

Petrol PLAZA

Automobiles as Status Symbols

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The rich man has his motor car, His country and his town estate. He smokes a fifty-cent cigar And jeers at Fate. —Franklin Pierce Adams

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According to his chart, for example, members of the upper class say, straightforwardly, “Muffy’s pregnant.” In the middle class they say, “Meredith’s expecting,” and in the proletarian class they say, “Minnie is in the family way.” With respect to cars, the chart says members of the upper class drive a “dirty old Plymouth or Chevy,” those in the middle class drive a “brand-new Mercedes or BMW,” and those in the proletarian class drive “anything with stuffed dice or baby shoes hanging in the window.”

The reason upper-class people drive nondescript cars, Fussell posits, is that “if your money and freedom and carelessness of censure allow you to buy any kind of car, you provide yourself with the meanest and most common to indicate that you’re not taking seriously so easily purchasable and thus vulgar a class totem.”

Was Fussell correct in this assessment? I suppose so. I first became aware of the practice in the early 1980s. I was then serving on the board of directors of a major corporation. Board members would frequently fly out of Tulsa on the company jet to attend meetings in other parts of the country. When we arrived at the private hanger in our personal cars, prior to departure, it was impossible not to notice the type of vehicle other directors were driving. Some pulled up in Mercedes, and one or two arrived in Cadillacs. The two richest men on the board, however—men who could have easily afforded to tool about in a different \$200,000 car each day of the week—always turned up in plain old Chevys. It was if they were deliberately affirming Paul Fussell’s dictum.

At about the same time, Sam Walton was being identified as one of the wealthiest men in the nation. His personal vehicle was a three- or four-year-old Ford pickup.

This does not, of course, mean that all of the super-rich elect to drive about in not-so-new Chevys or Fords. Many, however, do. It is their subtle way of signaling that they have so much money they don’t

need to appear in an expensive car to prove it.

For Americans in the middle and upper middle classes, however, the family auto remains as a status symbol of critical importance. As this is written, the sports utility vehicle (SUV) continues as the car of choice for upwardly mobile professionals and executives. Now that Mercedes has come out with an SUV model of its own, the most sought-after car among the young country club crowd is the Mercedes SUV. The company can't produce enough of them. Among older middle class citizens, the Cadillac still has strong appeal. It is the car affluent doctors were driving when today's 70-something Americans were in their teens, and many promised themselves that they, too, would some day own a Cadillac.

For all Americans, particularly those aspiring to the upper middle class, the automobile one drives is deemed to be a status symbol of enormous significance. If you doubt this, drop by an expensive private middle school some afternoon around 3 p.m., as the soccer moms arrive to pick up their offspring. If you spot any vehicle that is not a late model Lexus, BMW, Mercedes, Jaguar, or high-end SUV, the chances are it is being driven by a teacher.

Automotive Status

Her spirits are low, her mood is bleak,
Her heart is feeling heavy.
Her friends all arrived in Porsches,
Just as she pulled up in her Chevy.

Howard Upton (now deceased) served as chief staff executive of the Petroleum Equipment Institute from that organization's inception until his retirement 37 years later. His management columns and light verse have long been featured in The Wall Street Journal. His contribution to this publication cannot be overstated. He was a model of integrity, objectivity, superior quality and a friend and mentor. (He is missed. JPH)