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## Resumen

In Italia, il tumultuoso sviluppo della motorizzazione privata fu favorito da una complessa serie di fattori.

La letteratura ha spesso privilegiato la spiegazione secondo la quale la diffusione dell'automobile fu facilitata da decisioni di natura politica che contribuirono a creare un sistema di trasporti imperniato essenzialmente sulle comunicazioni stradali. È indubbio che l'industria automobilistica si avvantaggiò di queste scelte, ma appare una forzatura sostenere che la fortuna dell'automobile sia ascrivibile prevalentemente ai provvedimenti di natura politica.

Il successo dell'autovettura è riconducibile, oltre al progressivo miglioramento del tenore di vita che permise alle famiglie di accedere ai nuovi beni di consumo, a due ragioni strettamente correlate fra loro: la funzionalità di impiego e le sue complesse connotazioni simboliche. Le motivazioni di natura utilitaristica ebbero un ruolo primario nella diffusione della motorizzazione privata: l'auto rappresentava l'affrancamento dalla scomodità e dai rigidi orari del trasporto pubblico, permetteva di risparmiare tempo e denaro, poteva essere impiegata liberamente per le attività più diverse; nessun altro mezzo aveva mai offerto una simile flessibilità di utilizzo.

Non possiamo sottovalutare, inoltre, le motivazioni culturali, edonistiche e di gratificazione personale. Nel secondo dopoguerra, infatti, l'automobile fu considerata uno strumento indispensabile per inserirsi a pieno titolo nella società del dopoguerra.

**Palabras clave:** trasporto; politica della motorizzazione; automobili; aspetti sociali.

## Abstract

The rapid growth of private transport in Italy was prompted by a number of factors. Literature has often privileged the notion that the diffusion of the automobile was encouraged by political choices, according to the idea that the choice of "asphalt over rail" contributed to the creation of a transportation system essentially based on the automobile. Undoubtedly the automobile industry took advantage of political choices, but it would be excessive to say the fortunes of the car only due to political decisions.

Alongside incipient economic improvement, which enabled families to gain access to new consumer goods, the success of the car can also be ascribed to two connected reasons: practicality and symbolic connotations. Utilitarian motivations played a primary role: the automobile freed the individual from the inconvenience and rigidity of public transport, saved time and money, and it could be used freely for various purposes. No other means had ever offered such a flexibility of use.

We should not, however, underestimate the cultural motivations, including hedonism and personal gratification. The car was felt as a means for joining post-war society in full, since the speed and the freedom granted by the car acquired a strong psychological connotation.

**Keywords:** Transportation; motorization policy; automobiles; social aspects.

## A Country on four wheels. The car and society in Italy (1900-1974)

**Federico Paolini**

### 1. Introduction

So far literature on the motor-car consists chiefly of papers on the history of car manufacturers<sup>1</sup>, of pamphlets largely influenced by the environmental debate<sup>2</sup> and of a large number of articles at a popular and rather superficial level, devoid of any intention to reflect on historical or contextual issues applying research methods and relying on bibliographies. If we restrict ourselves to social history – an aspect rarely contemplated so far as concerns private transport both in Italy and abroad – we are confronted with three main approaches which historians have adopted.

The first focuses on the concept of use value and explains the extraordinary commercial success of the car due to its versatility of use and, at the same time, to its complex symbolic connotations<sup>3</sup>.

The second underlines the importance of the car as one of the principal agents of the technological revolution of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and, consequently, of the modernization of society<sup>4</sup>.

The third focuses on the change in urban planning brought about by the car and examines aspects concerning traffic in particular, along with policies for

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Womach (1990) and the publications by the Gerpisa Network (Groupe d'Etude de Recherche Permanent sur l'Industrie et les Salariés de l'Automobile), in particular Freyssenet, Mair, Shimizu and Volpato (1998).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Ward (1991), Sachs (1992), Ladd (2008).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Flower (1981), Flink (1988), Sandqvist (1997), Thoms, Clayton, Holden (1998), Wollen, Kerr (2002), Foster (2003), Setright (2003), McCarthy (2007), Paterson (2007).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ling (1990), Schwartz Cowan (1997), Hillstrom and Hillstrom (2006).

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infrastructures and for new typologies of settlement patterns as caused by the expansion of motorization<sup>5</sup>.

This essay synthetically illustrates a research work<sup>6</sup> which has represented an attempt at writing a social history of the car in Italy with an intent to generate an historiographic reflection on the role of private transport in Italy in the process of modernization of the country and on the social and cultural processes which have made the car a symbol of modernity<sup>7</sup>. 1974 (the “oil shock” year) has been chosen as an epochal date since in Italy, beginning from 1975 the motorization process has undergone a second phase of strong growth with different peculiarities from the previous decades.

## 2. Italian motorization policy

### 2.1. Choosing the road

Up to the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, road development in Italy was second with respect to railways<sup>8</sup>. Compared to other important European countries, the slower pace of Italy was apparent, suffices to think that in 1873 there were in Italy 102.000 km of roads against 220.000 km in Great Britain and 556.000 in France. Act n. 293 of June 30<sup>th</sup> 1904, which provided financial help for car services to be made available where railway lines were lacking, gave an impulse to road construction. It was however Fascism to enhance road communications starting the construction of the first motorways: between 1923 and 1933 the motorways Milano-Laghi (1923-1925) Milano-Bergamo (1927), Napoli-Pompei (1929), Bergamo-Brescia (1931), Milano-Torino (1932, Firenze-Mare and Padova-Mestre (1933) were all built. In 1928, Act n° 1094 of May 17<sup>th</sup> the *Azienda autonoma strade statali* (AASS, the National roads authority) was instituted and was financially autonomous; its role was to technically manage the national road network. In the 1930s, due to a scarcity of revenue from tolls, AASS was induced to purchase and manage 300 km of motorways (Milano-Laghi; Milano-Bergamo

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Delcroix (1978), St.Clair (1986), Wachs, Crawford (1992), McShane (1994), Lamure (1995), Flonneau (2003, 2005), Schipper (2009).

<sup>6</sup> The results of this research work have been published in two books: *Un paese a quattro ruote. Automobili e società in Italia* (Marsilio, Venezia 2005) and *Storia sociale dell'automobile in Italia* (Carocci, Roma 2007).

<sup>7</sup> In Italy – if we exclude studies on infrastructures, industrial production and all publications of a popular character almost exclusively concerned with the history of car manufacturers and with famous popular and successful car models – very few are social history essays on the car. An outline of some social and cultural aspects concerning the diffusion of private transport can be found in Berta (1991), Menduni (1999), Marchesini (2001).

<sup>8</sup> On road transport policies in Italy see Giuntini (1999), Maggi (2001), Moraglio (2007). Data on the road network derive from Istat, *Annuario statistico italiano*, Roma, annual editions from 1938 to 1976 and from Italian Association of the Automotive Industry (Anfia), *L'automobile in cifre*, Torino, annual editions from 1950 to 1976.

and Firenze-Mare); in 1934 AASS studied a programme for a motorway network for a total of 6.850 km, which was later aborted by the Second World War, and in 1935 it built the 50 km *autocamionale* (road for heavy traffic) Genova-Pianura Padana.

By 1942 the total extent of the road network measured 174.258 km: of these, 21.286 km were classified as main roads (in 1933 these measured 20.597 km), 42.213 were secondary roads and 110.280 local roads.

**Table 1**  
**Italian road network. 1938-1975 (km)**

Years	Motorways	Main roads	Secondary roads	Local roads	G. Total
1938	479	20.324	42.213	110.280	173.296
1942	479	21.286	42.213	110.280	174.258
1948	1.258	30.440	77.748	84.783	194.229
1962	1.351	33.203	76.844	82.478	193.876
1963	1.428	34.985	82.260	77.054	195.727
1964	1.656	36.456	88.592	70.015	196.719
1965	1.736	37.332	88.871	72.060	199.999
1966	2.132	38.409	89.207	137.395	267.143
1967	2.379	39.745	89.871	149.448	281.443
1968	2.703	40.503	91.311	149.079	283.596
1969	3.474	41.730	91.844	148.090	285.138
1970	3.913	42.755	91.628	147.022	285.318
1971	4.342	43.347	92.445	145.665	285.799
1972	4.614	43.793	94.903	143.475	286.785
1973	5.090	43.768	96.377	143.218	288.453
1974	5.177	44.097	97.590	142.976	289.840
1975	5.329	44.001	99.383	142.156	290.869

Istat, *Annuario statistico italiano*, anni 1938-1976.

By the end of the Second World War, in the Spring 1945, the Italian road network had an extent of 170.591 km (3.667 km less than in 1942) and presented serious structural problems due to war damages which had disabled half the main roads, one third of the secondary roads, one sixth of the local road networks.

The Italian road network still consisted then, by over two thirds, of unpaved and very narrow secondary and local roads, cutting through all settlements found along them.

The existence of a disastrous road network with inadequate characteristics and the progressive growth of road transport (in 1949 commercial road traffic surpassed railway traffic in quantity) encouraged, beginning from 1952, a choice in favour of road infrastructure. The most peculiar aspect of this decision is that both Parliament and Government chose not to go for the reconstruction of an ordinary capillary network, aiming at completing the pre-war network, they

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instead preferred to direct their choice towards the construction of a new network of motorways, thinking that this would provide a more appropriate answer to the foreseeable growth of demand for mobility.

The first sign of this political choice was the programme for road works put together between 1951 and 1952, by the Minister for Public Works, Salvatore Aldisio<sup>9</sup>.

A second sign was the foundation, on the 16th of June 1952, of the Italian Federation for the Road (FIS) which aimed at “promoting co-operation in matters of problems concerning the road, of all institutions, associations, enterprises, technical personnel, and people who may be directly or indirectly concerned with the extension, the modernisation, the upkeep, the use and the safety of roads and the development of road transport”. It is clear that the aim of the Italian Federation for the Road was to propose, by means of lobbying, to effect infrastructural policy choices in favour of the road<sup>10</sup>.

A third sign was the institution of a Parliamentary group called “Friends of the Car” (chaired by the Christian Democrat Salvatore Foderaro) which united nineteen senators and one hundred and thirty Christian Democratic, MSI (the neo-fascist Party), Monarchic, Liberal, Social Democrat, and some Gruppo Misto MPs, no Communists or Socialists were part of it. The “Amici dell’automobile” (Friends of the car) published a monthly magazine entitled *Politica della motorizzazione*, whose objective was to “highlight all those negative elements (fiscal burdens, customs duties on imported goods, export duties) which heavily burdened the whole process of motor transport cycle”. From the editorial policy *Politica della motorizzazione* we gather that the “Amici dell’automobile” represented a considerable lobby, whose aim was to support and accelerate the development of private transport and, consequently, to impose upon infrastructural policies a change of direction favouring road transport<sup>11</sup>.

The choice of the road took shape with the approval of two motorway building programmes: the first (Act 23 May 1955 n. 463) promoted by Socialist MP Giuseppe Romita, the second (Act 24 July 1961 n. 729) promoted by Christian Democrat MP Amintore Fanfani<sup>12</sup>. With the approval of the Romita Plan and of the Fanfani Plan the choice favouring the road and private transport was made.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. the parliamentary bill presented on 16 august 1952 by Aldisio. And also the articles “Perché ho presentato il Piano Aldisio” and “Aldisio è piaciuto ai tecnici” published in the March-April issue 1953 of the *Pirelli* magazine.

<sup>10</sup> On the Italian Federation for the Road we may consult the volume *Dieci anni di attività della Federazione italiana della strada 1952-1962*, published by the same Italian Federation for the Road in 1962.

<sup>11</sup> On “Friends of the car” see the magazine *Politica della motorizzazione*, published from 1953 to 1956.

<sup>12</sup> On the Romita Plan see the minutes of the Committee for Public Works (at deliberative stage) 1, 17, 21st December 1954; 19, 26, 27th January 1955; 2nd February 1955; 2, 3, 17th March 1955. On the Fanfani Plan see the minutes of the Senate sessions (30th May 1961, 31st May 1961, 6th June 1961, 7th June 1961) and of the Chamber of Deputies (21st July 1961). The minutes are published in the series of Parliamentary Proceedings available in the Library of Chamber of Deputies.

The Fanfani Plan, in particular, represented the crucial measure which enabled a policy of motorway construction without parallel in Europe: nel 1970, in fact, Italian motorway network (3.913 km) was only second to the German (6.061 km). France had 1.553 km of motorways, the Netherlands 1.209, the United Kingdom 1.183, Belgium 488, Austria 478, Sweden 403 and Spain 387<sup>13</sup>.

## 2.2. Is Italy suffering from “auto-phobia”?

A question which has been much discussed since the appearance of the first cars is that of fiscal levies: at the centre of the debate there were the road tax and the levy on fuel manufacture<sup>14</sup>.

In 1950, at the onset of mass motorization, motor vehicles paid to the National Revenue 154 billion Lire divided between production taxes, vehicle and tires sales taxes, fuel taxes, lubricant taxes, road taxes, registration taxes, repair taxes and circulation permission taxes. In 1962 the annual revenue on vehicles has reached 678,9 billion Lire (amounting to 14,74% of all taxation) and in 1974 it had reached 3.265,7 billions.

Notwithstanding that the road tax represented the second largest income, coming only second after the tax on fuels, financial science did not attribute a precise role to it<sup>15</sup>. According to some this was a surrogate tax of the registry and road tax and an occasional levy on wealth, whereas others regarded it as licence tax aimed at limiting and integrating the levy on fuel consumption. For the majority of tax experts this was a tax on consumption, whose role was to hit hardest on the well-off: in their view, in fact, by building roads the State provided a public service which offered evident advantages to motor vehicle owners, who enjoyed, in this way, a protection income upon which the State must apply a fiscal imposition in order to redistribute, in the form of services, such benefit to all citizens, including those who did not own any motor vehicle.

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<sup>13</sup> Data come from the European Union. European Commission. Directorate General for Energy and Transport, *Energy and Transport in Figures 2003*, Table 3.2.6 “Motorways. Length at the end of year”, published in the dvd-rom European Commission, *Everything on Transport Statistics 1970-2002*, Bruxelles 2004. These data, relative to 1980, regarding the extension of the motorway network to 15 countries of the European Union: Germany, 9.225 km; Italy, 5.900; France, 4.862; United Kingdom, 2.683; Spain, 2.008; Netherlands, 1.798; Belgium, 1.203; Austria, 938; Sweden, 850; Denmark, 516; Finland, 204; Portugal, 132; Greece, 91; Luxembourg, 44; Ireland, 0.

<sup>14</sup> The magazine *Quattroruote* published a great number of articles about the “auto-phobia”. Some of these are: “Per favore, signor ministro, non parli” (April 1956); “La politica antimotorizzazione” (December 1958); “Abolire la tassa di circolazione” (February 1959); “Battaglia per la benzina a cento lire” (April 1960); “Abolite il bollo di circolazione” (October 1965); “Appello” (October 1970); “Il nostro fisco è molto peggio degli sceicchi” (March 1974). The same did *L’automobile*, the Italian Automobile Club (Aci) magazine: “Finiremo per andare a piedi” (48, 1955); “Costa troppo andare in auto?” (50, 1957); “Nella spirale delle tasse” (10, 1958); “L’Assemblea dell’Aci chiede meno tasse” (26, 1960); “Quando il bollo costa più dell’auto” (8, 1967); “Perché l’Aci ha detto no all’aumento della benzina” (24, 1973).

<sup>15</sup> On the nature of the road tax see Morselli (1959), p. 283 and Einaudi (1956), p. 233.

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The Italian formula<sup>16</sup>, not very different from that enforced by other European and North American countries<sup>17</sup>, calculated this tax on the bases of the volume and number of pistons of a vehicle, rather than on the base of the true power of the engine and thus tax experts spoke of “fiscal capacity” rather than of “fiscal power”.

The progressive system with which this tax was applied, not only abided to the principle of maximum revenue, but also to an approximate fair system in an attempt to hit on the ownership of medium and large cars which seemed highly profitable to the revenue. Compared to other European countries we may observe that in 1965 a low-powered car such as the Fiat “600” paid in Italy a lower road tax (£. 10.720) compared to Switzerland (£. 15.930), Germany (£. 18.239), Belgium (£. 11.298) or the United Kingdom (£. 26.240). On the contrary, a medium powered car such as Fiat “1300” paid, in Italy, a road tax of 32.155 Lire, £. 20.275 in Switzerland, £. 29.402 in Germany, £. 18.000 in Belgium, £. 26.240 in the United Kingdom and £. 11.474 in France. A medium-large powered car such as Alfa Romeo “Giulia 1.6” paid in Italy a road tax of 46.950 lire, 22.440 in Switzerland, 36.240 in Germany, 20.300 in Belgium, 26.240 in the United Kingdom and 15.300 in France. Finally, an high-powered car such as Lancia “Flaminia” paid in Italy a tax of 101.085 Lire, 47.600 in Switzerland, 40.250 in Sweden, 28.500 in Germany, 39.850 in Belgium and 19.000 in France.

Car factories lamented that in order to cut taxation to the minimum had to obtain the necessary power from engines with reduced displacement increasing the number of turns and the compression ratio therefore producing “pushed engines” with negative consequences for the durability of such engines and for the safety of traffic and public health. In short, car makers regarded the road tax as the principal obstacle for the diffusion of medium powered cars, and to the competitiveness of Italian car industry precisely in the sector of medium size vehicles which was gaining ground as the main segment of the car market. Furthermore, the road tax was blamed as an obstacle to the diffusion of the car, preventing the development of the second-hand car market, which in the case of medium to large cars, cost less to purchase than the annual road tax levied.

To heighten the taxation debate further also contributed the high price of petrol and of other fuels.

With the exception of France, where the manufacture tax amounted to 76% of petrol retail price, Italy had the highest tax in Europe: in 1960, for example, this

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<sup>16</sup>  $H.P. = 0.08782 \cdot n \cdot V^{0.6541}$ , where  $n$  = number of pistons of the engine, and  $V$  = volume of each single piston.

<sup>17</sup> The Italian formula was similar to the Belgian, British, Swiss, Canadian, Greek, Irish, Russian, French, Norwegian and Spanish. In Spain, France, United Kingdom and Switzerland in particular the formula took into specific account, as in Italy, if the number of pistons, therefore two cars with the same capacity but with a different number of pistons belonged to two different fiscal categories. In France, for example the formula was:  $H.P. = 0.00015 \cdot n \cdot d^2 \cdot h \cdot a$ , where  $n$  = number of pistons,  $d$  = reaming,  $h$  = run of the piston,  $a = 30$  for cars and  $25/20$  for other vehicles. In the United Kingdom it was:  $H.P. = 0.00062 \cdot n \cdot d^2$ , where  $n$  = number of pistons  $e d$  = reaming. Data come from “Principi teorici e relazione parametriche nella tassa di circolazione”, *Rassegna Automobilistica*, Vol. 1960, pp. 80-103.

**Table 2**  
**Road tax paid for some of best seller cars (1960-1969)**

Models	1960	1963	1966	1969
Fiat 500	6.805	7.150	7.150	7.150
Fiat 600	10.210	10.720	10.720	10.720
Fiat 1100	20.710	21.740	21.740	21.740
Lancia Flaminia	101.085	106.140	106.140	127.575
Citroen 2CV	4.360	5.110	5.110	5.110
Ford Taunus 1.2	26.245	27.560	32.155	32.155
Volkswagen 113	26.245	27.560	27.560	27.450
Morris.MiniMinor	14.580	15.315	15.315	15.315
Renault 4	—	15.315	15.315	15.315
Simca 1000	—	18.375	18.375	18.375
Opel Rekord 1.5	—	39.805	39.805	39.805
AlfaRo. Giulia 1.6	—	46.950	46.950	46.950
AlfaRo. Giulia 1.3	—	32.155	32.155	32.155

*Quattroruote*, anni 1960-1970.

tax amounted to 74% against 61% of Belgium, 60% of the Netherlands, 54% of Switzerland, 49% of West Germany and 48% of the United Kingdom<sup>18</sup>.

The progressive increase in the price of petrol and of other fuels caused protests by producers interested in the development of motorization, and regarded the manufacturing tax as an iniquitous levy bearing only upon car users and consequently hampering the development of private transport.

The debate on fuel taxation and on road tax is however only the best known side of a broader argument fuelled by productive sectors connected with car manufacturing and discussed by the sector press, always ready to generate suspicion that in Italy a policy of “auto-phobia” was in action<sup>19</sup>. Notwithstanding the unequivocal “choice of the road” made by governments, the idea was widespread among the supporters of the car, that in Italy there was an underlying anti motor feeling which manifested itself with an obstinate, preconceived perception of the private means of transport not as an essential tool for work and personal mobility, but rather as a non essential consumer’s good whose diffusion must therefore be contained within certain limits by applying taxation. In the car sector there was a belief that Italian governments had never really renounced to assign to taxation

<sup>18</sup> On fuel taxation see the minutes of the Senate sessions (18 April 1959, 20 and 21 May 1959, 16 March 1964, 17 March 1964, 28 March 1969) and Chamber of Deputies (3 December 1958, 7 April 1964). The minutes are published in the series of Parliamentary Proceedings available in the Library of Chamber of Deputies.

<sup>19</sup> See the following parliamentary enquiry realized by the XII Permanent Committee of the Chamber of Deputies: Camera dei Deputati, Indagini conoscitive e documentazioni legislative, n. 7: Indagine conoscitiva della XII Commissione permanente, *Situazione e prospettive dell’industria automobilistica nazionale*, Roma, 1971.



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**Table 3**  
**Petrol prices and tax burden. Italian lire per litre**  
**(prices are in the current lira of the shown years)**

Years	Regular petrol		Four-star petrol	
	Tax burden	Price	Tax burden	Price
1929	0,86 (44%)	1,97		
1939	3,96 (73%)	5,42		
1947 (dic.)	72,50 (67%)	108,00		
1950 (ott.)	76,70 (65%)	118,00	78,87 (62%)	128
1954 (lug.)	91,24 (71%)	128,00	93,70 (68%)	138
1956 (nov.)	105,04 (74%)	142,00	107,76 (71%)	152
1958 (nov.)	98,05 (73%)	135,00	100,63 (69%)	145
1960 (mag.)	73,82 (74%)	100,00	75,96 (69%)	110
1963 (30 ott.)	68,19 (71%)	96,00	69,94 (66%)	106
1966 (10 nov.)	91,97 (77%)	120,00	94,19 (72%)	130
1969 (16 feb.)	101,85 (78%)	130,00	104,26 (74%)	140
1972 (26 mag.)	117,03 (77%)	152,00	119,67 (74%)	162
1973 (24 nov.)	134,03 (71%)	190,00	137,46 (69%)	200
1974 (7 lug.)	195,70 (68%)	287,00	202,86 (68%)	300

Anfia (1975), *L'automobile in cifre*, p. 79.

the role of regulating instrument for an acceptable level of car density and, in particular, to the fuel manufacturing tax the task of containing the expansion of car use.

Was it really the case, as implied by the trade press and by car firms, that in Italy there existed such a deeply rooted pressure group within the political and economic sectors able to counter the interests of the car industry and of its dependent industries?

The theory of the existence of a powerful anti-motor party within the Parliament is contradicted by at least four factors: the long series of measures concerning the building of road infrastructures passed between 1954 and 1982, the adoption of measures aimed at limiting the penetration of foreign cars onto the Italian market, the existence of the Parliamentary group "Friends of the Car" and finally the presence in Parliament of MPs put there directly by interested parties connected with the motorcar industry.

Fiscal policies concerning the car, do not seem at all, therefore, a result of pressures from an anti motor party which, even if it existed, would not have been able to effect the behaviour of consumers nor to oppose the more substantial party of the supporters of private transport.

Fiscal levies on the car should not be attributed to a "war on the car", nor blamed on a widespread "auto-phobia". The reasons are therefore to be found elsewhere, since it appears evident that the spectre of car-phobia was simply an expedient to obtain legal measures conducive to the development of car use,

waving the spectre of unemployment and of an irreversible crisis in the principal industry of Italy. The principal reason for the fiscal pressure upon the car is to be found in the very nature of the Italian fiscal system where direct taxation prevails, which being easily manoeuvrable, granted the legislator a higher degree of flexibility. There was also a second reason for preferring indirect taxation: this enabled governments to avoid an increase in income tax, which besides being highly unpopular, was opposed both by wide sectors of the majority and by the corporations, equally opposed to increases in fiscal pressure upon higher incomes and on private incomes.

### 3. Car in the Italian society

#### 3.1. The character of the development of private transport

The word “autovettura” (motorcar) appears for the first time in official statistics in 1905: cars numbered to 2.119 along with 10 trucks and 45 buses. In the following years the growth was fast even though figures were still modest: 7.061 in 1910, 22.710 in 1915, 31.466 in 1920, 84.826 in 1925, 183.292 in 1930, 243.774 in 1935, 290.225 in 1939<sup>20</sup>.

In 1927, in Italy, there was a car every 325 people against, for example, 5,3 in the Usa, 10,5 in Australia, 10,7 in Canada, 42 in Denmark, 43 in Great Britain, 44 in France, 61 in Sweden, 75 in Switzerland, 80 of Belgium, 88 of Norway, 106 in the Netherlands, 161 in Spain and 196 of Germany.

During the first half of the 1900s, the expansion of the car followed geographical patterns which generally matched the patterns of social-economic development of the country. Assuming as a principal indicator the density of cars (or the number of inhabitants per motorcar)<sup>21</sup> in 1921, Italy appeared divided in three distinct areas.

In first row were the regions with density above the national average (1.171 inhabitants/car): Liguria (615), Lazio (623), Lombardy (634), Piedmont-Valle d’Aosta (711), Emilia Romagna (749) and further back, Tuscany (1.168). In second row were regions with a density spanning between 1500 and 2000 inhabitants per car: Venetia (1.224), Marche (1.455), Umbria (1.593), Campania (1.726), Trentino-Alto Adige (1.793) and Friuli Venezia Giulia (1.884). In third row, finally, were the southern regions and the islands whose density was much lower than the national: Sicily (3.932), Abruzzi (4.069), Sardinia (4.735), Apulia (5.422), Calabria (6.380), Molise (17.848) and Basilicata (21.397).

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<sup>20</sup> All data published in this paragraph have been calculated by the author from the statistical data published by the Italian Association of the Automotive Industry in the yearbook *L’automobile in cifre*.

<sup>21</sup> Car density is the measure used in the statistics published by the Italian Association of the Automotive Industry (Anfia) to measure the level of motorization. The density of cars indicates the relationship between resident inhabitants per car: the higher is the number of resident inhabitants, the lower is the level of development of private motorization.

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Between the two wars the diffusion of the car took the character of socially relevant phenomenon only within the “industrial triangle” and in some regional capitals. In 1921, 43,83% of registered cars were found in Piedmont, Lombardy and Liguria. This figure remained practically constant during the following decades: in 1933 the triangle boasted 40,43% of vehicles and in 1946, 42,42%. Furthermore, between 1921 and 1946, motorization in Italy acquired the connotation of a typically urban phenomenon. In 1921, 49% of all cars were found in seven regional capital provinces: Milan had the highest number of cars (328 inhabitants/car), followed by Turin (334), Rome (373), Genoa (382), Bologna (494), Trieste (595) and Florence (616).

The above statistics do not, however, signify that the expansion of the car was a prerogative of the first group of regions. Analyzing the regional rates of increase we observe how, already in these years, there existed an ongoing process which later was to characterize the growth of Italian motorization: that is the increase in the number of circulating cars has consistently followed an inversely proportional trend to density. This, as confirmed by data concerning the period 1921 – 1938, means that the growth of private motorization was more intense exactly in the regions where car density was below the national average (Molise +3.286%, Basilicata +3.174%, Apulia +2.023%, Sardinia +1.540%, Calabria +1.350%, Sicily +1.248%, Abruzzi +1.108%, Trentino-Alto Adige +937%, Umbria +880%, Friuli Venezia Giulia +872%), whereas it was slower in more transport advanced regions (Lazio +866%, Tuscany +817%, Marche +799%, Lombardy +690%, Piedmont +688%, Campania +690%, Venetia +601%, Emilia Romagna +566%, Liguria +560%, Valle d’Aosta +146%).

Once the Second World War was over, motorization took a new, albeit modest, impulse: in 1946, 149.649 were in circulation, which in 1950 had become 342.021. Italy was therefore far from being a motorized country: car density continued to be very low. In 1952, in fact, there was a car every 92,9 inhabitants, against, for example, 55,9 in West Germany, 21,8 in France, 19,9 in Great Britain, 7,5 in Australia, and 3,5 in the United States.

We can say that Italy entered the realm of motorized countries only in 1964, at the peak of an extraordinary period of economic growth. That year, for the first time, the number of cars in circulation (4.674.644) rose above the number of motorcycles (4.656.035).

Between 1958 and the brief recession of 1974, sparked off by the oil crisis, the increase in private motors showed in the record a mean annual growth of 14,40%. In 1974, 14.303.761 cars were in circulation as compared to 1.392.525 in 1958: the total growth during that period was of 927,18%.

In little over twenty years (1951-1974), therefore, Italy had filled the gap which separated it from other countries. In 1974 car density was of four inhabitants per automobile: the same as in Great Britain and West Germany and only inferior to that of France, Sweden, Australia, Canada (3 inhabitants/car) and US (2 inhabitants/car).

Between 1950 and 1974, the dynamics of private transport development in Italy presented three characteristics.

**Table 4**  
**Circulating motor vehicles (1905-1974)**

Years	Cars	Trucks and Buses	G. Total	% Variation (cars only)
1905	2.119	55	2.174	—
1922	41.035	24.449	65.484	+1836,53%
1938	289.174	83.824	372.998	+604,70%
1946	149.649	138.966	288.615	-48,25%
1954	690.728	306.940	997.668	+361,56%
1964	4.674.644	644.650	5.319.294	+576,77%
1974	14.303.761	1.145.777	15.449.538	+205,99%

Anfia (1975), *L'automobile in cifre*, 1976.

**Table 5**  
**Circulating cars and car density. An international comparison**

	1952		1974	
	Circulating Cars	Car density	Circulating Cars	Car density
Argentina	221.976	79,4	1.845.000	13
Australia	1.118.400	7,5	4.627.200	3
Austria	66.594	103,9	1.635.927	5
Belgium-Lux	353.700	25,2	2.502.158	4
Brazil	299.625	181,1	2.984.200	33
Canada	2.324.790	6	8.339.000	3
Denmark	131.120	32,8	1.256.318	4
Finland	53.900	75,9	812.634	6
France	1.940.000	21,8	15.180.000	3
Italy	510.189	92,9	14.303.761	4
Japan	87.010	972,3	15.853.548	7
Netherlands	170.000	60,6	3.440.000	4
Spain	81.863	335,9	4.309.500	8
Soviet Union	180.000	805,6	1.815.000	136
South Africa	497.000	25,5	1.502.900	15
Sweden	364.815	19,5	2.638.885	3
United Kingdom	2.525.269	19,9	13.948.237	4
United States	43.894.000	3,5	105.287.000	2
West Germany	862.700	55,9	17.356.276	4

Anfia, *L'automobile in cifre*, anni 1953 e 1975.

A first peculiarity lies in the fact that the expansion of the car has been even throughout Italy, notwithstanding the imbalances in wealth and economic development. Between 1952 and 1974 in Southern Italy the dynamics of the car

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market and the rate of increase in the number of vehicles in circulation, has been generally superior to that of the central and northern regions.

In fact, between 1952 and 1964, the increase in private vehicles was higher exactly in the regions where car density was lowest, sometimes by a high degree, compared to the national average. The growth was highest in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia, this is the northern region with the lowest number of vehicles in circulation in 1952, and it was lowest in Lombardy and Piedmont, which alone had 30.62 per cent of the vehicles in Italy, but which was far from reaching the saturation level as concerns both market and road capacity. Furthermore, the three regions with the lowest number of cars on the road, this is to say Basilicata, Molise and Calabria, were in this order, the seventh, the eleventh and the ninth in the rate of growth scale.

The same observation may be extended to the provinces: car expansion was, in most cases, higher in the southern provinces than in the northern, where we registered the highest rate of vehicles.

In conclusion, the increase in the number of private vehicles follows through the years a pattern in reverse proportion to car density. Between 1964 and 1974 too it was the southern regions, and chiefly those with a lower car density, which took the lead of private vehicle growth. At the end of this period, the South (24.54 per cent and 24.61 per cent) had overtaken the Centre (22.18 per cent and 22.39 per cent) in number of vehicles and cars on the road, whereas the North (53.28 per cent and 53 per cent) continued to maintain its leadership. In 1974, therefore, the southern regions had filled the considerable gap which separated them from the centre-north, with the only exception of some provinces which were unable to catch up initially and were still far from the mean national density.

A second characteristic of car expansion in Italy must be seen in the absolute predominance, among all cars present in Italy, of models produced by Italian companies.

The car market in Italy maintained this character during the most intensive phases in its development (1958-1974). The number of imported foreign cars, very small until 1967, began to increase only from 1968, stabilizing, between 1970 and 1974, to a mean annual average of 405,742 units.

Still in 1974, Italian cars continued to predominate sales; the only exception being the luxury car sector with a capacity above 2050 cc where the percentage of national cars was of only 4.71% of the total sales.

Fiat in particular dominated the market unchallenged, with the sole exceptions of the "mini-cars" category (<500cc), where Autobianchi was first, and the high powered cars sector where it ranked behind Opel, Mercedes, German Ford, Citroën, Bmw, Peugeot and Rover: 87,37% of utility cars (501-800 cc), 54,56% of medium-small (801-1050 cc), 45,27% of medium (1051-1550 cc) and 28,53% of medium-large (1551-2050 cc) was produced by the Fiat. The Turin car factory practically operated as a monopoly, thanks also to a distribution network which had no equal.

In 1958, cars in circulation produced by Fiat represented 88,01% of all cars in circulation, and 73,85% in 1966; in 1970, two years after the enforcement of

**Table 6**  
**Automobile growth rate. Percentage increase (1952-1974)**

Regions	1952-1964	1964-1974	1952-1974
Valle d'Aosta	521,68	210,84	1832,44
Piedmont	485,87	164,61	1450,26
Lombardy	464,46	181,52	1489,00
Trentino A.A.	488,27	192,66	1621,58
Venetia	502,63	234,53	1915,93
Friuli V.G.	941,72	88,77	2953,70
Liguria	573,12	141,73	1527,18
Emilia Romagna	586,90	170,65	1759,00
Tuscany	661,23	195,33	2148,11
Umbria	541,61	221,95	1965,62
Marche	506,70	225,39	1874,14
Lazio	680,09	169,18	1999,82
Abruzzi	580,56	253,80	2307,75
Molise	583,33	327,42	2820,72
Campania	672,17	212,16	2310,41
Basilicata	662,84	307,50	2988,15
Apulia	672,85	251,64	2617,60
Calabria	641,71	251,94	2510,35
Sicily	705,06	233,42	2584,18
Sardinia	677,46	303,16	3034,45
Italy	607,51	216,91	2185,52

Assessment by the autor of Anfia data (*L'automobile in cifre*, 1950-1976).

the European customs unity (1st July 1968), Fiat cars still represented 69,64% of the total. The superiority of Fiat over all other Italian car factories appeared unquestionable: in 1970 there were on the road 7.079.521 Fiat vehicles, 473.890 Alfa Romeo, 361.455 Autobianchi, 317.820 Lancia and 315.158 Innocentcars. As to foreign cars the most common were Simca (252.808), followed by Opel (238.529), then by NSU (215.379), Volkswagen (191.255), Ford (169.017), Renault (155.554) and finally by Citroën.

A third characteristic of the expansion of private vehicles in Italy is represented by the absolute prevalence of small cars among the national total of cars: whereas in European countries with a high car density, not to mention the United States, medium to medium-large capacity (between 1001 and 2000 cc), in Italy, cars up to 1000 cc, were predominant. In 1964, 66.74 per cent of registered cars had a capacity of up to 1000 cc, 28.20 per cent between 1001 and 1500 cc, 4.52 per cent between 1501 and 2000 cc, and only 0.54 per cent above the 2000 cc. During the first half of the 1970s, notwithstanding that the Italian car market, characterized by a gradual growth in registrations of medium size vehicles, was gradually growing similar to the rest of Europe, the majority of vehicles on the road were still small cars. Still in 1974, in fact, 57.91 per cent of cars in circulation were small, up to

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**Table 7**  
**Automobile percentage distribution. Brands per regions**

Regions	1958			1970		
	Fiat	Italian Others	Non Italian	Fiat	Italian Others	Non Italian
Valle d' Aosta	84,51	14,06	1,43	63,33	15,39	21,28
Piedmont	87,86	11,09	1,05	72,79	12,77	14,44
Lombardy	84,75	12,92	2,33	63,77	16,90	19,33
Trentino A.A.	86,43	9,86	3,71	65,03	11,06	23,91
Venetia	88,32	10,12	1,56	67,78	15,11	17,11
Friuli V.G.	87,00	10,82	2,18	67,36	14,31	18,33
Liguria	85,86	12,34	1,80	67,42	15,30	17,28
Emilia Romagna	88,09	10,48	1,43	68,96	15,12	15,92
Tuscany	88,80	9,62	1,58	69,04	14,47	16,49
Umbria	88,39	9,71	1,90	73,07	13,39	13,54
Marche	90,15	9,27	0,58	69,33	15,27	15,40
Lazio	87,74	9,48	2,78	70,02	13,96	16,02
Abruzzi*	88,76	10,44	0,80	69,88	14,02	16,10
Molise*	—	—	—	68,65	13,48	17,87
Campania	87,50	11,24	1,26	73,34	13,18	13,48
Apulia	89,94	9,13	0,93	71,79	14,47	13,74
Basilicata	88,17	11,75	0,08	71,13	12,57	16,30
Calabria	90,35	9,56	0,09	75,58	11,21	13,21
Sicily	89,09	9,41	1,50	73,97	11,70	14,33
Sardinia	90,46	8,34	1,20	70,56	11,84	17,60
Italy	88,01	10,51	1,48	69,64	13,78	16,58

Anfia, *L'automobile in cifre*, 1959-1972.

1000 cc, 33.83 per cent medium size, 6.94 per cent medium-large and 1.32 per cent large capacity cars.

The vast preponderance of Italian cars can also be explained with the obsolescence and the slow renewal of the car in the country, which over the years has remained a constant feature of Italian car ownership: in 1974, in fact, over a quarter of the cars (25.48%) resulted registered at least ten years earlier, having been presumably bought in the years of the "economic miracle" (82,500).

**Table 8**  
**Automobile percentage distribution (cc engine, 1970)**

Regions	Up to 800cc	From 801 to 1050cc	From 1051 to 1550cc	From 1551 to 2050cc	Beyond 2050cc
Valle d'Aosta	25,74	23,83	39,11	10,12	1,20
Piedmont	32,75	20,93	36,94	8,10	1,28
Lombardy	27,62	19,76	40,11	10,45	2,06
Trentino A.A.	26,74	23,48	39,19	9,18	1,41
Venetia	32,43	21,31	35,18	9,26	1,82
Friuli V. G.	27,35	21,30	40,14	9,75	1,46
Liguria	30,82	23,50	37,81	6,67	1,20
EmiliaRomagna	32,21	16,60	39,97	9,49	1,73
Tuscany	38,48	21,08	32,22	6,95	1,27
Umbria	41,60	21,85	29,31	6,02	1,22
Marche	39,65	20,28	31,75	7,07	1,25
Lazio	33,76	21,36	34,48	8,30	2,10
Abruzzi	38,16	24,82	30,00	5,97	1,05
Molise	37,28	25,65	30,33	5,88	0,86
Campania	39,19	25,74	28,45	5,25	1,37
Apulia	37,47	24,56	31,42	5,60	0,95
Basilicata	35,18	29,12	29,85	5,06	0,79
Calabria	39,18	26,89	28,24	4,91	0,78
Sicily	42,20	26,42	26,18	4,48	0,72
Sardinia	41,19	24,41	28,31	5,52	0,57
Italy	34,95	23,14	33,44	7,20	1,27

Anfia, *L'automobile in cifre*, 1970-1971.

## 2.2. The reasons of an extraordinary success

Motivation of a utilitarian nature certainly played a primary role in the diffusion of private transport<sup>22</sup>. Travelling by car was far more comfortable than using public transport which, crowded and obsolete, turned house to work commuting a daily Odissey.

<sup>22</sup> There are no archival sources for the subjects treated in this paragraph. For this reason the author refers to secondary sources (a truthful, but disorderly mine of information and documents, as shown by magazines such as *L'automobile* or *Quattroruote*), to public opinion polls and to the arts, be these *high* (literature) or *popular* (cinema and music). It is impossibile, for lack of space, to mention all sources. For this, regarding utilitarian motivations, this paragraph is based on the following sources: Centro studi sui sistemi di trasporto, *I comportamenti, gli atteggiamenti e le motivazioni del pubblico in relazione alla mobilità e ai trasporti nelle aree urbane*, Roma, 1971; "Preferenze e valutazioni sulle scelte del mezzo di trasporto fra casa e lavoro", *Automobilismo e aut. Industriale*, September-October 1965; "Un sondaggio fra i possessori di autovetture", *Bollettino Doxa*, 15 agosto 1952. Cf. also Luzzatto Fegiz (1956), Guidicini (1967).



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According to Aci the car was universally regarded the best means of transport for getting to work: for this reason the car was used by 77% of the interviewed, a percentage which in the larger municipalities grew to 80%. One travelled by car regardless of his profession, covering an average distance of four kilometres and five hundred metres in little less than twelve minutes at a speed of 30,6 km/h for car users resident in larger municipalities, and of 40 km/h for residents of smaller municipalities. Movements for work covered 55% of the annual total distance. An important data is that the decision to use the private car as a means of transport was a choice rather than a necessity, since the majority of interviewed preferred the car even when they could cover the same distance with efficient public transports.

A research carried out by the “Centro studi sui sistemi di trasporto” of Rome, highlighted as the chief motivations behind the choice of the car as the privileged means of transport, which were three: a lack of public transport in residential and work areas; the higher speed of private transport along with all the comforts and economic advantages that came with it: a higher freedom allowed by the private means for all that concerned the movements of the individual and family within the urban area.

Furthermore, the car allowed considerable time saving and this amounted for the majority of people to saving money: it is true that the workers of Turin who went to work in the outskirts of the city at the Fiat Mirafiori South plant took twenty minutes by car and over one hour and a half by public transport, whereas some workers of Bari covered the distance from home to work in thirty minutes by car and in over four hours by public means.

The whole complex of motivations favouring the car is accentuated by the issue of comfort, an issue which connects together several aspects, among them the fact of having the means “on the doorstep” and that of “avoiding all unpleasantness” involved in standing in a crowded situation for a long time in a bus or a train. Women especially emphasized the fact that the car enabled them to avoid the inconveniences of public transport, such as dirt, bad smells, “hot breathing on the neck”, “bad manners” and “rudeness”.

Furthermore, the car was an exceptional tool for occupying spare time. There are no statistics measuring urban movements for hedonistic purposes, however, thanks to the car, urban distances were shortened and new opportunities for diversion and socialization emerged. Movements were no longer restricted to the immediate neighbourhood since in a short time one could reach the cinema, the ballroom or friend’s houses, situated at the far end of the city.

This new freedom of movement appeared even more important in small centres where social relations must take place within the village (or the hamlet) of residence: movements were rare since there often were no railways or bus services, and usually one moved on particular occasions such as for example market days, religious celebrations, or civic celebrations such as Mayday. The car provided for all this; altering habits and life styles, it contributed to eliminate geographical segregation thus enabling a similar life style in small villages and rural areas and in the city.

The car was not only used for daily movements: very early on it became, in fact, the best means of transport for family outings and vacations.

According to a research by the *Istituto Doxa* of May 1962, 40% of the inhabitants of Lombardy owned a car and used it for weekend outings, and 47% of the interviewed had had a vacation outside the municipality of residence and had preferred to travel by car. A research carried out in 1964 all over the national territory found that the percentage of people using the car to reach their vacation sites had risen to 50%.

In conclusion, the car had unquestionably asserted itself as the family's "best friend": an indispensable means for going to work on weekdays and a comfortable means for organizing one's spare time, to go on holiday and also for escaping the city's daily routine and getting out of it at weekends.

In addition, we cannot underestimate cultural motivations, hedonistic and personal gratifications. Analysing these we realize that, at the bottom of it all, the reason why the car has enjoyed such a success is even banal: it is an object which, since the earliest commercial models, has attracted the attention and lured ambitions.

There exist a vast literature which regards the car as a "shopping good", whose acquisition is prompted by the product's symbolic connotations. In particular, the car is classifiable (equal to one's own home, furniture, furnishings and fur coats) a "prestigious possession" contributing to the qualification of the social position of the individual<sup>23</sup>.

Some research carried out during the 1960s have shown that the attitude of consumers with respect to the car changes considerably with the improvement of the quality of one's own life<sup>24</sup>. In "almost classless societies" (basically the Scandinavian) cars were simply regarded as "utilitarian vehicles", so much so that the most appreciated qualities in a car were its reliability, the low consumption, whereas "style" was regarded as secondary. Furthermore, the family rarely owned more than one car, and both new makes and new unnecessary accessories attracted little interest from car users. In countries with a higher standard of living (United States, Canada, Switzerland, West Germany, Netherlands) the car progressively lost its value as a status symbol, although in Germany there were still a considerable number of people who used the car "for prestige". Dichter noted that in the above five countries the car was not a "cuddly toy, but something that provides a service". In states experiencing a "revolutionary phase" (Argentina, Venezuela, Mexico, Brazil, Philippines, Spain, India, Indonesia, China), on the contrary, the car was regarded as a status symbol and the acquisition of a small utility car was only regarded as a "first step" since as Dichter observed, car users

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Baudrillard (1970), Fabris (1970), Bourdieu (1979), Douglas, Isherwood (1979), Mukerji (1983), Appadurai (1986), Bayley (1986), Scharff (1991), Codeluppi (1992), Capuzzo (2003), Sassatelli (2004), Cavazza, Scarpellini (2006), Scarpellini (2008).

<sup>24</sup> Dichter (1967), p. 285-291. On countries with a socialist economy cf. also Fava (2008), Péteri (2009).

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aspired to making a “great impression”. This attitude was also observed in the Soviet Union and in countries with a socialist economy where notwithstanding the progressive disappearance of bourgeois symbols, the car continued to be regarded as an object “of prestige”. Finally, in countries undergoing “a transition” (France, United Kingdom, Australia, South Africa, Japan, Austria and Italy), the opinion that “wellbeing drives a car” pervaded the entire society.

The success of the car, therefore, appears closely connected to the fact that it had become perceived as the symbol of prosperity and individual freedom in contraposition with the oppressive traditional values of pre-war society. In addition to this, in the lower classes, the possession of a car meant bearing witness to others the achievement of a higher social status. Cars were bought not only because they were a comfortable means of transport, but also in order to display one’s own achieved prosperity, or to emulate your neighbour or relation who may have just bought a new “Fiat 600” and for not feeling cut off from this new consumer’s society which was rapidly asserting itself.

In the Italy of the economic *Miracolo*, as demonstrated by an enquiry by the Centre for studies on transport systems<sup>25</sup>, families which did not have a car were described as single-income, savers, conservative, traditionalist and less “simpatiche”.

Families with two cars, instead, were regarded as well-to-do or at any rate with an income in evolution, dynamic, modern, simpatiche, youthful; it is also significant that the members of such families were regarded as “with no fear of the future” and, in particular, the wife had her own career attributed to her and this justified the fact that she was running her own car.

A family with two cars embodied the stereotype of the “brilliant middle class as illustrated by TV ads” and was described as “having faith in progress, even in an exaggerated way and from this faith it derived a better quality of life”.

In conclusion, the car was regarded as an indispensable object, not only for facilitating personal movement, but also for acquiring social prestige, which derived not only from the mere possession of a vehicle, but from the fact that this granted more “dynamic life, rapid movements and great mobility”.

The car was perceived as a tool for adapting to the “culture of mobility” chiefly useful for those who were hitherto emarginated, in order to become entitled to enter post-war society, where the “speed” and the “freedom” insured by the car acquired a psychological connotation such as to confer to the car “a very important role in social and educational processes”.

### 3. Conclusion

The car, in Italy, received a special treatment under the pressure of lobbies supported by the prospect that a decline of the car industry might cause a crisis

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<sup>25</sup> Centro studi sui sistemi di trasporto, cit., p. 43-53.

effecting the whole Italian industry. Proof of this was the shelving of numerous bills which, it was feared, might slow down the development of private transport. Suffice to look at the extraordinary slowness with which local administrations began, with extreme circumspection, to pass legislation aimed at regulating traffic in urban centres, or at the belated environmental legislation, or again at the absence of policies aimed positively at encouraging public transport for commuters.

Undoubtedly the car industry took advantage of such choices, but it would be an exaggeration to attribute the success of the car mainly to provisions of a political nature: a transport system characterised by a greater variety of means and by more efficient public transport, would have lessened the problems of congestion in road traffic, encouraging a more moderate and rational use of private vehicles, but it would not have affected the general inclination towards the acquisition of cars. This is proved by the fact that in countries where cities are provided with more efficient transport infrastructures, on rails (tramways and metropolitan railways) and where road transport does not represent the principal means for carrying goods, car density is superior or equal to that in Italy.

To explain the extraordinary development of private transport in Italy it is not enough to blame the nature of the transport system, neither it is enough to give an economic explanation pointing at the expansion of car use exclusively to the steady increase in incomes occurred between 1950 and 1974. The growth in income enabled people to assign a greater part of their own income to the acquisition of convenient and superfluous goods, but it does not explain the structural change which took place over a period of only two decades in the budget of Italian families, characterised by an unstoppable growth in transport expenses.

To comprehend what seems to be a truly epochal change in the daily habits of the Italians it is therefore necessary to refer both to utilitarian reasons and to cultural and hedonistic reasons of personal gratification.

The commercial success of the car is explained, in the first place, by its functionality and flexibility of use. The success of private transport had been determined essentially by a conspicuous improvement in the freedom of personal movement, not to be compared by any forms of collective transport.

The commercial fortune of the car is due, in the second instance, to the complex symbolical connotations which it carries. Italians were firmly convinced that the car was necessary for a better living; they regarded it an indispensable object not only for facilitating personal movement, but also for acquiring social prestige, which derived not so much from owning it, as to the fact that it enabled a dynamic life style and fast transfers.

The car has not only been a means of transport or a product of technology capable of revolutionising land transport, but it has also been the agent of social transformation, a symbol of freedom, independence, wellbeing and progress all at the same time. While television was tearing down linguistic barriers, the car shortened geographical distances, also by creating a new symbolism which became established within the collective perception according to which modernization was identified with the racing cars, economic Fiat cars, the viaducts and tunnels of the

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highways. In particular, economic Fiat cars have been the most visible symbols of that push towards modernization which guided the economic transformation of Italian society during the later post war years.

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