THE MAKING OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

SEX AND THE AUTOMOBILE IN THE JAZZ AGE

'Brothels on wheels' thundered the moralists but Peter Ling argues the advent of mass motoring in the 1920s was only one of the changes in social and group relationships that made easier the pursuit of carnal desire.

Thanks to the richness of the new recording media of film, phonograph, and glossy magazine, the imagery of the 1920s remains deeply etched on the popular memory. Like the 1960s, the 1920s are remembered as 'teenage' years in which an older generation said: 'Thou shalt not' and youth replied: 'I will!' Youth itself was one essential element in the iconography of the decade. When not dancing or kissing, the carefree flapper and her boyfriend were commonly depicted seated in an automobile, for the motor car was another key symbol of the so-called 'Jazz Age'.

Some contemporaries saw 'fast cars' and 'fast' conduct as inextricably mixed. But did the automobile really deserve to be called 'the Devil's wagon' or 'a brothel on wheels'? One chronicler of courtship was the popular press. The August 1924 edition of Harper's magazine carried an article entitled: 'Is the Young Person Coming Back?' which recounted the experience of a young man who asked a city girl if she might call on her. The nub of this humorous piece was that when the young man came to 'call', he found to his astonishment that 'she had her hat on'. To older Americans, this could signify only one thing: she expected to go out. This was not what the unsophisticated youth had anticipated at all. To him, coming to call meant being received in the family parlour, making light conversation with the girl and her mother. On subsequent occasions, it might involve taking tea with them and listening politely while the young woman displayed her skills as a pianist. But this was not what the woman had in mind. She was expecting 'a date'; to be taken out and 'treated', and the young man ended up spending four weeks' savings in an effort to meet her expectations.

A generation later, dating had become so accepted that social scientists felt that Americans had to be reminded that there had been no 'dates' before around 1900. Moreover, these scholars linked dating directly to the introduction of the automobile, which was more widely owned by Americans in 1927 than by the citizens of any other nation. There was a car for every five Americans in 1927 whereas in Great Britain there was one for every forty-four people. It would be the swinging sixties before car ownership here reached the American level of the roaring twenties. By combining mobility and privacy, the automobile offered young Americans in the 1920s a 'getaway' vehicle from parental supervision. Consequently, students of American courtship attributed the rise of dating to the automobile's arrival. Dr Evelyn Duvall in a 1956 textbook for teenagers, for instance, declared simply that the car had changed courtship.

To understand the automobile's contribution to this change, however, one should first clarify the nature of earlier courtship practices. The convention of calling was not universal practice in late nineteenth-century America. It was a bourgeois custom based on the concerns and capabilities of the middle classes. As a courtship ritual, calling involved three of the pillars of bourgeois life: the family, respectability, and in particular, privacy. The focal point of calling was gaining admittance into the private family sphere of the home which was the central expression of bourgeois status. Although privacy itself had only become a realistic possibility...
in the eighteenth century, thereafter it had rapidly established itself as a necessity for the affluent and an aspiration for the poor. A badge of respectability, privacy was profoundly important to the nineteenth-century bourgeois family whose individual members each pined for rooms of their own. Only affluence afforded such spaciousness and so the separate parlour in which callers applied for admission into the bosom of the family was itself a status symbol. As guardians of the home, women were the chief arbiters of who could call and who would never be invited. Daughters could invite male suitors to call but there remained a parental veto on who would be received. In this way, family honour and essential privacy could be preserved. However, parental oversight always threatened to infringe the maturing offspring's right to privacy. To uphold their own notions of honour and ethics, Peter Gay points out, parents went to extraordinary lengths. They would 'open their children's letters, oversee their reading, chaperone their visitors, (even) inspect their underwear'. To the dismay of the younger generation, bourgeois parents failed to respect the principle of privacy they preached.

For the mass of working-class Americans, such privacy was very remote from the daily reality of overcrowding. Cramped lodging houses made the social niceties of 'calling' ludicrously impractical. Of course, a large proportion of the American working class was either immigrant or the children of immigrants and so tried to continue in the New World their traditional practices of chaperonage and female seclusion. However, as social workers like Jane Addams noted, the need for everyone to earn money in impoverished working-class households made such customs hard to maintain, while crowded living conditions, simultaneously prevented the adoption of bourgeois habits. The working classes consequently pioneered dating as an expedient born of the opportunities offered and the comforts denied to them. Forced out onto the streets, Addams warned, working-class youth was highly susceptible to the enticements of commercialised entertainment. Recognising the need for relaxation after a harsh working day, Addams worried nonetheless about the vulgarity of available leisure facilities. She told her middle-class readers of pathetic instances when her work took her into one of Chicago's many saloons and she would be stopped by naive youths who asked her to introduce them to a 'nice' girl. Addams clearly believed that none would be found in such a place.

If poverty pushed the lower orders onto the streets, wealth enabled the upper classes to explore every avenue of city life. Money gave access to theatres, restaurants, galleries and clubs. By 1900, the traditional events of the season, such as the opera, began to be deemed passé by a growing number of privileged youths. These 'bohemians' began to perceive the possibility of a new freedom arising from the anonymity of crowded city streets. Paradoxically, the public places of the metropolis could be profoundly private, provided one avoided the stamping ground of one's own social class. Thus, affluent youth figuratively 'crossed the tracks' to enjoy a surer privacy amidst working-class crowds than they experienced in their parents' homes. A revolution in etiquette had

'Love and transportation' – a comment on its state-of-the-art combination from the 1924 issue of Judge magazine.
innocent' was intensified by alarmist forecasts of the spread of such infections via the numerous shared facilities of the late nineteenth-century city, such as the omni-present drinking cup and of course, communal toilets. Such fears of contagion were politically useful to all groups seeking to curtail casual social contact. Racial segregation, for example, was advocated on the grounds of the high incidence of contagious diseases among Negroes. When female workers in the Treasury Department in Washington urged racial segregation in federal offices, they reported specifically their fears of infection from shared toilet facilities. Similarly, nativists, calling for immigration restriction, urged tougher health standards and inspection procedures at immigration entry points. Thus at the start of this century the VD threat seemed graver and more pervasive than anyone had previously imagined. Moreover, in a world of contagion, improved transport undermined attempts to quarantine the dangerous classes.

Physicians concerned with the health hazards of VD eventually formed the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA) in 1905. Despite its euphemistic name, the organisation differed from earlier purity campaigners in its belief that the taboo on public discussion of sex must be ended. As these doctors knew, ignorance injured the pure as well as the profane. For the general welfare, therefore, American youth should be given sex education in order to dispel harmful myths, notably the deeply ingrained belief that the male sex need was so great that sexual continence was physically harmful to a man. Hundred of thousands of pamphlets were distributed to warn young Americans of the perils of sexual promiscuity. In addition, the mass-circulation magazines of this 'muck-raking' age eagerly seized on a sensational topic and published exposes of the so-called 'white slave trade' and prostitution. Like earlier moral campaigners, however, the ASHA regarded prostitutes as the vital source of venereal infection. Consequently, municipal and state authorities were pressed to eradicate 'red-light' districts, while at the federal level, Congress passed the Mann Act of 1911 which made it a criminal offence to transport a woman across state lines for sexual purposes.

This last measure reflected the public outcry provoked by the press campaign against the alleged trafficking of women for brothels: the 'white slave trade'. It was not primarily a response to the ability of motorists to escape legal restrictions on sexual conduct by crossing state lines. National governmental concern over the health dangers of prostitution peaked with America's mobilisation for war in 1917. Fearing that the armed forces would be decimated by VD before they reached the Western Front, the Wilson administration appointed ASHA lawyer Bascom Johnson to oversee the suppression of red-light districts near military bases. It was Johnson who first pointed to the automobile as an obstacle in the fight against vice. 'The automobile prostitute', he wrote, 'is the bane of law enforcement officials'. In January 1919, Johnson urged federal legislation to combat this new
phenomenon. However, as the concurrent moral crusade of Prohibition demonstrated, such legislation would be hard to enforce. Government at all levels had neither the officers nor the newly purchased motor vehicles to patrol city streets and country highways.

The fixed abode of ill repute, however, was vulnerable to the anti-vice campaign. Robert and Helen Lynd noticed the impact of one such 'clean-up' campaign in Muncie, Indiana. During the local oil and natural gas boom of the 1890s, Muncie had had twenty to twenty-five brothels. However, the anti-vice campaign of the First World War period had been so vigorous that by the early 1920s the city had at most 'three fly-by-night furtively conducted houses of prostitution catering exclusively to the working class'. The Lynds also reported, however, a statement by Muncie's juvenile court judge that 'the automobile has become a house of prostitu-

Home, sweet home—Judy Garland and family embodying midWest wholesomeness at the turn of the century in the film *Meet Me in St Louis*. The reality of blue-collar urban living however was somewhat different, as portrayed in George Bellows' painting *The Cliff Dwellers* (above), forcing ordinary men and women to take their pleasures out on the streets.
accepted red-light districts, prostitutes found an economical expedient in the form of their client's car. This may explain in part why three brothels for the working class remained in Muncie since the latter's car ownership and use was less extensive than that found among higher income groups. Car ownership was, however, incredibly high. Only 10 per cent of Muncie's families had incomes above the US Census Bureau's subsistence level of $1,921 at a time when motor trade authorities reckoned that owning a cheap car required an annual income of $2,800. Nonetheless, two out of every three families in Muncie owned cars.

If more citizens of Muncie had cars than could apparently afford them, then equally, more residents had sex than the guardians of public morality would have preferred. Of the thirty girls charged with 'sex crimes' before the juvenile court in the year prior to September 1st, 1924, nineteen committed the offence in an automobile, while the remaining eleven declined to say. The juveniles' judge seems to have had grounds for describing the car in lurid terms. However, prostitution was not intrinsically a juvenile offence nor was it the only sex crime under Indiana law, so we cannot assume that the thirty women were charged with prostitution. Another category of sex crime was having sex with a minor (that is, under the age of consent, which varied from state to state). Given that the accused appeared before a juvenile court, it seems likely that at least some were guilty of sexual precocity rather than prostitution. The judge's blanket condemnation reflected his adherence to a moral code which regarded all extra-marital sex as debased and therefore classed all females who participated in it as 'fallen women'.

With hindsight, his outburst may seem to us unjust. Presumably, therefore, one should welcome the arrival of back-seat sex in the 1920s as a harbinger of sexual liberation. Now freed from the oppressive scrutiny of their guardians, young people were able to respond to their 'natural' desires. The automobile aided this process, especially when car manufacturers shifted from open-top to closed-body models, improved interior upholstery, and included a heater as a standard feature. Increased public spending on highway improvement helped, too, by making secluded beauty spots more accessible to couples in search of inspiration and opportunity. However, just as the current drug problem in America has encouraged a sympathetic scholarly re-appraisal of Prohibition, so the AIDS pandemic obliges us to reassess our attitudes to the social hygienists. Some doctors in the 1920s recognised that the easy mobility provided by private passenger cars and improved roads had serious implications for the containment of contagious diseases in the same way as medical authorities in our own time acknowledge the contribution of a network of air routes to the global spread of AIDS.

However, this is not the principal reason why the concern expressed in the 1920s about the incidence of sex in cars should be treated with understanding rather than smug derision. The
move from calling to dating was not simply a move away from prudish parental oversight but also a transition from a courtship conducted in a place defined culturally as female, the home, to a sphere defined as male, public life. While many of the Victorian conventions surrounding the notion of separate spheres were undoubtedly oppressive, the calling ritual by virtue of its location in the home gave bourgeois women (mothers and daughters) a measure of control that should not be forgotten. The emergence of dating entailed the loss of this control for women.

The different conventions governing invitations under the two patterns of courtship indicate this shift of power. Under the calling system, the woman asked the man and could refuse to receive him, even when he called. Under the dating system, however, it was left to the man to issue invitations since he would bear the expense. Moreover, whatever the disadvantages of courtship conducted within the parental home, it did provide a comparatively safe environment in which to meet a man about whom a woman might know relatively little. To those who argue that this is a defence of the kind of double standard that imprisoned women for years (men can go out; women cannot), my response must be that since the social hygienists did not break the belief in an overpowering male sexual need, women in the twentieth century continued to face men largely conditioned to the idea that they must not readily take 'no' for an answer. Getting out into a sexist public world was not automatically liberating.

Moreover, the practicalities of dating made courtship manifestly a process governed by cash and thereby accentuated the treatment of women as a commodity. The low wages of female workers ensured that many working women had to scrimp on essentials to have money for leisure. The willingness of a man to bear the cost of an evening out became vitally important under such circumstances. Economic inequality thus ratified male power. Dating became an exercise in the machismo of capitalism; the man with money could afford to ask girls out; he had a car to take them out in; he drove, he paid, and she had to be 'good company' in return. In this sense, prostitution became a paradigm of sexual relations in general and the automobile truly became a brothel on wheels. Social reformer Mary Simkovich observed acridly in 1910: 'The young men of the big cities today are no gallantly paying the way of these girls for nothing'.

However, nothing was what they might get, despite the persistence of sexual inequality throughout the century. When an American teens' magazine of the 1950s asked: 'Does a girl have to pet to be popular?', one boy responded: 'When a boy takes a girl out and spends $1.20 on her (like I did the other night) he expects a little petting in return (which I didn’t get)'. While this incident, like the earlier account of a youth spending the equivalent of four weeks' savings on his date, indicates that dating was not automatically male-controlled, male car ownership did not help women in this power struggle. The automobile was part of the male-owned wealth that gave an implied right to command, a right made manifest by the driver's choice of homeward route. Women had to bargain and the sexual practice of 'petting' emerged as an integral part of this process. A wide variety of sexual practices short of intercourse constituted petting. The overwhelming majority of teenagers interviewed by the Lynds in the mid-1920s said they had been to petting parties and the automobile was the commonest place to pet. Of course, neither the desire for nor the pleasure from petting was always confined to the male. Moreover, it was grudgingly accepted that the woman should have a brake on the pace of progression through the various phases of petting, even though the man was expected to try to get as far as he could.

Each of the phases of petting came to be associated with a corresponding emotional stage in a couple's relationship. Kissing, while not automatic, was alright if the two merely liked each other; 'deep' or 'French' kissing indicated romantic attachment; breast touching through the clothing heralded that things were becoming serious; and continued under the bra, if the feelings intensified; finally, explorations 'below the waist' were reserved only for cou-

The closed car (above the 1921 Haynes four-door roadster which retailed at $3,250) offered opportunities for intimate contact between the sexes that previous locations had withheld – not all of them as decorous as those enjoyed by the motoring socialites portrayed in 'Our Modern Maidsen' (one of Joan Crawford's early films).
The advent of the car afforded new social as well as sexual opportunities to couples going steady—as with this group of sweethearts above, vacationing at Lake Hopatcong in New Jersey in July 1920. The course of true love on wheels did not always run smooth however—when it did not, it was the man who had to resolve it as portrayed on the sheet music to the suggestive 20s hit song opposite.

...people who considered themselves truly in love. The culmination of this logic was intercourse with one’s fiancé. The first large-scale surveys of American sexual practices conducted during the 1950s suggested that this had been the experience of young women in the 1920s. Alfred Kinsey reported that women who reached sexual maturity in the 1920s were far less likely to be virgins at marriage than were those who matured before the First World War. Nonetheless, a majority of women under thirty years old during the 1920s did not experience pre-marital sex, and half of those that did had sex only with their fiancés. As a prelude to marriage rather than a wholly unrelated activity, such sex may be regarded as less revolutionary than it might otherwise appear, and correspondingly the automobile which facilitated such sexual encounters may be deemed less subversive than some contemporaries feared.

Americans did have sex in automobiles in the 1920s. However, the contribution of the motor car to the much-vaunted wantonness of the twenties was an indirect one. Even before the automobile was available young Americans of the leisure class were seeking anonymous places where they could ignore the bounds of propriety. Working-class youth had even earlier resorted to the streets in search of companionship and pleasure. What the automobile produced was a diffusion and intensification of this incipient pattern of dating. Other factors were also important to this trend. Successful campaigns against child labour and in favour of prolonged compulsory schooling both reflected and reinforced changing notions of youth itself. Increasingly, adolescence in particular was seen as a time of experimentation, a somewhat separate, and some believed therapeutic, prelude to adult life. Thus we should not accept uncritically the idea that customs and institutions simply react belatedly to technological change. American society in the 1920s was struggling to accommodate social as well as technological innovations.

At the same time the inertia and shortsightedness of institutions must not be overlooked. One simple reason why motoring was so deeply implicated in the youth practices of the 1920s was the absence of any effective restriction on the right to drive. In Muncie, young teenagers could drive, provided they could persuade their parents to loan them the car. The Lynds remark that such requests were a major cause of family arguments in Muncie, and the outcome of these domestic disputes hinged on parental attitudes to youth as well as mass car ownership. While legislative inaction and parental trust enabled apparently sex-hungry teenagers to take to America’s roads in the 1920s, the active state suppression of red-light districts pushed prostitutes too, into cars in secluded parking spots. Just as the moralists feared, the automobile had become a brothel on wheels. Yet the deplorable thing was not that so much had changed, but that sexism remained the same. Dating was hazardous not because of automobility but because of male attitudes to sex. For, as most women came to appreciate, they were most in danger when the car was parked.

FOR FURTHER READING:

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