

The autocratic automobile? A political history of the car in Switzerland (1950–2000)

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Abstract

This study aims to understand the scientific, political, and social controversies that have accompanied the development of individual motorised traffic in Switzerland during the second half of the 20th century. Motorisation and the democratisation of the car have often been presented as inevitable. Environmental concerns and oppositions were often ignored or simply considered as conservative “resistances to progress”. Nevertheless, countless committees and local groups opposing excessive concreting, consumerism, and the omnipresence of cars were born during the Grand Acceleration of the Anthropocene (1950-2000). These groups focused on the financial, environmental, social, and health cost of the increase in cars and, as a result, they attempted to curb these costs or to propose alternative forms of transport.

We suggest that their claims were marginalised, channelled, and, at times, absorbed by the political authorities. From this point of view, the massive development of cars was the result of political struggles in which the interest of the car industry and the automobile clubs held predominance.

This research will focus on two areas corresponding to two types of controversy, (1) infrastructure and (2) pollution. These areas will be addressed through several case studies namely (1) controversies about highway construction and to road projects (case studies: Geneva-Lausanne; Martigny-Brig) and (2) the political regulation of pollution (case study: use of leaded gasoline).

Switzerland is an interesting laboratory for historical analysis because its direct democracy system theoretically offers opportunities to oppose developments considered as being against the interests of society. We shall thus see how the car continued its dominance despite this political framework.

RCC Research Project

During my stay in Munich, I will develop the second area of my research project: political regulation of pollution through the case study of leaded gasoline.

In 1921, General Motors chemists decided to include highly toxic tetraethyl lead in gasoline to reduce “knock” or “pinging” in internal-combustion engines. Despite the opposition of health authorities first in the United States and subsequently, in several countries, the lead additive would come to dominate the global market, particularly during ‘The Great Acceleration’. The use of the additive was finally abolished only in 2021, when the last consumer country stopped

its distribution. Before its progressive elimination of its use and throughout the 20th century, many voices spoke out against the use of, and on environmental contamination from, this additive. Switzerland prohibited its use from 1925-1947. This decision was a worldwide exception. But it did not last: indeed, as soon as 1947, the country authorized the use of leaded gasoline again.

Through the case of Switzerland, my research aims to shed the light on the acceptance of lead poisoning beyond the USA. Therefore, one must ask how concerns over human health and environmental impacts from toxic lead are not publicized in democratic countries, and how corporate interests trumped concerns over the well-being of the community even though they know about the threats.

This research is based on a body of historical sources, mainly from the press, archives of the main automobile lobbies (Touring Club Suisse and Automobile Club Suisse) or from parliamentary debates. The case of the acceptance of leaded gasoline in Switzerland shows the limits of instruments of parliamentary democracy in order to oppose in an efficient way and early enough to a sanitary and environmental contamination.

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