on a status symbol that still is important for almost all bourgeois and middle-class (and of course many proletarian) people all over the world. What makes a difference to – at least some – European countries which are more affected by the ecological movement, e.g. the Netherlands, Germany and Denmark, is the immense impact the car contributes to the lifestyle of the middle-class Brazilian. Also in cities that have more European roots, such as Salvador or Recife, the citizens seems to be unable to organize their quotidian including work, shopping and leisure without the car. Many Brazilians take the car for distances less than one kilometre without thinking twice. The argument to use the car will always be a mixture of long distances, safety reasons and a lack of convenient public transport. In the above mentioned European countries where the idea of the "compact city" or "the city of the short distances" still reigns the urban planning discourse even in metropolises like Berlin and Vienna, the bicycle – at least in the summer – became the dominant means of transport.

Indeed there are a lot of differences in the structure of the European and Brazilian cities that in the latter are urging to use the car. First of all there is a lack of a sufficient public transport. A metro system network only exists in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. But these are very small in comparison to the cities´ bigness and they cover just a vanishing minority of their territories. Rio de Janeiro has got two metro-lines predominantly in the bourgeois Zona Sul. São Paulo offers five metro lines plus 6 commuter train lines[5]. The major part of the public transport is covered by busses. This means a relative slow transportation, due to long distances and traffic jams that cannot even be avoided by several bus lanes, that had been integrated by Brazilian transport planners within the last years. For somewhat complicated ways, e.g. when you like to go to an academy after work in one neighbourhood and you want to meet with friends thereafter in a restaurant in another borough, this system is insufficient und frustrating. As bicycle lanes almost do not exist and driving a bicycle (as well as a motorbike) on a normal road must be considered as a danger for life due to the

car-drivers rudeness described more below there are reasonable motives using a car instead.

Modernist urban planning and the building of the automotive society

The key-problem of Brazilian urban transport is that they are too modern for not using a car – at least for those who can effort one. What is meant by "too modern"? The answer will go in the direction of a critique of ideology.

The manifesto of modernism in city-planning, the Charta of Athens, led the way for the motorized society. The "Congrès Internationaux de Architecture Moderne" (CIAM), a gathering of young modernist architects defined in this manifesto their assumptions of what should have been then considered a "modern city". The congress was held in 1933 in Moscow, but due to political reasons the manifesto was published only in 1943 as Charta of Athens. In the aftermath of World War II the Charta achieved to be the master-plan for the rebuilding of the destroyed European cities – and the blueprint of a rising modern Brazil. This is documented not only in the prestige buildings of the completely new capital Brasilia, but also in the demolition of almost every big historic city centre in the country. The Charta defined modernism in city planning as geometrical clearness and symmetry not only in the architecture of buildings but also in the city ground plan. Le Courbusier, mastermind behind the Charta, wanted to create a city that would function like a machine (Le Courbusier 1925). For him work, living, leisure and transit should have been separated. He intended to tear down the medieval centres of the European cities, that were not able to provide these facilities in an "integrated solution" anymore (work and living in the same house at least the same quarter), moreover when between 1890 and 1910 almost all European capitals doubled their size to each some million inhabitants. Velocity and the image of the (mobile) machine were the ideals of Le Courbusier´s plans. In his opinion fast and big roads had to be build to provide the urban transit. Obstacles for automobiles such as curvy roads, bad surface of the road and other road users than car drivers had to disappear. The separation of pedestrians, bicyclists and cars on the streets followed. But the biggest obstacles that had to be removed was the tram. The tram had been predominantly in the pre-war

era. From the mid 1950´s onwards the tram was eliminated by the planners in both, Europe and Brazil (and also the United States). A city of big highways proposing easy access to all neighbourhoods by car was the ideal of the post-war period. The city without centre, Los Angeles, was the paradigm for restructuring Brazilian capitals too[6].

The authoritarian Vargas regime that promoted the *Estado Novo* ("New State") was enthusiastic for a modernist rebuilding of the Brazilian society. At that time (1930-1940s) the fairly under-developed country boomed into an new era of industrialization followed by the internal immigration from millions of Brazilian of the poor North-East to the rich cities in the Southeast.[7] The Brazilian population that in 1950 settled to over 60% in rural areas in 2000 only remained to about 20% there (IBGE 2006). The same development in total numbers with a different bias: Whereas in 1950 about 18 millions inhabitants lived in urban areas in 2000 there were about 130 millions (op. cit.). This was the cause for the government demand for modernist city planning. São Paulo (municipal area) rose from 580.000 in 1920 to 2,2 millions inhabitants in 1950. Despite of authoritarian modernisation the spread of *favelas* was one successor of this development.

The new capital in the middle of the country, Brasilia, was intended to serve as prototype for the modernisation of the Brazilian society and its cities (Nunes 2004). Lúcio Costa, a scholar of Le Corbusier, worked out the masterplan and Oscar Niemeyer, also member of CIAM sessions from the 1940´s not only developed several representative government buildings but had been the head of *Novacap*, the company that was formed to urbanize the new capital of Brazil.

Despite of minor differences in the planning, Brasilia represented the main ideas of the Charta: A functional separation of work, living, and leisure, integrated by cross-less motorways to be driven with high velocity in cars, a wide and geometrically building structure with space and green in between and a functional "light" architecture using steel, concrete and glass as main components for the at least 5-10 floors high tenements. The new capital was "the" modern city of the world and many architectures and planners pilgrimed to this *Gesamtkunstwerk* of the modernist movement. In 1987 UNESCO inscribed Brasília on

the World Cultural Heritage list because it represents the applied principles of 20th century urbanism in the largest scale (UNESCO 1987).

Today when typical Brazilian societal problems such as poverty, pollution and criminality worsen also life quality in Brasilia and with the common decay of many of its modernist buildings while facing Brasilia´s 50th anniversary also the modernist transport planning is questioned. The city will implement a tram system (Correio Braziliense 2007, ABIN 2008). A sacrifice to dogmatic modernist urban planners. Ironically their argument is to conserve the original modernist planning by Costa and Niemeyer. Their arguments might be supported by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee but they contradict the idea of a dynamic city development and the crucial idea of modernism: form follows function. From this point of view the re-invention of a tram system would definitely mean progress for the solution of Brasília´s traffic problems. One reason why the re-invention of the efficient tram system in Brazil encounters many obstacles is that the Brazilian society is mentally stuck into the modernist ideals from the 20th century. Today dogmatic modernism is not the future anymore but merely a concept from yesterday.

Psycho-Social Theses on Brazilian Auto-Mobilism

As Marx says, conscience is being directed by the material being, it is useful to have look on the urban living conditions, especially those of the "deciders" in the Brazilian upper and middle class. The latter live in small rented or mainly bought apartments, with a garage in the basement, protected by a fence and a porter. Sport activities are performed on the beaches – as far as there are some available – or in academies. For many *Paulistas* it is common to be detained in the car for three hours a day or more, just to get to work, go back, and maybe do one extra way for leisure or shopping. So the special relationship of the middle-class Brazilian to his car is not surprising. What makes the relation a somewhat dangerous adventure for visitors and people of other classes is the enhancement of psychological determined velocity and safety feelings.

Transportation psychologists have ever since brought forward the argument that the car with its cladding

made of metal sheet serves as a physical and mental armour against the (imagined and real) threats of modern urbanity (Dick 2002, Dick/Werner 1999, Hilgers 1992). Its power and speed seduces to reckless behaviour against the slower and the weaker in the urban public. Permanent access to the car suggests autonomy. The feeling of being a protected autonomous individual if driving a car is the reason for the success story of the automobile all over the world (Canzler 1996, Rammler 2001, Sachs 1984). This general disposition encounters sharpened social conditions in Brazil. First, more than in European countries, the possession of an automobile is still a good indicator for social affiliation. Members of the sub-proletarian lower classes cannot afford a car. Their precarious, often informal jobs prevent them from receiving a bank credit for financing an automobile. Members of this class are forced to use the insufficient pubic transport. Despite of all economic growth within he last years they still make up the majority of the Brazilian population: There are more Brazilians without than with a car.

Belonging to the lower middle-class is indicated by the possession of a small car like the Volkswagen GOL or the General Motors Corsa. As described above, the car secures its owner social integration. He or she is able to reach his or her working place and leisure facilities without spending hours in busses. Therefore the possession of a car has got a much greater importance for social integration than in Europe, where quality public transport offers also for those who hardly can and/or who are not willing to afford a car the possibility of a decent life style. A high personal value of the car is the result of this dependency. In one of the half-standardized interviews that were made to back to visual sociology assumptions, 35-year-old single public worker Angela C. commented her buy of a car after seven years of work within the administration of the City of São Paulo with the words: "A car is everything in life". *(Um carro é tudo na vida)*. Though passing each day hours in the notorious São Paulo traffic jam, the automobile opened up for her what German Sociologists called "Spaces of Possibilities" (Canzler/Knie 1998). This term refers to the options of spatial mobility which is offered only by the car: 24/7 access, flexible choice of destinations, free choice of co-travellers and the mentioned feeling of security and comfort. But as the lower middle-class is the first to be threatened by economic crises – and

these have not been seldom in the last 50 years in Brazil – the automobile is not only a symbol for being "inside" or "outside" of the formal economy, it is often also the deciding material prerequisite for re-gaining work after a loss. Furniture, personal belongings and even the ubiquitous television sets at a pinch can be dispensed. To maintain the chance to find a (good) job in the formal economy a Brazilian needs crucially three things: an address in a formal neighbourhood (with asphalted roads, "*no asfalto*"), a mobile phone and a car to react flexible on employers´ shifting demands. So the possession of a car here means to be part of the formal society. Members of the lower middle-class are easy to be replaced in a country with 190 million inhabitants with a rising number of educated workers.

On the lowest ends of the services sector for unskilled workers this is even more dramatic. In every restaurant, in every shop there are about three to four employees that a caring for one customer in order to raise their subsistence wage ("salário mínimo") with a personal service percentage of the client´s bill. If there are complaints of the customer or for any other reason the low-wage workers can be fired very fast as workers protection is poorly developed. This is the reason for the distinct "service mentality" in Brazil some upper-class Brazilians visiting Europe are missing there. So there is strong competition among the service workers of a company as well as there is concurrence against all the outsiders who want to get in. The result is a lack of solidarity and latent aggression. The struggle for securing the job, the fight against the millions of what Marx called the "industrial reserve army" produces stress. For members of the lower middle-class pedestrians are a symbol for the unwished fate: jobless, homeless, car-less. Pedestrians are potential rivals in the struggle to survive. So lower middle-class Brazilians sitting in automobiles in common act aggressively against pedestrians on the streets without even noticing it.

In Brazil crossing a street for pedestrian means running from one kerbstone to the other side even if there was a crosswalk. By turning in to one road to the right or left Brazilian car-drivers usually ignore right of way for pedestrians according to the Brazilian transit laws. Sometimes car drivers even seem to speed up if they see a pedestrian some fifty metres in front of them crossing the street. Pedestrians accept this behaviour without mourning

8 It is not a surprise that "normality" within (Brazilian) cities are interpreted differently by European rooted sociologists like Barbara Freitag-Rouanet (2002).

9 Lately urban planners in European metropolises have started to establish bike lanes on the road by narrowing the space for car-traffic. This has been de-escalated the conflicts between pedestrians and cyclist, but to a certain extend raised those of cyclists and car-drivers. In case of a traffic jam car-drivers tend to invade bicycle lanes. The reaction of hard-core cyclists – insult, kicking of driving-mirrors, scratching on the car's varnish etc – in Brazil would have the effect of serious injuries if not death.

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in order not to risk their lives. That there are hardly complaints about this behaviour is astonishing for foreigners, but Brazilians consider this behaviour as "normal".[8] In contrary to the fact that this is a rather serious menace to the individual pedestrian, there only exist many jokes and cartoons on this very special part of Brazilian street culture. From an outsider point of view the taken right of way by car-drivers seems to cancel basic human rights like the integrity of the body. The rights of pedestrians, bicycle and motor-drivers seem to be kicked with the leadfoot. One example of a literary ethnography illustrates the differences of the European and the Brazilian perspectives on this topic.

João Ubaldo Ribeiro (1994/2006) in his matchless diction has described the chase of pedestrians by car-drivers with an example of Rio de Janeiro. But he declaimed that the Brazilian rage against the pedestrian is nothing compared to that of Berlin bicyclists. Those would recklessly attack harmless pedestrians strolling around like him. One should know that almost all over Berlin you find bicycle lanes paved onto sidewalks. Often strangers are not aware of the fact, that the marked areas a bicycle lanes, because they just never had seen them before. It is true that Berlin bicyclists a quite rude in defending the space they had been offered according to urban planner's ideology of functional separation, either against pedestrians but also against car-drivers.[9]

Even if "wrong" behaviour on German sidewalks respectively bicycle lanes seldom lead to accidents, and even less to severe ones, to Ribaldo the dangers of being "attacked" by a bicycle-driver in Europe seems bigger than the danger of a car shock in Brazil. Whereas the aggressive behaviour of car-drivers of Brazilian cities is taken as normality the persistence of bicyclists on free floating in their space of the road is being scandalised by Ribaldo. Even if relativised by the irony and the poetic sharpening of this literary text, read as ethnography these essays on the German capital present very well cultural differences in the (perception of) European and the Brazilian daily life. They show that even cosmopolitan Brazilians have internalised and accepted the dominance of the car and a certain aggressiveness of the drivers in Brazilian transport. On the other hand Ribaldo seems to have expected good old-nineteenth-century cities in Europe where the bourgeois classes (at least on the week-ends) had nothing else to do than meeting

as "flaneurs" on the sidewalk. Of course this society and its urbanity do not exist anymore – not even in Europe. The idealised perception of European urbanity and its regulated transport might have induced his "inappropriate behaviour" like walking on bicycle lanes. Maybe João Ubaldo Ribaldo was just not accustomed to stroll around in cities, because he would never do so in Brazil. I used this example to show that there is a cultural gap between Brazil and Europe considering street behaviour. As a self-reflexive European sociologist I also have to admit that what seems to be a scandal to me is caused by different perception and interpretation.

So probably the problem discussed here lies merely in the different social perception of what is a pedestrian. Upper and middle class Brazilian perceive a pedestrian not as a possible concurrent for a job (like described above) but as a possible assaulter. This attitude is combined with the different social role their automobiles play in their lives. The upper-middle-class and the upper-class distinguish themselves from the lower classes with the ostentatious representation of either middle class cars like the Volkswagen Golf or imported Sports Utility Vehicles (SUVs) like the BMW X6.

Like Bourdieu (1984) showed, the fine distinction between members of the upper classes and the rough distinctions against the lower classes in capitalist societies are made up by taste. A "good taste" must be presented in the public in order to build out the ego in reconnaissance of its social environment. Because the houses of the upper class are hidden behind huge walls and the upper-middle class merely resides in anonymous skyscraper apartments that, though expensive, are seldom representative, the bourgeois Brazilian has to find other objects to affirm his own role in society. In Brazil it is no the private homestead that shows off social status like Bourdieu et al. (1990) argued in their analyses on petit bourgeois individuality expressions of the private home. Social distinctions are merely represented by the choice of the car. More like in Europe, in Brazil one can decipher class affiliation by the individual possession of certain type of cars. But this does not explain the rude driving style of upper classes individuals. Why, one could ask, they behave so nasty against all other road users if they are on the sunny side of the Brazilian society? The reason is that the upper classes feel threatened by

the millions of the poor. Violent crime is common all over Brazil. And where does it happen? On the streets! Real estate is protected by walls, guards men, electric fences etc. Upper class Brazilians domain in high security areas. Wherever they go to, to their gated communities, their restaurants, their shopping centres, there are walls, guards and controls. This is the exact contradiction of a free society, it is a closed society. Whether the wall and the gates are useful or not, this has a tremendous effect on these classes´ mentality: upper classes children grow up with fear of violence and the need to protect them against "the other". "The other" is on the road.

The street is the only place where the rigid Brazilian class society is mixed. To get from the private home, to a private club or a private beach resort, upper class people have to transfer the public. For them this means danger. So they behave like they were permanently threatened of being attacked. I don´t want to argue here that there are incidents of assaults on Brazilian streets. Of course there are. My argument is that this fear, built up during the whole process of socialisation, causes a behaviour that must be considered as a crime too! What, if not crime, should be the name for permanent violation of laws and the endorsed acceptance of injuries or death of other transit participants? Not to stop on a red traffic light at night is not even considered a trivial offence. It is seen as a form of self-protection and is accepted by the society, the state and its legitimate force, the police. This attitude causes danger for the weaker and does not solve the societal problem of violent crime. In contrary it is worsening the situation. If every pedestrian and every motor-biker is considered a potential threat to a car-driver this mentality is merely a threat to civil society. Upper class Brazilians lose the sense for the public and also the sense that the public, including the poor, has a right to control all members of the society. Permanent violation of transit laws show the poor status of public responsibility of its individuals. Instead of social responsibility in Brazilian streets rules the conservative-anarchist parole "everyone for himself (and his property)" (Stirner 1907/1995).

So it is not exaggerated to affirm that the possession of a car for Brazilians in general (independent from class distinctions) is existential. Re-interpreting Stirner one could analyse the predominant psycho-social

condition of many Brazilian car-owners with an approach based on the phrase "the ego and his car". To sharpen this hypotheses on the basis of Marxist materialism, one could say the modern ego and its conscience is formed by the car. I call this mentality "I-car" ("ego-carro"). Merely than Brazilians are possessing a car, they are possessed by them.

Conclusion

General neurotic dispositions of individuals in the global automotive society (fantasies of power, autonomy, freedom and security) accumulate under the specific conditions of the Brazilian society and break out as anti-social mass behaviour. It could be described as a civil war on a low level: everyone is fighting against everyone. Yet this is not seen as a social problem. There exists a misbelief that violence on the street is caused only by the socially weaker in form of assaults. I argued that Brazilian transit represents the class struggle the upper classes are fighting against the poor and that this results in far more violations of human rights than this is the case within armed criminal attacks. But whereas there is a lot of social science work done on "crime" in the sense of assaults, violation etc. (e.g. Pinheiro et al 1998), there is, as far as I can see, no specific sociological interest in the other forms of street crimes I discussed above. Transit is considered in the functionalistic way as a topic for urban planners. Their objective is, to make it flow (with disputable success as we all know).

This essay does not want to "prove" facts, and declaim a "right" or "wrong" way of street behaviour. It wanted to submit a new perspective on an important field in the Brazilian everyday life. Sometimes, like Levi-Strauss (1955) taught, it is useful to have an eye from the outside to reach a new perspective on what everybody seems to know perfectly well: normality. The described problem is a symptom of a much bigger problem than only aggressiveness in transport. It represents the structural inequality of the Brazilian society.

Reckless behaviour against the weaker has got complex societal reasons. But it is strongly supported by the ideology of the car-friendly modernist urban planning. What is missing in the Brazilian development of modernisation (but not only there)[10] is a self-reflective criticism on the ideology of the

[10] Despite some political concessions against the ecology movement, also in Europe this ideology still must be considered hegemonic.

car-affine city. The former planner of Austrian "Autobahns", Hermann Knoflacher, has made up a new goal for urban planners by the end of the 20th century: He said they must free the urban population from the necessity to drive car. Though this goal is not reached at all, he had at least gained a good resonance all over Europe. Increasing numbers of public transport users due to improved services and thousands of kilometres of new bicycle lanes in all European metropolises followed by highly increasing numbers of quotidian bicycle users are the effect. In Brazil such a paradigm change is still far away.

Ulrich Beck (1999) called it the "Brazilianisation" of European labour markets, when he was investigating the increasing precarious labour segment without the traditional welfare state securities, that had ruled not only labour conditions but the whole sociability in Europe after World War II. This system is being erased and in fact there are slight signs of European adoptions to some Brazilian social norm and forms – maybe none of the best. If Brazil serves for a global example in street behaviour, European commuters, especially the old and the children, will have to adopt to severe changes in transport habits. The exploding rate of so called Sports Utility Vehicles despite of all ecological and social rationality during the first decade of the 21st century might be a first indicator of a "Brazilianisation" of European transport standards. Definitely Brazil has much better (social) export values than Social Darwinism on the streets.

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The Brazilian and his I-car: an european sociological view on car-driving in a "land of the future"

Martin Gegner

Abstract

Urban transport is a quite uncommon topic for a sociological anlaysis – not only in Brasil. The issue is considered belonging to urban planning and not to sociology. With the establishment of modernist urban planning as the hegemonic model in the aftermath of World War II its airm was to guarantee a rapid individual fluxus based on the private property of a automobile. But aside of this functionalist aproach, transport is also a "fait sociale". Urban transport is constitutive for the urban public space – especially in Brasil. There is hardly any other place where we could watch social codes and conditions of the Brazilian society presented so obviously: the severe class distinctions and the quoditian violence. Whereas sociologists are referreing to violence mainly with respect to increasing numbers of weaponed assaults in Brazilian cities, this essay is focusing on forms of violence on a low level: the violence of car-drivers against weaker participants of Brazilian street transport like pedestrians, bicyclists and motor-bikers. Based on the methodology of the Visual Sociology (Gegner 2007) this research approach also integrates ethnographic methods in the traces of Claude Levi-Strauss (1955). The scientfic alienation of the researcher is backed by the cultural gap between European and Brazilian urban traditions. This allows to discuss habits and circumstance critically that are "normal" for most Brazilians and that are therefore not even questioned. So the Chicago School type of the "sociological eye" (Hughes 1971) is enforced by the "natural" alienation of the researcher. With these European eyes – accustomed to very different codes in the sociabilities of transport – Brazilian habits on the street seem be a permanent violation of human rights, e.g. the right of personal integrity and the right to live without fear for life. As urban transport is a dominant social space in the life of most Brazilians, it effects on the mental life of the individuals cannot be neglected. This essay stresses that agressiveness and counter-agression in transport is rather a symptom but not the cause, it is rooted into structural problems of the Brazilian society. The hypothetical explanation of this "low-level-violence" links it with modernist urban planning. As this has been implemented in Brasil in the most radical form its effect on the mentality of the urbanites is also most radical: Combined with the individual psychological constitution based on the deep class distinctions and the social inequality, the featured individals within modernist planning, car-drivers, show hardly any respect for "the other", they behave like "masters" on the roads.

Keywords: transportation, auto-mobilism, modernist city planning, violence, brazilian city.

El Brasileño y su ego-coche: una visión sociológica europea sobre el acto de dirigir en un "país del futuro"

Martin Gegner

Resumen

El transporte urbano es un tema bastante inusual para un análisis sociológica – no solo en el Brasil. Se considera el asunto perteneciente a la planificación urbana y no a la sociología. Establecer la planificación urbana modernista como modelo hegemônico después de la 2ª Guerra Mundial, tenía el objetivo de garantizar el flujo rápido e individual con el coche propio. Pero, además de esa aproximación funcional, el transporte es también un hecho social. El tráfico constituye el espacio público – especialmente en el Brasil. Difícilmente podemos observar códigos y conductas sociales en otros lugares que en la sociedad brasileña son tan explícitas: la gran diferencia de clases y la violencia cotidiana. Mientras sociólogos normalmente se refieren a la violencia como el número creciente de asaltos armados en las ciudades brasileñas, este artículo focaliza formas de violencia en nivel más pequeño: la violencia de conductoras de coches contra transeuntes más débiles en las calles del País, tales como pedestres, ciclistas y motoqueiros. Con base en la metodología de la Sociología Visual (Gegner 2007), este enfoque de pesquisa también integra métodos etnográficos en la línea de Claude Levi-Strauss (1955). La alienação científica del investigador encuentra apoyo en la laguna cultural entre las tradiciones urbanas europeas y brasileñas. Eso posibilita la discusión crítica de hábitos y circunstancias que son "normales" para la mayoría de los brasileños y que, por lo tanto, no son siquiera cuestionadas. Así, el "ojo sociológico" (Hughes, 1971) de la Escuela de Chicago es reforzado por la alienação "natural" del investigador. Para los ojos europeos – acostumbrados a códigos bien diferentes en la sociabilidade del tráfico – los hábitos brasileños en las calles parecen ser una violación constante a los derechos humanos, como el derecho a la integridad personal y el derecho de vivir sin miedo. Como el transporte urbano es un espacio social dominante en la vida de la mayoría de los brasileños, sus efectos en la psique de los individuos no pueden ser negados. Ese artículo resalta que agressividade y contra-agresión en el tráfico son un síntoma, pero no la causa. Esta está enraizada en problemas estructurales de la sociedad brasileña. La explicación hipotética para este "nivel más pequeño de violencia" está en la planificación urbana modernista. Una vez que fue implantado de forma más drástica en el Brasil, los efectos psicológicos de los habitantes también son más drásticos: combinando la constitución psicológica individual, con base en la gran diferencia de clases y desigualdad social, los individuos de destaque dentro de la planificación modernista, los conductores de coche, casi no muestran ningún respeto por el "otro", comportándose como "dueños" de las calles.

Palabras clave: transporte, automobilismo, planificación urbana modernista, violencia, ciudad brasileña.