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Cultivating the “car state”: a culturally sensitive analysis of car-centric discourses and mobility cultures in Southern Germany

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ABSTRACT

Concepts of “mobility cultures” are gaining traction in mobility research and policy across Europe. This article initially examines and synthesizes existing empirical and conceptual work on mobility cultures. Resulting insights are subsequently used to structure a culturally sensitive inquiry into the transformation of the automobile industry in Southern Germany. For this, a discourse-analytical approach is applied to diverse sources of qualitative data collected specifically for this study. Results reveal different understandings among participants of two regional initiatives intended to facilitate a debate about the future of the automobile industry in the area. These initiatives feature culturally diverse understandings of both the current “car state” and opportunities and threats emanating from a potential shift toward a more environmentally friendly “mobility state.” It is shown that discursive representations of the two states in Southern Germany as major car-manufacturing sites dominate, at the expense of alternative views that advocate for the formation of mobility-related regional identities “beyond the car.” This insistence on maintaining regional identities rooted in car manufacturing simultaneously stokes fears of potential social upheaval in the region if any restrictions to (auto)mobility were to pass, thereby delaying an urgently needed (industrial) political departure from unsustainable car-centric mobility cultures.

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Introduction

Against the backdrop of accelerating climate change, calls abound for a rapid sustainability transformation of the transport sector (e.g., Banister 2008; Givoni and Banister 2013; Hopkins and Higham 2016). In this context, some commentators view a shift toward a post-car society as a radical but necessary solution (Dennis and Urry 2009; Canzler et al. 2018). However, behavior change and technological improvements alone cannot transform the dominant socio-technical system of fossil-fueled automobility, given its deeply rooted cultural and symbolic dimensions (Sachs 1984; Miller 2001; Urry 2004; Sheller 2004; Manderscheid 2014). Instead, a deep cultural shift is needed in how mobility is thought about and practiced, complementing transport- and industrial-political efforts to initiate this shift away from the car and to mitigate anticipated negative economic and societal effects of a shrinking car-manufacturing sector. Current attempts to “wean” the automobile industry in Germany (and elsewhere) of its dependence on the combustion

engine and the privately owned car have already shown the conflict potential of such efforts.

To date, transport policy and planning in Germany (and elsewhere) have largely ignored the cultural dimensions of mobility, partly because political elites often view a culturally sensitive stance as deeply “ideological” and obstructive to rational and “value-neutral” decision-making (see Flyvbjerg 1998; Sheller 2004; Rau 2008; Freudendal-Pedersen et al. 2017 for critiques of this particular argument). However, this insistence on keeping transport planning “culturally neutral” overlooks the dominance of certain cultural meanings and interpretations used by transport planners and policymakers (Stone 1989; Hajer 1995a; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003). Moreover, such a posture diverts attention from so-called “transport taboos” (Gössling and Cohen 2014), that is potentially negative and uncomfortable consequences of transport infrastructure development for (vulnerable parts of) society. However, late modern (mobility) politics is increasingly confronted with its own consequences, with narratives of culture-free, value-neutral transport planning gradually

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becoming implausible (Beck et al. 2003). Growing public resistance to costly transport infrastructure megaprojects, such as the controversial demolition of large parts of Stuttgart main station (*Stuttgart 21*) and its subsequent extensive reconstruction within the framework of the Trans-European Network (TEN), exemplifies this situation. A shift in mobility policy and practice that incorporates cultural and symbolic aspects can potentially help to prevent such mobility-related conflicts (for a sociological investigation of new formats of mobility politics in Munich see Hajer and Kesselring 1999 and Kesselring 2001).

At the same time, calls abound for a sustainability transformation of existing mobility cultures (Wulforth et al. 2013; Rammler 2017; Baden-Württemberg Stiftung 2017; Reallabor für nachhaltige Mobilitätskultur, Universität Stuttgart 2018), yet it often remains unclear what this actually means both in conceptual terms and on a practical level. Concepts of mobility culture discussed in the literature tend to emphasize the role of societal norms and conventions concerning mobility. Here, mobility cultures are defined as toolkits of solutions to everyday problems that require the movement of people and/or goods (cf. Rau 2008). Existing mobility-cultural empirical work ranges from research on car cultures to inquiries into urban mobility (sub)cultures and has captured the meanings, emotions, and societal norms attached to mobility (e.g., Fincham 2007; Klinger et al. 2013; Aldred and Jungnickel 2014).

The origins of the term “mobility cultures” can be traced back to urban theorist Ole Jensen’s seminal work that elaborates on “flows of meaning” and “mobility codes” that connect with, and are (re)produced by urban mobility (Jensen 2006, 2009). Concurrently, Deffner et al. (2006) developed a conceptualization of mobility cultures (*Mobilitätskulturen*) in a German context. At the same time, John Urry’s groundbreaking efforts to combine systems thinking and culturally sensitive forms of social inquiry to re-conceptualize society as a set of mobilities have exerted a decisive influence on this emerging body of mobility-cultural work (Urry 2000; Sheller and Urry 2006; see Rau 2010, 2011; Adey et al. 2014; see also Freudendal-Pedersen and Kesselring 2017 for appraisals of Urry’s work on mobilities).

This article draws on this existing body of work to illustrate the inherently cultural nature of current political processes that deal with the future of car manufacturing in Southern Germany and its limiting effect on efforts to bring about a post-car system. In doing so, it attempts to answer the following research question: how do current political negotiations regarding the future of car

manufacturing in Southern Germany (re)construct mobility-cultural meanings and practices? To achieve this aim, the study adopts a production-oriented, culturally sensitive approach to mobility research that is capable of capturing empirically current mobility-cultural rifts and disagreements that emerge in contemporary political negotiations related to car manufacturing in the region.

The next section of this article categorizes and critically examines existing concepts of mobility culture in the literature. Building on this review, the third section outlines the culturally sensitive, interpretative approach to empirical mobility research that is used in this study and that combines central elements of Maarten Hajer’s argumentative discourse analysis (Hajer 1995a; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003) with a broader notion of “discourse” as a set of socio-material practices. The fourth section presents qualitative data from different sources, including publicly available documents, qualitative interviews, and records of (discursive) practices in relation to two discursive spaces in Southern Germany that focus on the transformation of the automobile industry. The subsequent discussion of the results reveals the omnipresence of the idea of the “car state” and its meanings and implications for the socio-material and political (re)production of the (auto)mobility system.

The concept of culture in social-scientific mobility research

Despite the relative novelty of culturalist approaches to mobility research, significant variations already exist in how (mobility) culture is conceptualized and measured. This section briefly examines these variations, drawing on a growing body of mostly European literature on mobility cultures. To capture the range and diversity of mobility cultures research (without being representative in the strict sense of the term), our review moves beyond a mere keyword search to include seminal texts that discuss cultural aspects of mobility without using the term “mobility cultures” (e.g., Sachs 1992; Dunn 1998; Featherstone 2004). Interestingly, some historical accounts are particularly insightful (e.g., Sachs 1984, 1992). This review reveals at least three key strands of mobility cultures thinking.

A first strand of thinking focuses on how mobility cultures *should be* and often argues for a paradigmatic shift away from fossil-fueled mobility cultures and toward “new” and *better* post-fossil ones (e.g., Rammler 2009, 2017; Keichel and Schwedes 2013). This includes calls for a transition toward a low-carbon, post-car society (Dunn 1998;

Featherstone 2004; Conley and McLaren 2009; Beyazit 2013; Rammner 2017).

The second strand compares different forms of everyday mobility, which are often identified empirically through cluster analyses of data sets collected at different social, geographical, or administrative levels. Large-scale quantitative work has dominated this field (Götz et al. 2016, Klinger 2017). More specifically, there are studies that compare the mobility cultures of different cities (IFMO 2013; Wulfhorst et al. 2013; Klinger et al. 2013) and European Union (EU)-countries (Haustein and Nielsen 2016). Yet others investigate changes in mobility behavior of people moving between urban mobility cultures (Klinger and Lanzendorf 2016; Klinger 2017). While mainly empirical in focus, there are also conceptual propositions in this body of work that consider mobility cultures of specific social groups and potential drivers for changing them (e.g., Hopkins and Stephenson 2014).

The third strand highlights meaning-oriented concepts of mobility cultures that appear across different research traditions (Miller 2001; Jensen 2006, 2009; Fincham 2007; Conley and McLaren 2009). A range of mostly Anglophone studies had attempted to capture cultural aspects of mobility using the “new mobilities paradigm” as a conceptual foundation (Sheller and Urry 2006). Here, a strong emphasis on meanings complements a focus on emotions (e.g., Sheller 2004). In Germany, cognitive aspects of constructing meaning have been central to much of the work on mobility cultures.¹ In addition, culturally sensitive studies of mobility politics (e.g., Rau 2008; Aldred and Jungnickel 2014) have illustrated the use of allegedly “culturally neutral” technical-practical lines of argumentation as a way of concealing the cultural distinctiveness of much thinking around mobility. This deliberate eclipsing of “all things cultural” can also be observed in current debates about the mobility turn (*Verkehrswende*) and its implicit challenge to the dominant system of automobility. Moreover, cultural-historical and discourse-analytical studies have demonstrated the benefits of qualitative inquiries into the multi-layered nature of mobility cultures. For example, Wolfgang Sachs’ (1984) seminal study of the history of Germany’s car culture has aptly demonstrated the wealth of insights that can be created through a thorough and careful qualitative analysis. Recent critical research on discourses of e-mobility in Germany (Schwedes et al. 2013), e-mobility in the region of Stuttgart (Späth et al. 2016), and political discourses and processes in the UK regarding automated mobility transitions (Schwanen and Hopkins 2018) confirms this observation.

Undoubtedly, all three strands have provided novel insights into the nature of mobility cultures and their potential transformation toward sustainability, including questions regarding how people get around and what mobility products and services they use (e.g., vehicles, car-sharing schemes). What is missing from much of the mobility cultures literature to date is systematic engagement with the (industrial) political and socio-cultural conditions that contribute to the production of vehicles and services and, by extension, the “production of distance” that underpins car-centric mobility cultures. This study thus develops an explicitly production-oriented view of mobility cultures to frame the presentation and discussion of the empirical material in this article. We thus conceptualize mobility cultures as “shared meanings and materials that underpin the production of mobility-related goods and services and, by extension, the reproduction of diverse mobility practices that make up the “consumption of distance.”² This definition evinces some resemblance to the “systems of provision” approach in practice-theoretical consumption research, including recent inquiries into the “consumption of distance” (Heisserer and Rau 2017). In particular, we explicitly recognize the relevance of shared material conditions (e.g., particular transport infrastructure) and an actor-oriented view of mobility cultures emphasizing existing power geometries in setting the material prerequisites for future mobility systems. In addition, we are interested in identifying dynamic processes that determine whether a particular mobility culture is challenged, maintained, or reinforced. We specifically focus on contemporary political negotiations and related actors in institutionalized formats of politics because of their (potential) ability for infrastructural, industrial, and social agenda setting and thus providing material prerequisites for future mobility systems.

The following section argues for a culturally sensitive discourse-analytical treatment of evidence of the transformation of the automobile industry in Southern Germany and related (industrial) political negotiations, with a view to empirically capturing their implicit cultural meanings.

Capturing discourses of transformation and change: investigating mobility cultures using Argumentative Discourse Analysis

Many social-scientific inquiries into mobility carried out to date have deployed methods that treat mobility-related phenomena as inherently measurable and quantifiable, at the expense of work on cultural meanings that requires interpretivist methodological and analytical tools. Moreover, much work has been

done to capture aspects of mobility culture that can be directly observed or immediately verbalized by different social actors. In contrast, few detailed empirical studies exist of the “hidden” influence of the car-manufacturing sector on mobility politics and the “production of distance” in Germany (e.g., Sternkopf and Nowack (2016) as well as Mögele (2016) describing car-lobbyism (in)directly influencing German mobility politics). This is partly because publicly accessible data can be hard to come by. These methodological considerations have partially motivated this study.

An analysis of discourses can be particularly useful for empirical investigations of underlying cultural meanings. In this context, argumentative discourse analysis (see Hajer 2002 for a summary of the development of ADA) has been shown to be valuable for studying the kinds of mobility politics and mobility discourses presented in this article (Hajer and Kesselring 1999; Hajer 1995b). For example, Hajer and Kesselring (1999) used an institutional-constructivist analysis for similar empirical objects as our discursive spaces under study. We decided to adopt this variant of ADA for this study but to shift its analytical focus away from reconstructing different visions of mobility and classifying different forms of mobility politics and toward an analysis of current political negotiations *in the making* as dynamic empirical objects and their underlying production-oriented mobility cultures.

An ADA approach combines an analysis of the discursive production of meaning with analytical inquiries into the social practices from which these meanings emerge and in which the actors that make discursive statements engage (Hajer 2002, 2006). It combines a focus on discursive interactions and argumentative structures with an emphasis on both language (in use) and the practices that facilitate the production of discourse. In Hajer’s (1995a) usage, “language is seen as an integral part of reality, as a specific communicative practice which influences the perception of interests and preference.” The concept of social reality that underpins ADA thus views society as “reproduced in this process of [discursive] interaction between agents and structures that constantly adjusts, transforms, resists, or reinvents social arrangements” (Hajer 1995a, 58).

To analyze different understandings, perceptions, and positions of actors as well as power relations in discourse, Hajer (1995a) uses the concept of story lines as a key element of analysis. A story line is a condensed statement which summarizes complex narratives within discourse and which “is a generative sort of narrative that allows actors to draw upon various discursive categories to give meaning to specific physical and social phenomena” (Hajer

1995a). Some story lines might become dominant, with actors building a discourse-coalition around them (Hajer 2006). The analysis of story lines applied to highly dynamic empirical objects makes it possible to capture both emerging and established story lines in ongoing negotiations whose future outcomes remain uncertain. This draws attention to underlying divergences and hidden conflicts that characterize seemingly “smooth” negotiations.

Methodologies predicated on ADA have enjoyed considerable popularity among social scientists interested in policy-making processes, with environmental politics emerging as a key area of application. This study thus adopts a post-positivist, interpretive method that closely mirrors Hajer’s ADA approach. Accordingly, we also recognize some of the limitations of this body of work, including its strong emphasis on what is said and how it is said, and the related lack of explicit attention to material elements of discourses (for a critique of language-centered perspectives on discourse see, for example, Müller 2008; Mattisek and Wiertz 2014). To address this limitation, we adopt a broader conceptualization of discourse as a set of socio-material practices that manifest themselves in people’s sayings and doings and related material artifacts. This explicitly “materialist” view of discourse draws on practice-theoretical work by Shove et al. (2012) that views meanings and materials as key elements of practices (cf. Heisserer and Rau 2017 for an empirical study of changing mobility cultures and the “consumption of distance” that draws on practice theory).

Concerning data collection, this study combines desk research, interviews, and ethnographic fieldwork (e.g., visiting and reporting about specific topic-related events like conferences, plenary discussions, public hearings) to identify hidden cultural meanings and related socio-material practices. It creates story lines from a pool of written and spoken statements that are intended to capture both dominant and marginal discourses of automobility. Documents collected and analyzed specifically for this study include minutes of meetings, policy papers, gray literature, published interviews, press releases, and video material, as well as ethnographic field notes and reports related to discursive spaces like roundtables, panel discussions, and meetings. Qualitative data from expert interviews complement the documentary material. Interview material used in this article include a mobility consultant to the automotive sector, a trade unionist, a representative of an environmental association, and two employees of ministries (economic affairs and transport) in Baden-Württemberg.³

Data analysis revolved around the identification of different “discourse coalitions” (Hajer 1993), that is, “a group of actors who share a social construct” (p. 45) as well as specific story lines and related (policy) practices that reflect the mobility culture of these groups. In short, this study captured empirically “the ensemble of a set of story lines, the actors that utter these story lines, and the practices that conform to those story lines, all organized around a discourse” (Hajer 1993, 47). We identified these story lines through categorization of dominant narratives in our empirical material explicitly collected for this study. Evidence of intercultural (in)compatibilities concerning the mobility-related (policy) practices of different discourse coalitions also received attention.

To investigate how the future of the automobile industry in Germany is (re)produced in discursive spaces, we used an embedded multiple-case study design to describe and critically examine currently unfolding mobility-political negotiation processes in two states in Southern Germany—Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg. The regional economies, political landscapes, and mobility cultures of these two states are closely linked to the strong presence of large car manufacturers and their suppliers.

Description of cases

To facilitate an in-depth investigation of established and emerging discourse coalitions, we deliberately chose two prominent discursive spaces that revolve around the future of the automobile industry in Southern Germany. The first case concerns an institutionalized platform for collaboration that was launched in May 2017 by the state of Baden-Württemberg to “successfully support and shape the transformation process in the automotive industry of Baden-Württemberg” (State Ministry Baden-Württemberg 2018a, 5). This ongoing initiative entitled “Strategic Dialogue for the Automotive Sector” (henceforth Strategic Dialog) assembles actors from “politics, industry, universities, employee associations, consumer organizations, environmental associations and society” (State Ministry Baden-Württemberg 2018a, 5). The second case focuses on an initiative launched by the Bavarian government called “Pact for the Future of the Bavarian Automotive Industry” (henceforth Bavarian Pact).⁴ This assemblage brings together the Bavarian vehicle industry, major suppliers to car manufacturing, the association of the Bavarian metal and electronic industry (vbm e.V.), the trade union IG Metall, and employee representatives of selected companies (Bavarian Government 2018a).

We chose these two mobility-political initiatives because of their shared focus on negotiating the future of the automobile industry in states that are officially framed as “car states” because of the presence of globally leading car manufacturers, relatively similar car-centric industries and suppliers, and transnational ICT companies, startups, and research institutes (in)directly related to car manufacturing. These car-centric economic conditions are also reflected in the political landscapes of the two states. Baden-Württemberg is currently ruled by a coalition government of the Green Party and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), led by Winfried Kretschmann (Green Party). Bavaria presently features a coalition government of the Christian Social Union (CSU) and the Free Voters (*Freie Wähler*), which follows a long history of single-party CSU governments. In both cases, the status of the car-manufacturing sector has been central to political developments and decisions past and present, albeit in different ways. In addition, the aforementioned protests against *Stuttgart 21* have had a significant influence on aspects of mobility politics in Baden-Württemberg, especially regarding the role of public participation.

Results

In this section, we present evidence of two prominent story lines that shape current negotiations concerning the future of the car-manufacturing sector in Southern Germany. Our analysis initially identifies a prominent story line—the “number one car-state” (NOCS)—that serves as a starting point for negotiating the future of the automobile industry in Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria, partly because it encourages coalitions between actors with divergent interests. The NOCS story line thus holds together the discourse coalitions within the two spaces under study, at least initially. Following on from this, we discuss the emergence of an alternative story line that argues for the construction of a “number one mobility state” (NOMS) and that reflects ideas for a shift in mobility culture in relation to both production and consumption.

Tracing the NOCS story line

There is ample empirical evidence for the use of the NOCS story line across different sources collected for this study. For example, a press release issued by the Bavarian prime minister on June 21 2018 clearly states, “We also want to ensure that Bavaria remains the number one car state into the future” (Bavarian Government 2018b). In the same vein, the Baden-Württembergian prime minister contended, “Baden-

Wuerttemberg is the cradle of the automobile. Thus, our goal must be that the car of the future is ‘Made in Baden-Württemberg’” (State Ministry Baden-Württemberg 2017). The NOCS story line signals a clear commitment to maintaining the status quo of the car-manufacturing sector. Interestingly, it is also capable of incorporating multiple meanings related to a car-centric mobility culture. In addition, it harbors meanings that do not relate to mobility issues at all.

Common meanings related to the NOCS story line

Both discursive spaces under investigation feature central aspects of the NOCS story line. A range of published documents analyzed for this study emphasized the strategic importance and outstanding economic contribution of the car-manufacturing sector, a view that is also reflected in the states’ relationship with their car manufacturers. More specifically, references are made to the sector’s exceptional employment and export rates, leadership in technology and innovation, funding for research and development, and strategic importance for economic growth and wealth in the region. Both the Baden-Württembergian Strategic Dialog and the Bavarian Pact point out that car manufacturers are confronted with four megatrends that present challenges to their very foundation, namely climate change, digitalization, societal change, and new global competition (Bavarian Government 2018a; State Ministry Baden-Württemberg 2018b).

Interestingly, this view that car manufacturing is “confronted with” megatrends that are forcing its (more or less rapid) transformation locates potential threats *outside* the sector and calls for new mobility-industrial policy responses, in addition to technological innovation. This contrasts with sector-internal threats such as lack of innovation, organizational inertia, and recent propensity toward scandals such as “Dieselgate.”

These meanings are similar across the two cases and reflect the preoccupation with economic growth that characterizes much contemporary industrial policy in Germany as well as many other countries. However, there are also mobility-related cultural meanings attached to the NOCS story line that display significant intercultural variations.

Detecting intercultural differences within the NOCS story line

In Baden-Württemberg, the NOCS discourse incorporates some mobility-cultural meanings that deviate significantly from the Bavarian variant. Repeated references to Daimler-Benz, one of the prominent

car manufacturers located in Baden-Württemberg, and Gottlieb Daimler’s legacy as inventor of the first fueled car, create a strong historical link between people, place, and the automobile and promote a collective identification with the automotive industry in Baden-Württemberg. For example, references to a “spirit of tinkerers and inventors” (State Ministry Baden-Württemberg 2018c, 5) extend the NOCS story line far beyond “hard” economic facts and create a symbolic relation to car manufacturing. It presents an important facet of the story why the future car has to be re-invented in the “cradle of the automobile” and why “the objective must be a mobility of the future ‘made in Baden-Württemberg’” (State Ministry Baden-Württemberg 2018a, 3). This view is further reinforced in the prime minister’s intermediary report to the parliament in relation to the Strategic Dialog:

[T]he car is our legacy. In 1886, it saw the light of day in the form of the *Benz Patent-Motorwagen Nummer 1* at our place. And we are still the number one car-state. But the car is radically and fundamentally transforming. This presents unprecedented challenges to our automotive industry. My state government is doing everything that Baden-Württemberg is also on top regarding the reinvention of the car (State Ministry Baden-Württemberg 2018b, 14–15).

Here, Baden-Württemberg is presented as the birthplace of the motorcar. This symbolic meaning suggests that, just like good parents, the state is expected to do everything (politically) possible to ensure a great future for the car. The future of the region is imagined as providing “suitable vehicles and mobility products for changing situations of life, different values and needs of people on a global scale” (State Ministry Baden-Württemberg 2018c, 10). As a result, actors from the Strategic Dialog suggest in official documents and minutes that Baden-Württemberg has to shift from “the number one car state” toward the “number one mobility state” (State Ministry Baden-Württemberg 2018b). We will return to this discursive shift later on in this section.

The cultural meaning of the state being the “cradle of automobility” is omnipresent, attributing enormous significance to car manufacturing in the region. In fact, many people have depended on jobs in car manufacturing in the past, and continue to do so today, with “6 percent of people in employment in Baden-Württemberg” working in this sector (State Ministry Baden-Württemberg 2018a, 8). A potential transformation of the automobile industry would most likely cause severe social challenges.

One of the participants in the Strategic Dialog who lives in Baden-Württemberg describes the strong historical relations between citizens and car

manufacturer and the resulting challenges for a transformation of the sector:

But for sure it is related to social upheaval, because if a skilled worker from the automobile industry has built a tiny house, he thought, he will get his salary the next 15, 20 years from Daimler, from Bosch or from Porsche... because a lot of Daimler employees were originally farmers and people were needed, skilled workers, and then they picked up the people from the rural area by bus. First, they were still part-time farmers, then they leased out their businesses or at the end have sold their land (NGO member, Strategic Dialog BW, 5 June 2018).

Interestingly, working *beim Daimler* [at Daimler] is a frequently used local expression in Baden-Württemberg that indicates that someone is working for Daimler-Benz. By referring to Daimler as a person, it indicates a rather friendship-like, emotional connection with the employer, as well as a strong material dependency upon the local automobile industry. Undoubtedly, these deep cultural meanings attached to the car and car manufacturing in Baden-Württemberg shape regional policy-making in manifold ways. In particular, they encourage a rather emotional, partially sentimental view of the centrality of car manufacturing for the economic and social wellbeing of *all* citizens in the region, eclipsing any negative side effects for people and the environment at regional, national, and global levels. As a result, rational decision-making and evidence-based policy-making can be effectively sidelined by appealing to this deep cultural meaning.

A very similar story could have been told about the workforce in Bavaria but is clearly missing from the Bavarian variant of the NOCS story line, presenting an interesting intercultural difference. Instead, the Bavarian Pact repeatedly emphasizes the role of Bavaria as a prime location for the production of premium cars, which suggests a kind of qualitative superiority in car manufacturing.

Bavaria needs to remain the prime location for technological and innovative leaders of vehicle production, including internationally competitive manufacturers and suppliers (Bavarian Government 2018a, 3).

In fact, actors who have signed the Bavarian Pact have committed themselves to pursuing the goal of maintaining the status of Bavaria as the “key location” or “go-to place” for premium car manufacturing. To this effect, Bavaria is using the upmarket image of its local manufacturers BMW Group and Audi AG. The former states that it “is the only automobile and motorcycle manufacturer worldwide to focus all its brands on the premium segment” (BMW Group 2018). The latter sees itself “among the leading manufacturers of premium automobiles” (Audi AG 2017, 94).

The appearance of the premium-branding theme in the official document of the Bavarian Pact is likely to have occurred as a result of BMW’s and Audi’s participation in this specific discursive space. This said, this “premium” argument is also observable in different political arenas that are not directly influenced by actors from the car-manufacturing sector, including debates in the Bavarian parliament (Bavarian Parliament 2017).⁵ Some of the interviewees confirmed this observation. For example, an environmental consultant working for the German car industry metaphorically describes the BMW-specific company culture as “extremely rooted in this premium mindset” and connects it to Bavaria and the Munich region, home of BMW’s headquarters and a number of manufacturing facilities. Furthermore, the respondent compares BMW with Daimler and supports his view with references to religious practices and metaphors.

A lot of things at BMW are driven by this typically, actually, Munich sociological phenomenon: this falling apart of poor and rich; actually we want to demonstrate [the interviewee is switching to a Bavarian accent] that we are rich but we do want to show a bit of social conscience... Daimler is much more serious. More pietistic Swabian. Munich is Upper Bavaria, Catholic, baroque, a bit hypocritical. We [Upper Bavarians] are enormously devout, rosary, but at the same time, we put paintings in our churches. And the Swabian people are more pious, Protestant... I have to work hard to get to heaven (Munich consultant, 20 December 2017).

A former trade union representative who was actively involved in the Bavarian Pact formulates the car-state narrative and its relationship to premium car manufacturing more directly:

Yes, Bavaria clearly is a car state. Not only the number of cars which drive on the street, but Bavaria is a car state in its tradition, seen from the number of cars produced... We have BMW with four production sites in Bavaria. We have Audi with one production site and after all more than 40,000 employees. We have the “who’s who” of suppliers, starting from Bosch and Continental to Schaeffler but also a lot of smaller ones (Trade unionist, 20 December 2018).

From the trade unionist’s perspective, Bavaria’s role as a car state is reflected in its mobility culture, with *driving* representing the dominant form of mobility and a prevailing understanding of mobility as automobility influencing much transport policy and practice.

Overall, the NOCS story line that features prominently in both states under study serves to support political arguments for protecting the car state to diverse production-oriented aspects of mobility culture. So far, we have focused mainly on arguments

for maintaining the car state deployed by participants in the Strategic Dialog and the Bavarian Pact. We now turn to evidence of an attempted (discursive) shift away from the car state and toward the “mobility state.” In the discussion that follows, we consider the possibility that this discursive shift may not necessarily ring in a transformation of car manufacturing in Baden-Württemberg but potentially could contribute to preserving the status quo instead, albeit under a different discursive banner.

Building a future for the car: evidence of the (discursive) construction of a “mobility state”

Undoubtedly, the dominant NOCS story line that is evident in the two discursive spaces reflects the prevailing production-oriented car culture in both regions under study. However, our analysis also reveals an emerging alternative in the Strategic Dialog in Baden-Württemberg—the “number one mobility state” (NOMS). In the aforementioned intermediary report to the parliament, the prime minister calls for a “move beyond NOCS” and a shift toward NOMS:

With the strategy dialogue, we started a unique format in order to bundle all forces. We promote the central key technologies—e-mobility and alternative drive systems, artificial intelligence and autonomous driving as well as new business concepts... And we include people into the transformation... We want Baden-Württemberg to shift from the number one car-state toward the number one mobility state (State Ministry Baden-Württemberg 2018b, 15).

In fact, some of the actors involved in the Strategic Dialog and the production of related documents and reports appear to combine the two contrasting story lines—NOCS and NOMS. This is done to encourage and facilitate interactions between actors with rather different, and at times, incompatible opinions concerning the future of the car and its cultural significance, with a view to creating opportunities for consensus. As a result, disagreements might persist, for instance between people who wish to lower car ownership and shift modal choice from cars to public transport and others who insist on providing favorable conditions for motorized private transport and maintaining the number of cars produced. However, encouraging a shift from NOCS to NOMS as part of current political debates about the future of car manufacturing in Baden-Württemberg points toward the need for a “paradigmatic shift from a techno-centered focus towards a needs-oriented approach” (State Ministry Baden-Württemberg 2018c, 10).

But is there sufficient support for such a “paradigm shift” across the different actors involved

in the Strategic Dialog? And what kinds of resistance can be observed? Resistance to this shift from NOCS to NOMS is visible in the minutes of a plenary discussion related to the governmental report entitled “From the Number One Car State to the Number One Mobility State” (State Parliament Baden-Württemberg, 2018). In this document, politicians from the Liberal Party (FDP) state several times that they support NOCS and consider the proposed plan for a transition from NOCS to NOMS to be “the wrong way” because it insinuates saying “goodbye to the automobile” (State Parliament Baden-Württemberg 2018, 3419). The perceived political vision behind NOMS, as well as its related socio-cultural meanings, hinder the Liberal Party from supporting the merger of NOCS and NOMS.

Digging deeper into the NOMS story line reveals the complexity of this emerging narrative, which clearly goes beyond just “saying goodbye to the automobile.” Instead, it is evident from the documents that it supersedes a focus on car manufacturing to include the entire Baden-Württembergian mobility system, indicating different visions of mobility (cultures) and related socio-material practices.

This is also evident in Prime Minister Winfried Kretschmann’s reaction in the plenary discussion to the FDP’s opposition regarding the title and the alleged shift to NOMS. He points out that the shift will only happen “if you are number one in all categories, which includes remaining the number one car state” (State Parliament Baden-Württemberg 2018, 3428). In the same vein, the chair of the Green Party parliamentary group states that Baden-Württemberg has to remain NOCS to be able to turn into NOMS. He views “emission-free driving” as central to this shift (State Parliament Baden-Württemberg 2018, 3433). In other words, the NOMS story line described above is not about cars *versus* mobility but rather about cars *and* mobility. In fact, NOMS in this form does not even directly challenge the incumbent system of automobility, including its prevailing car culture. Instead, the expectation is that these two story lines can coexist. This situation is also reflected in the documents accompanying the Strategic Dialog which promote both global leadership in the *production* of zero-emissions driving solutions and, at the same time, the development of a cutting-edge climate- and environment-friendly *mobility system* for Baden-Württemberg (State Ministry Baden-Württemberg 2019).

Moving beyond these parliamentary debates to focus on the views and discursive practices of actors who are actively involved in the Strategic Dialog, a

much more nuanced picture emerges. The proposed shift toward a “mobility state” is met with considerable opposition, getting more fragile and unstable because of competing meanings concerning the NOMS story line and related mobility cultures that are embraced by different discourse coalitions. For example, tensions regarding NOMS become evident in conversations with staff from the State Department of Economic Affairs and the State Department of Transport, representing the economic and transport block inside the Strategic Dialog. For example, an employee of the State Department of Economic Affairs interviewed for this study stated that the Department wants to shift to a mobility state, promote sustainable mobility, and establish a climate-neutral Baden-Württemberg—but without having to massively restrict mobility. From the staff’s point of view, some aspects of sustainable mobility already enjoy widespread acceptance. In other words, public acceptance of a more sustainable mobility culture decreases rapidly whenever there are any restrictions to personal mobility. This individual also emphasizes that the “same level of mobility” needs to be maintained, for example through “innovative approaches that provide flexibility and a sense of freedom, but with less traffic and, above all, fewer vehicles” (Employee of Ministry for Economic Affairs BW 2019).

According to another respondent who works for the State Department of Transport in Baden-Württemberg, the main responsibility of the Department is the provision of “reasonable mobility solutions,” to ensure mobility and maximum accessibility for all. It is not the economic development of the automotive industry per se. This interviewee also calls for a change in the current car-centric political framework which is seen as a remnant of a time when there were far fewer vehicles on the road (Employee of Ministry for Transport BW 2019).

Overall, there is evidence of an emerging consensus regarding a necessary reduction in the total number of cars while maintaining current mobility levels. Interestingly, the latter may only be achieved by lowering the mobility of some members of the population (e.g., those who drive to work) to facilitate increased mobility for others (e.g., cyclists). This aspect of restricting mobility that is associated with a shift to a more sustainable mobility state represents a risk for the economic block which causes lower public acceptance and thus has to be avoided. In contrast, the transport block sees restriction as a potential for providing freedom through (new) mobility solutions to non-motorists. In other words, there are discernible mobility-cultural tensions and discrepancies that characterize the NOMS story line.

On one hand, actors from the economic block advocate for a continuation of existing forms of mobility. Colleagues engaged in the transport sector, on the other hand, call for change that involves a more just distribution of mobility opportunities and less automobility.

Linking this result to the aforementioned instability of the mobility state story, the latest published progress report of the Strategic Dialog displays a shift away from the “NOCS to NOMS” discourse and its potentially conflict-laden focus on the state’s mobility system. It instead stresses the “common” goal of turning Baden-Württemberg into a model of climate and environmentally friendly mobility, facilitated by new technologies including “cleaner” cars (State Ministry Baden-Württemberg 2019, 5).

Discussion

What can the coexistence of two seemingly divergent story lines, one firmly established, dominant, and car-centric, and another emerging, highly dynamic, and primarily mobility-focused, reveal about current political negotiations regarding the future of the automobile industry in Southern Germany? As evident from the material presented in this article, both story lines harbor culturally significant meanings that range from ideas about what constitutes “the right kind” of mobility to views of local car manufacturers (e.g., Daimler) as guarantors of economic stability and social security in the region. At the same time, shared meanings related to the automobile more generally, and car manufacturing in particular, shape and reflect a whole range of mobility-related practices in the two states under study. As a result, interstate variations in how the NOCS and NOMS story lines are constructed are clearly discernible across a large pool of empirical data collected specifically for this study.

Conceptualizations of car manufacturing and the invention of mobility solutions as either *heritage* in Baden-Württemberg or the *production of premium cars* in Bavaria translate into contingent sets of practices that contribute to the (re-)production of distinctive production-oriented mobility cultures. Paradoxically, both story lines—NOCS and NOMS—seem to reinforce practices that serve to maintain the mobility-cultural dominance of the car in the respective states. In fact, leaving NOCS largely unchallenged and shifting NOMS to a story about location-based mobility production that is largely decoupled from the history of Baden-Württemberg’s mobility system serves to maintain the prevailing “system of automobility” (Urry 2004). This discursive split of NOCS and NOMS including its discursive significance is illustrated in Figure 1.

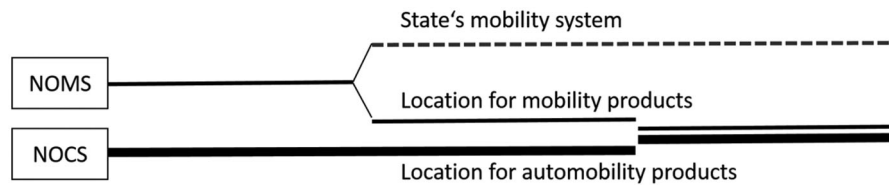


Figure 1. Different strands of NOCS and NOMS and their discursive significance.

As soon as the NOMS story line became established, various (industry-political) “gravity effects” pulled it back to a location-oriented NOCS story line. The fear of social upheaval and public anger in the region caused by job losses in the automotive sector proved to be a main motivation for this return to NOCS (see e.g., Burmeister 2019). A potential drop in public acceptance caused by restrictions in people’s mobility and “freedom of choice” regarding (auto)mobility products (e.g., driving bans, sport-utility vehicles) were equally feared by decision makers across the political spectrum. As a result, renewed interest and engagement in “hard” industry-political practices such as the construction of parallel production lines and sites for combustion engines and electric cars, batteries, fuel cells, and synthetic fuels, in addition to the construction of charging infrastructure for electric cars and hydrogen-powered engines could be detected. This combines with a turn toward strong regionalism and “economic patriotism” (Bavarian Government 2019b),⁶ which manifests itself in the use of terminology such as “(globally) leading regions” and geographically distinct “prime/top locations.” On one hand, this seems surprising given that the entire automobile industry in Germany is now operating across the country’s state boundaries. However, this insistence on making one’s own region globally significant makes political sense when treated as a response by moderate and leftward-leaning politicians to the recent dramatic rise in German politics of right-wing, nationalist and anti-globalization sentiments (Haas 2018). On the other hand, both NOCS and the location-based elements of NOMS support an export-oriented perspective of the “right kind of automobility” being made available to others outside the region or state. This view completely neglects how the very same products and materials shape the mobility culture of the region.

In contrast, the mobility-oriented NOMS story line represents an import-oriented perspective in which “the right kind of mobility (solutions)” such as smaller cars without combustion engines are brought into the region to facilitate a more sustainable mobility culture. This development, in turn, triggers fears among economic actors about the potential “de-industrialization” of the region. Here, the production of “proper” material goods such as

cars and batteries is seen as guarantor of regional employment. In contrast, the NOMS story line remains marginalized partly because of its emphasis on imported solutions and less tangible services (as opposed to goods).

The coexistence of the NOCS and NOMS story lines and their divergent visions of the future of the automobile industry in Southern Germany clearly complement Alexander Wentland’s (2017) observations concerning the emergence of three competing mobility futures that are rooted in “rearticulations” of socio-technical imaginaries concerning the car. Focusing on the growing electrification of transportation, Wentland observes the reformulation of old promises through reimagining individual technological components of the car, the discovery of a new purpose, and the redefinition of the citizenship of mobility. We argue that key elements of these rearticulations are also discernible in the NOCS and NOMS story lines. In fact, the location-oriented elements of the NOCS and NOMS story lines serve to reproduce cultural meanings and socio-material practices that (re)produce a regional identity that revolves around cars and car manufacturing and that rearticulates the old promise of Germany as number one car manufacturer in the world. Furthermore, they promote mobility practices that continue to require the extensive “consumption of distance,” albeit in ways that may be less environmentally disruptive. In contrast, mobility cultures that facilitate a radical reduction in the consumption of distance remain marginalized even though they are urgently needed for a sustainable mobility transition (Rau 2014).

Conclusion

Current efforts to build a viable future for car manufacturing in Southern Germany have already faced huge political challenges, some of which relate to the emergence and diffusion of alternatives to the dominant production-oriented car culture that underpins Germany’s national and regional “car economies.” This study has revealed emerging mobility-cultural conflicts in the context of efforts to (discursively) replace the car state with a “mobility state” focusing on mobility provision rather than (auto)mobility production. We show that a culturally sensitive approach to mobility research can make visible mobility-cultural rifts and disagreements that

have the potential to undermine the planned transition toward sustainable mobility in Germany. By focusing on divergent cultural meanings related to car manufacturing in Southern Germany, this study has highlighted the inherently cultural nature of mobility. The policy relevance of these insights cannot be overestimated, in particular given the potentially disruptive nature of a shift from “car state” to “mobility state.”

Notes

1. Drawing on Deffner et al.'s (2006) seminal study of mobility cultures, Klinger and Lanzendorf (2016) define culture “as commonly shared knowledge which facilitates the organization of day-to-day life by accepting particular practices and norms as well as excluding others” (p. 247).
2. Heisserer and Rau (2017) define “consumption of distance” as “a socially and culturally significant practice that is contingent upon diverse material and infrastructural conditions and that shows significant variations in how it manifests itself both temporally and spatially.”
3. Text material and excerpts from interviews were translated from German into English by the authors. Where necessary, changes were made to the text and related background information (e.g., date of interview, location) to ensure anonymity.
4. In January 2019, the Bavarian Pact was shifted to *Zukunftsforum Automobil* (Automotive Future Forum) and reorganized into working groups and pilot projects. As a result, companies, associations, and the state signed an agreement focusing on funding schemes, workplace security, and mobility solutions (Bavarian Government 2019a).
5. Prior to the Bavarian Pact, a plenary discussion took place in the Bavarian Parliament entitled *Vorsprung durch Technik: With e-Mobility toward a Clean Future*. Interestingly, the title includes Audi's well-known advertising slogan *Vorsprung durch Technik* (Lead by Technology) hinting at the significant influence of the car manufacturer in Bavarian transport policy. Similar to the NOCS story, the former state secretary of the Bavarian Ministry of Economic Affairs framed “Bavaria as the prime location for the automotive sector,” a status that has to be kept up at all cost (Bavarian Parliament 2017, 9681).
6. As stated by Bavarian Prime Minister Markus Söder at a press conference after a meeting of the *Zukunftsforum Automobil* (Automotive Future Forum) in 2019 and posted to Youtube.com (Accessed 11 April 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GWv-ajfGZ3w>).

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