



REAL GEOGRAPHY

EXPLORING THE GEOGRAPHY OF EVERYDAY LIFE

McGraw-Hill Higher Education

America's Car Complex by Jon C. Malinowski, Ph.D.

A culture complex is a set of functionally interrelated cultural traits. In American culture, there is perhaps no greater example of this than the automobile. More than just technological items for transportation, cars are at the center of many aspects of American values, social norms, and cultural trends.

First, the car is a symbol of freedom, a central American value. Cruising down the road in a convertible with the top down is an image used time and time again in American movies and advertising campaigns. Millions

of Americans own recreational vehicles (RV) because they can travel wherever they choose.

This sense of freedom has been incorporated into American architecture. Witness the countless drive-thru restaurants, banks, and other establishments that are ubiquitous in the United States.

Cars are also part of our social fabric. Many teenagers get their first jobs simply because they want to save money for an auto. Cars, for them, represent freedom from their parents, social status among their peers, and the promise of romantic encounters away from prying eyes.

Automobiles are also a common feature in our recreational culture. NASCAR is the number one sport in America. Millions of Americans collect and restore old cars. Thousands of books describing pleasant drives and vacations are sold each year to motorists excited to spend a week or two in their cars.

But cars are also vital as an economic force. The fate of the



auto industry continues to affect vast sectors of the American (and world) economy. Because autos use textiles, metal, plastics, glass, and electronic components, a declining auto industry can have ripple effects far and wide.

Because of this importance, the political culture of the country often makes decisions based on the good of the industry or its workers (labor unions, etc.). Highway construction gets more consideration than public transportation as a vital component of national defense.

Finally, our popular culture is saturated with auto references. Movies such as *American Graffiti*, *National Lampoon's Vacation*, *The Fast and the Furious*, and *Days of Thunder* celebrate driving or drivers. Songs such as "Route 66", "Little Deuce Coup", and "I Can't Drive Fifty-Five" feature auto culture. Television has also capitalized on the American love for cars in shows such as *Knight Rider*.

Further Research

1. Read one of John A. Jakle's books on the American landscape, such as *Fast Food*, *The Gas Station in America*, or *The Motel in America*.
2. Read Richard Pillsbury's 1974 classic article "Carolina thunder: A geography of southern stock car racing" in volume 73 of the *Journal of Geography* (1974). The article is reprinted in the book, *Fast Food, Stock Cars, and Rock-n-Roll*, edited by George O. Carney and published by Rowman & Littlefield.
3. See how many American movies, books, television shows, and songs you can think of that have cars as their central theme.

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