

# The ideological function of cars

[Sociology](#), [Racism](#)



The Ideological Function of Cars A car is a personal tool for transportation that can be used whenever and for whatever reasons. Its role in everyday life varies across public and private spheres of society and carries with it various ideological assumptions. A car is understood to serve the basic universal purpose of travel in the modern world; however, its insertion, absorption, and appropriation into the ideological realm of society transforms cars into extensions of people's relational identities. The function of a car at its historical conception was a response to peoples' need to travel faster and easier. While it may seem neutral and unbiased, a car, as an alternative to other modes of transportation, carries immediate allusions to class in society. Its purpose goes beyond simply transportation. Its ideological function as a mythologized object creates forms of inclusion and exclusion accepted as true and natural to modern society. The details of the type of car or its use are part of the intersectionality of class, race, and gender. Cars can be a form of affiliation or individuation but they ultimately create and reinforce the cycle of society; what Louis Althusser refers as the reproduction of the conditions of production. In U. S. society a vehicle is practically a standard of everyday life. Its use is accepted almost as necessity for the continuation of normal operations of work and leisure. The reality of cars' historical creation has been lost through its subjection to the dialectical social relationships of modern America. At the simplest level a cars function is to move from point A to point B. However the variety of the types of cars and the uses of cars complicate this notion. Once a person gets behind the wheel they automatically transform from passenger to driver. When one purchases a car they become an owner leading to extensive other

implications of identity. By mystifying its reality, a car's ideological function serves as symbols of individuals' personality, ability, marginality, and so on. The foremost distinction that a car represents is class. A vehicle is predominantly understood as part of the working middle class necessity in U. S. society. To be able to afford a car is a major exclusionary factor that differentiates between those who have and those who have-not. Cars generally appeal to people part of the work force because they must travel to and from their jobs, making at least moderate income to support the costs of owning or driving a vehicle. Almost adopted as a necessity, having a car is still a luxury for a large portion of American society. It is a large divide between those who drive and reap the benefits of traveling further, making more money, experiencing more than someone limited to walking or public transportation. Having a car is also associated with the concept of freedom and attainment. The capability to travel further both liberates and elevates status. The type of car one drives is also a signifier of ones social status. The road is a public space where peoples' class and characteristics are juxtaposed to one another distinguishing their societal roles. A luxury car is an automatic signifier of the driver's status because the subconscious recognition of the price tag associated with vehicles. While someone without a car or a troubled car faces more limitations, thereby maintaining the gap between upper and lower classes. A less obviously appropriated association with cars is race. As a subjective signifier, race is associated with cars through racist lens of interpretation based on stereotypes and illusions. Certain styles or makes of cars are associated with certain identities of being black, Hispanic, Asian, and white. The ability for cars to be customized and

personalized feed the generalizations of certain images of racial groups. These ascribed meanings are accepted as typical and true. Pick-up trucks that are raised with large tires are often associated with white males. "Low-riders" are identified as a largely Hispanic vehicle, "chrome rims" point to the African-American community's taste in design, while the term "ricer" or "rice burner" refers negatively to a sub-cultural group of predominantly Asian import car enthusiasts. These socially constructed labels carry various other racialized meanings, such as Hispanics being poor and black people being ostentatious. Even driving ability can distinguish race, such as the popular notion of Asians being bad drivers. The long-standing belief of racial profiling by cops cause some to argue that even having a car can prompt racism in individuals. The binding of socialized meanings with inanimate objects such as cars mythologizes and perpetuates the sources of racism in America.

Gender is also a large factor of in the realm of cars. From the functional standpoint cars were created for the ease of travel. Traveling is understood as part of the public sphere where people interchange information and ideas as contrasted with the private sphere of domesticity and family. Therefore, cars are tacitly masculine objects used for the purpose of engaging in masculine activities. The gender implications of cars are exemplified by their ways of appealing to the masses. Cars are advertised as extensions of man emphasizing the power of speed and security. The act of driving is culturally (and somewhat symbolically – the phallic shift knob) a masculine activity that is also praised as a sport. The male figure is most often situated in the driver seat in images reproducing hierarchical social positions in car seating. The woman is then situated in the front passenger seat as subordinate to the

man. The man being the driver implicates his power and control over his passengers or family. Driving as a sport further engages masculine traits of competition, pride, achievement, and all around machismo. Ultimately the ideological structure within the object of a car creates and reinforces normative identities in society. It maintains class divides between those who can afford to travel further and in the comfort of their own car and the lower classes that cannot afford such a luxury. The differences between types of cars also become extensions of the racialized society where stereotypes and illusions emerge. Economic divisions in society mutually support racism through the differences in car ownership. Also, cars as both a physical and ideological device create and maintain the gendered activities of society. As a representation of a form of masculinity, cars and the activity of driving depend on its engendered meanings of hierarchical positions between man and woman, driver and passenger, leader and subordinate. These ideological assumptions embedded within the object of car helps to create and maintain society. Cars ideological and physical functions reproduce the conditions of production so that the patterns of society subsist. The marginalization, racialization, and subordination of drivers and car owners emulate how the intersectionality of society ascribes meaning into daily objects that are believed to hold no ideological value. A car carries far more meaning than only the function of moving from point A to point B.