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## Graeme Chesters and David Smith (2001) 'The Neglected Art of Hitch-hiking: Risk, Trust and Sustainability'

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### Abstract

This article explores the sociologically neglected practice of hitch-hiking. It demonstrates the paucity of research on what is potentially a fascinating instance of social interaction and it argues that hitch-hiking provides an interesting test case for the applicability of recent social theories of risk and trust. The reasons for the relative decline in hitch-hiking in Britain are discussed and comparisons are made with continental Europe and the U.S.. The article suggests that despite the increasingly risk-averse nature of public bodies, attention to this subject could provide interesting possibilities for policy makers concerned with the development of sustainable modes of transport, as well as for those concerned with the re-vitalisation of civil society.

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**Keywords: Car-sharing; Deviance; Environment; Hitch-hiking; Marginality; Risk; Sustainability; Transport; Trust**

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### Introduction

- 1.1 There has been very little sociological work on hitch-hiking ('autostop' in continental Europe), which is in one sense surprising, since, as we will argue, it is a topic with potentially fruitful connections to recent social theories concerned with social change and with risk and trust<sup>[1]</sup>. There has been almost equally little policy-oriented research on the subject, although, as we will also argue, an understanding of the circumstances that make hitch-hiking possible could have implications for policies designed to control the growth of car use. This paper proposes hitch-hiking as a test case for social theories of risk, and discusses the limited empirical evidence available on hitch-hiking and its apparent decline. It explores possible reasons for its decline in the light of recent sociological analysis of mobility and 'automobility' (Jasper, 2000; Sheller and Urry, 2000; Urry, 2000), and suggests that although a revival of hitch-hiking in its classic, unorganised form is unlikely, an understanding of the experience of hitch-hiking might nevertheless contribute to policies designed to encourage car-sharing, and thus to environmental and transport policy more generally.
- 1.2 For the importance of risk and trust, consider what is entailed by any successful act of hitch-hiking. The driver in accepting a stranger into his or her private space, and the hitch-hiker in entering this space with no certainty about the driver's motives and intentions, are establishing a relationship of 'active trust' (Giddens, 1994), and overcoming whatever anxiety they may feel about inhabiting 'a world of risky strangers' (Furedi, 1997). The situation of hitch-hiking thus arguably provides an ideal case for the examination of how far recent theories on risk and trust (Beck, 1992; Giddens 1994; Msztal, 1996) are relevant to people's perceptions of an encounter in which, when it is successfully managed, willingness to trust outweighs any perception of risk. Given that civil society and democratic politics depend on trust (Msztal, 1996), and that their positive development requires a sense of solidarity, a willingness to share and co-operate, and an active acceptance of difference, we may have something valuable to learn from those who are willing to take the risk of entering into a relationship in which the social divisions and boundaries of everyday life are suspended, and new possibilities are given a chance to emerge.

### Hitch-hiking and Social Science

- 2.1 Our bibliographical searches for previous work on hitch-hiking drew a near-blank. The work of Weiss (1974), which we have not read, was dismissed in a review by Hayes (1975) as evangelical proselytising rather than social science. The more superficially promising work of Greenley and Rice (1973-74)



treats hitch-hiking by female college students as a form of deviance, which the authors suggest can be understood as sustained by subcultural supports; in essence, the students who hitch-hiked did so because they had friends who did so, saw nothing wrong with it, benefited from it in practical terms, and had had no seriously negative experiences of it. The authors' use of Hirschi's (1969) typology of strain, control and cultural deviance theories of delinquency reflects their normative assumption that hitch-hiking can be understood as delinquency rather than illuminating the motives and understandings of the hitch-hikers.

- 2.2 The only extended study we were able to find was that of Rinvoluceri (1974 and 1997). This was originally published in England, by the author, as a short book, and was re-published on the internet in 1997 by Bernd Wechner in Australia. It is based mainly on interviews with 186 hitch-hikers (161 of them male) given lifts in Britain in the summer of 1968, and on questionnaires returned by about 700 people hitch-hiking near Cambridge around the same time. Rinvoluceri, citing mainly journalistic, autobiographical and fictional material, shows that hitch-hiking was well established in Britain, the United States and elsewhere long before the late 1960s (dictionaries place the earliest use of the term in mid-1920s' America)<sup>[2]</sup>. Rinvoluceri notes that in places hitch-hiking was facilitated by some degree of formal organisation, for example through bureaux in which drivers could indicate their willingness to give lifts in return for help with the costs of fuel (a case is quoted from Kerouac's *On the Road*<sup>[3]</sup>).
- 2.3 Rinvoluceri praises hitch-hiking as an example of co-operation and unselfishness: it is 'an oft repeated act of practical friendly co-operation between human beings', and potentially a means of breaking down isolationism. In Rinvoluceri's analysis, the hitch-hikers 'par excellence' are students, often, in the 1960s, identifiable as such (and therefore likely to be defined as safe) by distinctive college scarves; he does not mention the possibility that non-students might acquire scarves with a view to improving their chances of getting a lift. As Rinvoluceri notes, 'There has to be basic trust for the hitch-hiking situation to be thinkable', and, while he recognises that many young people (and their parents) disapprove of the practice and see it as dangerous, his interviewees reported few experiences of threatening sexual or violent encounters: 10 of the 25 young women said that they had had 'trouble' with male drivers, and 36 of the 161 men reported 'unpleasant encounters with homosexuals'. Personal risk seems not to have been a prominent concern for these interviewees, although Rinvoluceri cites press reports from the early 1960s of hitch-hikers being murdered by drivers. As the quotations suggest, Rinvoluceri's attitude to hitch-hiking and its risks is likely to seem dated and naive, and at times offensive - as when he suggests that female hitch-hikers may fantasise about sexual encounters with male drivers. Nevertheless, it is striking that he places so little emphasis on the personal risks associated with hitch-hiking.

### ◆ Evidence for the Decline of Hitch-hiking

- 3.1 In contrast, risk is a central theme of the press reports and commentary on hitch-hiking we have found from *The Guardian* and *The Independent* newspapers in the later 1990s, and even of the booklet - full of sensible-sounding practical advice - on hitch-hiking published by Godhaven Ink (1995). The reports we have studied tend to suggest that hitch-hiking in Britain began to decline from some point in the mid-1970s, although two much more recent events are also cited as important influences: the trial of the serial killer Rosemary West in the autumn of 1995 (her husband and partner in murder had committed suicide in prison), and the murder in December of that year of a young French woman, Céline Figard, who was hitch-hiking in Berkshire in southern England. The evidence in the West case that the couple had deliberately picked up young women hitch-hikers as potential victims was widely publicised, and may well have provided an additional deterrent to prospective hitch-hikers (though the events referred to had taken place in the 1970s). The environmental activist George Monbiot (1999) considers that the murder of Céline Figard 'effectively brought hitch-hiking in Britain to an end', a theme echoed in a *Guardian* article at the time of the murder (O'Kane, 1995), which concluded that: 'Hitching in Britain is clearly a thing of the past'. Only one of O'Kane's fifty interviewees had ever hitch-hiked, and that was only over short distances, 'but it scared the life out of me and I wouldn't do it again'. Lorry drivers said that they rarely gave lifts, either because their companies forbade it or because they feared being assaulted or being accused of assault. O'Kane did, however, find one lone woman hitch-hiker, a 45 year-old who 'was on her way to Newbury to join the treetop protesters'. Environmental activists are one of the few identifiable social groups among whom hitch-hiking is still common (Godhaven Ink, 1995), but the *Guardian* interviewee herself felt that: 'It's getting harder...It's completely different now...I suppose people just don't trust each other the way they used to' [twenty years previously].
- 3.2 In an earlier *Guardian* article, reprising some themes from the latest number of the magazine *The Big Issue*, which had featured interviews with hitch-hiking environmental activists, Turner (1995) reported that 'nowadays, apparently, the honest hitch-hiker is vanishing as a breed'. She cites Simon Calder, author of a *Hitchhikers' Manual*, as saying that hitch-hiking - and lift-giving - are now confined to people who are 'seriously weird', whereas 25 years previously 'you couldn't move for hitchers on the M5' [motorway].

According to Turner, Calder blames the introduction of the Young Persons' Railcard; an alternative but similar explanation is in Godhaven Ink (1995), which blames 'the advent of cheap coaches' in the late 1970s. *The Guardian* of 3 January 1996 printed several letters from readers in response to the article by O'Kane (1995) which were generally supportive of hitch-hiking on environmental and social grounds, but these writers too tended to assume that the number of hitch-hikers had declined since the 1970s, and one warned (as does Godhaven Ink (1995)) that women should not hitch-hike alone.

- 3.3 An exchange in March 1999 in *InkyText*<sup>[4]</sup>, an electronic journal produced in Lancaster University, also suggested that hitch-hiking (mainly over the three miles between the university and the town) had declined, and included the anonymous plea to drivers: 'PLEASE PICK UP HITCH- HIKERS! Very few of us are axe-murderers'. A similar ironic tone about the theme of risk, but in this case intended to reassure prospective hitch-hikers, appears in Godhaven Ink (1995): 'Despite what the papers tell you, you don't get threatened/eaten/buggered by psychotic serial killers with swastika tattoos and baby flesh between their teeth.' Although the press reports stress the risks to the hitch-hiker, recent cultural representations of hitch-hiking have emphasised the risk *from* the hitch-hiker, as in *The Hitcher* (1986), a film in which Rutger Hauer plays a murderous hitch-hiker, and which prompted a number of low-budget sensational spin-offs. The 1993 film *Kalifornia* suggests that more organised and formal hitch-hiking, in which those given a lift are expected to contribute to the costs of the journey, is equally risky: the academic couple who make such an arrangement find that they have given a ride to a psychotic serial killer, played by Brad Pitt. In combination, these representations may have created a diffuse sense of threat: although convincing evidence that hitch-hiking has in reality become more dangerous is lacking, the belief that this is so has become part of common sense.
- 3.4 There is evidence from the media, then, and from hitch-hikers themselves, that hitch-hiking is now seen by many people as risky and dangerous for both parties - too risky, in fact, to undertake. Green (1995) quotes Jennifer Fox of the *Lonely Planet* series of travel guides as saying, 'These are not the Kerouac days of old. The culture of hitch-hiking has changed dramatically in the Nineties and we feel it is so dangerous we would rather people didn't take the risk'. All references to hitch-hiking have been removed from recent editions of the guides, whose scope is global: hitch-hiking is viewed as dangerous everywhere. While environmental activists certainly form a special group who do hitch-hike - they are likely to have little money, and they need to travel - our impression is that hitch-hiking is indeed much rarer than in the late 1960s and early 1970s. One of us, without feeling in any way daring or especially Kerouacian (or particularly at risk), hitch-hiked over much of Britain and western Europe in the late 1960s, and memory, reinforced by discussions with contemporaries, now mostly senior academics at Lancaster University, suggests that this was not unusual behaviour among male students of the time. His revival of interest in the issue was prompted by his student son's response to a mild suggestion that hitch-hiking might be a feasible means of travel from Southampton to Lancaster (a distance of about 270 miles): essentially, 'It doesn't work like that, Dad': it was not a culturally available option, to him or his peers. It would, however, be false to claim that hitch-hiking among students has disappeared completely: Lancaster University has a recognised 'hitching post' on campus (the University built a shelter for hitch-hikers in the late 1970s, and it was recently re-built to a high architectural specification), with a companion site on the road out of the town, both of which are regularly used by students; and informal discussions with student hitch-hikers (who may be radically unrepresentative of the whole student population) since we became interested in the issue have produced reports that hitch-hiking over much longer distances (from Lancaster to destinations in France, for example) survives, and suggestions that as many as one-third of the hitch-hikers' student contemporaries see it as a practical form of travel. Nevertheless, it seems beyond doubt that among students hitch-hiking has become much rarer (and therefore more 'culturally deviant') than in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

#### ◆ Explaining the Decline of Hitch-hiking

- 4.1 The reasons for this decline are worth considering. As we have seen, journalistic sources usually attribute it to a heightened sense of risk (often associated with widely reported murders) on the part of potential hitch-hikers and lift-givers; relatively cheaper public transport is also cited. It also seems relevant to consider the growth of car ownership and access over the period in question. The average annual growth rate of car ownership in Britain was 3.8% between 1970 and 1993 (Giuliano, 1999). The government's statistics (*Social Trends Pocketbook*, 2000, p. 62) show that 'only three out of ten households...had a car in 1961, but by 1998 seven out of ten households had at least one'. In 1971 the figure was about 50%; in 1981 about 60%. The effect of the growth of car ownership and access, we suggest, was to normalise car use and thus to marginalise those without access to a car, including hitch-hikers. People who needed or chose to hitch-hike became by definition deviant - suspect, disreputable, risky, abnormal, and potentially dangerous, as criminals or people with a mental disorder (and the gradual development in Britain of 'care' in the community for formerly hospitalised patients after the 1959 Mental Health Act may have contributed

to the growth of anxiety about and distrust of conspicuous and deviant strangers<sup>[5]</sup>). Students, a social group many of whom were deprived of access to a car only by virtue of their temporary status, would not be exempt from this growing anxiety. The social processes - whether conceived as cultural deviance (Greenley and Rice, 1973-4) or more neutrally as differential association (Sutherland and Cressey, 1966) - that allowed one generation of students to regard hitch-hiking as normal, acceptable and perhaps pleasurable were eroded; hitch-hiking ceased to be an accessible, or even a thinkable, practice for many students with a normal stake in preserving their status and reputation (as not being 'seriously weird'), and a normally prudential attitude to their own safety<sup>[6]</sup>.

- 4.2 This sketch of the processes by which broader car ownership and access could alter the social meanings of hitch-hiking can be filled out by considering recent work on the social impact of the car. (Urry, 2000, pp. 57-8), outlining themes for a 'sociology beyond societies', observes sociology's neglect of the topic, despite the car's potency in sustaining 'major discourses of what constitutes the good life'. Perhaps the car's omnipresence in the iconography of (especially) American cinema and 20th century literature, and its central importance in 20th century manufacturing, led to its being simply taken for granted, an obvious part of the landscape of modernity whose meanings were transparent. Some guides to these meanings were available, however: Roland Barthes (1973, p. 88) suggested in 1957: 'I think cars today are almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals...the supreme creation of an era, conceived with passion by unknown artists, and consumed in image if not in usage by a whole population which appropriates them as a purely magical object'.
- 4.3 With the growth of access an ever-growing part of the population consumes cars in usage, but the importance of their image remains: the car is 'the major item of *individual consumption* which provides status to its owner/user through the sign-values with which it is associated (speed, home, safety, sexual desire, career success, freedom, family, masculinity)' (Urry, 2000, p. 57). The car is the dominant 'form of "quasi-private" mobility' whose success marginalises all other mobilities (walking, cycling, travelling by train or bus - and hitch-hiking). 'The environment beyond the windscreen [which may include a hitch-hiker<sup>[7]</sup>] is an alien other, to be kept at bay through the diverse privatising technologies' at the disposal of the occupants of a modern car (Urry, 2000, p. 63). For Jasper (2000), cars are the perfect embodiment of American restlessness: 'cars are enclosed spaces, little homes you can take with you, where you can play music as loudly as you want, eat dinner, spend the night, even have sex' (p. 4). Car drivers control who enters and who is excluded from this little home just as they control who enters their house (Urry, 2000, p. 191). 'Automobility' has become a fundamental right, a precondition of participation in modern social life; those 'not-in-cars' are disenfranchised and excluded (Sheller and Urry, 2000, p. 739). Compared with the 'seamlessness' of car journeys, all other forms of travel are fragmented, inconvenient and potentially dangerous (Sheller and Urry, 2000, p. 745)<sup>[8]</sup>. Whitelegg (1997), writing from an environmentalist perspective, suggests that with the triumph of the car the 'other' - anyone not in a car - becomes invisible. Public spaces become public roads (Urry, 2000, p. 193)<sup>[9]</sup>.
- 4.4 How far can these insights explain the decline of hitch-hiking since the early 1970s? One problem in using them as an explanation is that the imagery of the car as a 'quasi-private' mobile space was not new or peculiar to the last quarter of the 20th century: Sheller and Urry (2000, p. 747) cite an advertisement for a Ford car as 'a living room on wheels' from 1949. Car drivers have always been able to exclude threatening others from their cocoons of safety amid the inherently risky environment of the roads. It is possible, however, that the technological developments mentioned by Urry have enhanced drivers' sense of the privacy and home-like character, and the safety, of the inside of a car. Air-conditioning and sophisticated sound systems are now routinely available, and such accessories as airbags and advanced braking systems provide visible assurances of the safety of the occupants. To be reminded of safety is to be reminded of dangers and risks, and it is possible that as cars have become more like homes from home drivers have become less disposed to allow the dangerous environment beyond the windscreen to intrude on their privacy (for solitary drivers, the potential benefits of companionship would still be outweighed by a sense of risk and inconvenience (Putnam, 2000)).
- 4.5 These technological enhancements of the car-as-home might, then, in combination with the growth of access to cars and the normalisation of car use, produce an increased reluctance to give lifts. Since access to a car has become a sign not just of success and social competence (Sheller and Urry, 2000) but of participation in what many people mean by 'social life' (Urry, 2000, p. 190), anyone not in a car will become definitively 'other'. The hitch-hiker glimpsed through the windscreen will be defined as inherently a bearer of risks and threats. The sense of sympathy and fellow-feeling which led some drivers in Britain to give lifts to army conscripts until the abolition of national service in the early 1960s, and later made former hitch-hikers turned drivers (and probably some ex-national servicemen) feel that they owed a general debt for lifts received in the past, will be eroded by a sense of risk: all hitch-hikers have become dangerous. And as hitch-hiking becomes more difficult it will increasingly be practised only by those who have genuinely no alternative, as a result of poverty, exclusion and - more rarely - political commitment.

4.6 If this outline of possible reasons for hitch-hiking's decline is plausible, it is not surprising that - as we have found - it tends to be seen in 2001 as a practice of essentially historical interest. Godhaven Ink (1995) advises hitch-hikers that they must expect to be regaled by some drivers with reminiscences of the golden days of hitch-hiking (following rock bands round the country, standing for three days on the road out of Algiers, and the like); and we have found that an amused nostalgia is a common response among middle-aged colleagues to whom we have mentioned our interest in the subject. The consensus is that hitch-hiking was once practicable but is so no longer; the subject is seen as essentially a historical one, with no resonances with, let alone practical implications for, the social concerns of the 21st century. This was also the view of an assessor of a proposal we submitted for research on hitch-hiking: that it was not a subject on which a responsible public body should spend money on the eve of the millennium. But is it true that hitch-hiking is so much a practice of an imagined past, where the risks were non-existent or at least acceptable, as to be merely a matter of reminiscence for those who can remember the 1960s?

#### ◆ Possibilities for Policy

- 5.1 At first sight, it seems unlikely that the encouragement of hitch-hiking could ever be an element of public policy, since it would appear as an incitement to risk-taking by public authorities which are expected to be risk-averse, and to promote public security and safety. Heightened awareness of risk has generated demands for social protection from all kinds of real or imagined social evils (Furedi, 1997), as in the evolution of crime prevention into the broader concept of 'community safety' (Crawford, 1997; Pease, 1997), and the corresponding extension of responsibility for the promotion of safety to local authorities, other public agencies, and, increasingly, private security companies (Hough and Tilley, 1998). Encouragement of hitch-hiking, in this context, could be presented as encouragement of predatory and violent crime. As Monbiot (1999) suggests, it is therefore likely that for hitch-hiking to become an element of transport policy it would need to be organised in ways that would reduce the attendant risks, entailing some means of formalising and controlling what was once an inherently informal and near-spontaneous act of sharing resources. Monbiot sees organised and regulated hitch-hiking as having potential social as well as environmental benefits, in promoting sociability and co-operativeness and enabling people to 'cross the barrier of fear and the barrier of selfishness'. There are indications that even without organisation to increase (if not guarantee) safety, people may be willing to seek and offer lifts in exceptional circumstances<sup>[10]</sup>. In what follows, however, we assume that some form of organisation is necessary for hitch-hiking to be perceived as a practical possibility on any substantial scale.
- 5.2 There are plentiful examples of what this form of organisation might be. The Planetary Engineering Group Earth (<<http://www.pege.org>>) has a website that links to, *inter alia*, Bernd Wechner's website at <<http://alumni.aitec.edu.au/~bwechner>>. This in turn provides a number of links that show that organised forms of hitch-hiking exist in various parts of Europe and elsewhere. There are hitch-hiking clubs in Lithuania, Ukraine and Belgium, and several in Russia. Wechner gives links to a hitch-hiker's guide to the Czech Republic and to the Autostoppers' Society of Japan, said to be one of the best countries for hitch-hiking - which, if true, could be associated with Japan's uniquely low crime rate and the survival of dyadic relationships based on trust (Braithwaite, 1989). In contrast, hitch-hiking in the mainland USA appears to be inextricably associated with criminality, and even where it is not actually illegal, as it appears to be in New Jersey and Utah, it seems to be actively discouraged: for example, the police in Illinois have produced a film entitled *Hitch-Hiking Leads to Rape*.
- 5.3 As for western Europe, Dejevsky's (1996) suggestion in the context of the Céline Figard case that hitch-hiking 'remains more prevalent in France than in Britain' is borne out by the existence of several organisations in France providing services for the arrangement of lifts. The 'autostop' service accessible at <<http://astop.remcomp.fr/>> declares: '*Ce service met en relation automobilistes et autostoppeurs*' on a basis that is '*totalemt gratuit*', while 'Allostop' and 'Pouce' (meaning the thumb used to request a lift) are both run as businesses and charge users a fee. In Germany too, there are several sites, which constitute a network of car sharing organisations: the *Mitfahrzentralen* arrange over 1.5 million shared lifts each year. They are mostly university-based in major cities, such as Stuttgart, where the *Känguruh Mitfahrzentrale* offers free registration for both hitch-hikers and drivers. There are also several websites in Italy, the most sophisticated of which is bi-lingual, operating lifts to and from anywhere in Italy for both Italian and English speakers (<<http://www.geocities.com/Baja/8250>>), and others in Sweden, Belgium ('Taxi-stop') and Switzerland ('Sharcom') which appear to be part of a well established and closely integrated network. In many European countries, the idea of organised support for hitch-hiking is commonplace, and there are offices in most major cities. This contrasts with the more obviously subcultural tradition of American hitch-hiking sites, which are full of 'outlaw' iconography, stressing rather than minimising the element of risk and adventure.
- 5.4 In Britain, the volume of organised hitch-hiking has increased significantly since we became interested in the issue: between April 1999 and October 2000 several web sites were established which seek to offer

resources comparable to those in France, Italy and Germany. In early 1999 only 'Freewheelers' (<<http://www.freewheelers.co.uk>>), a completely free and internet-based service, was available to potential users. Our original assessment, based upon the list of recent offers and requests for lifts in April 1999, was that the organisation did not appear very active: only three lifts were offered for this month, and the recurrence of a few names suggested that the organisation was only kept alive by a small group of enthusiasts. However, since then the web site has been completely re-launched, and our most recent count recorded 30 offers of lifts and over 60 requests; some of those requesting lifts refer directly to their motivations, such as difficulties with the railways and the then recent fuel protests by hauliers and farmers. Freewheelers has also been joined by a number of similar web sites (e.g. 'Lift Share' (<<http://www.liftshare.com>>), and Travel Share (<<http://www.travelshare.com>>), all of which appear to be offering similar services under a variety of terms and conditions. The National Car Share Scheme (NCSS) (<<http://www.nationalcarshare.com>> ) is particularly sophisticated, and, whilst currently free to users, it appears to be building a customer base in order to develop the obvious commercial potential such schemes might hold. The NCSS's approach indicates a high level of sensitivity to risk and a familiar solution: new users must provide a third party reference from a respected member of the community and verification of photo identification by their employer, doctor or bank.

- 5.5** A more formal, policy-based approach to the reduction of car use is illustrated by the recent official encouragement of car-sharing in Europe and North America. A range of schemes has emerged that are designed to encourage car-sharing and other means of making car use a less privatised, individualistic practice (Sheller and Urry, 2000, pp. 753-4). Technologically enabled car-sharing as a part of environmental policy could contribute to initiatives on urban transport such as those proposed by the Car Free Cities network, supported by the European Union through the Fourth Framework Research Project ICARO (Increasing Car Occupancy through innovative measures and technical instruments). A conference organised by Leeds City Council in March 1999 included papers on car-pooling from the European Commission and from the cities of Ghent, Vienna, Zurich, Madrid and Leuven, as well as Leeds; and both Leeds and Edinburgh have recently begun experiments with High Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) lanes in the city centres. Edinburgh has also recently become the first British city to establish a City Car Club (*The Guardian*, April 15, 1999). Elsewhere, Harms and Truffer (1999) report on the success of a car-sharing co-operative in Switzerland, and Shaheen (1999) describes a market evaluation of a 'smart' car-sharing system in the San Francisco Bay Area. Sheller and Urry (2000) also note the possibility of using smart-card technology to make cars available for public hire. Although car-sharing is largely confined to urban areas and hitch-hiking is usually associated with much longer journeys, there are many potential cross-overs for the developing 'smart' technologies (see <<http://www.pege.org/cahh/>> for work on 'Computer Aided Hitchhiking as a Traffic Problem Solution').

## Conclusions

- 6.1** There seems little doubt that hitch-hiking in Britain and other countries in western Europe, not to mention the United States, has declined since the late 1960s or early 1970s. Journalistic accounts tend to explain this with reference either to cheaper public transport (which is doubtful, since coach journeys were cheap in the 1960s) or to particular high-profile cases in which hitch-hikers (not drivers) were murdered; and no doubt such cases have contributed to a sense of heightened risk. It is not clear, however, that in any objective sense the risks have increased over the past 25 years, or what could explain such an increase (unless the incidence of homicidal tendencies amongst car and lorry drivers has risen). We have sought instead to explain the decline of hitch-hiking in terms of the rapid growth of car ownership and access, which led rapidly to a definition of hitch-hikers as essentially deviant and dangerous, and of hitch-hiking as an essentially disreputable practice; the enhancement of the privacy of the experience of car-driving by new technologies of safety and comfort; and the erosion of a sense of obligation and reciprocity among former army conscripts and people sympathetic to them, and later among hitch-hikers turned drivers. We have also suggested that, at a general level, the decline is associated with a heightened perception of other people as risky, noted by Goffman (1971) as a feature of the urban social environment, and treated by subsequent social theorists as a key aspect of the consciousness of late modernity. The perception, however 'objectively' unjustified, has had real effects, and it is conceivable that in western societies (with the possible exception of some rural areas) hitch-hiking has entered an irretrievable downward spiral, in which hitch-hikers have become by definition marginal, deviant, possibly criminal, and certainly risky. The fewer hitch-hikers there are, the less inclined drivers will be to give them lifts, and any residual sense of obligation will become less persuasive when former hitch-hikers see those now seeking lifts as essentially different from, rather than younger versions of, themselves.
- 6.2** The apparent success of organised hitch-hiking - judging by the number and durability of web sites - suggests that there is a market for their services. But it is possible that hitch-hiking reached its high-water mark in the 1960s and early 1970s for quite temporally specific reasons. The necessary

sense of obligation on the part of drivers may have been, as suggested above, a unique generational phenomenon, the product of the experience of national service and of a loosely communitarian ideology widely shared among students and other young people, and derived from the new left movements of the 1960s. The possibilities for recreational travel have also changed dramatically in the past thirty years: holiday destinations which were barely imaginable in the late 1960s have now become routine (in Latin America, south east Asia, and Australasia). Rather than hitch-hiking from London to Athens young people can fly to Bangkok or Lima - or indeed to Athens. And while the scale of global travelling is 'awesome' (Urry, 2000, p. 50), it is conceivable that electronic forms of communication that allow for virtual travel will begin to displace physical travelling. Jasper (2000) discusses what he regards as hopeful signs of this displacement in the conclusion of his *Restless Nation*, and proposes social and political initiatives that might promote a sense of connectedness to people and places, and foster a culture of rootedness rather than restlessness. But he acknowledges (p. 254) that his proposals offer 'hard, not easy, solutions'.

- 6.3 Despite the nostalgic tone of much recent discussion of hitch-hiking in the media, and the risks of sentimentality in remembering the 1960s, we continue to think that the practice of hitch-hiking deserves the attention of social scientists. Questions for research might include the following: since hitch-hiking has not died out completely, who are the people who keep it alive, as seekers and givers of lifts? How conscious are they of the risks that rule out hitch-hiking for many people, and how do they manage their own sense of risk? What might we learn from them about the management of risk and the achievement of trust? And how are we to understand the apparent continuation of trans-national - and perhaps local - differences in the acceptability of hitch-hiking? Answers to these questions could both illuminate the processes of risk perception and address the issue of how hitch-hiking might be organised in ways that would make it more widely acceptable by reducing the perceived risk.

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## ◆ Notes

<sup>1</sup>In another sense we were naïve to be surprised, since until recently little sociological attention has been given to the car, its meanings and its social impacts (Urry, 2000, p. 58). We return to these questions later in the paper.

<sup>2</sup>Hitch-hiking does not, however, feature much in the literature of American migration in the 1920s and 1930s. Urry (2000), commenting on the 'freedom of the road' associated with the car, notes that in the US 'even the dispossessed of the Great Depression travelled by car'. The dispossessed Joad family in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* leave Oklahoma for California in a 1925 Dodge pickup (Jasper, 2000, p. 91). Travellers without cars or the means or inclination to buy rail tickets were much more likely to ride on goods trains than to hitch-hike. See the bibliography at <<http://www.snowcrest.net/bndlstif/books.html>>.

<sup>3</sup>In fact there are two mentions of the practice in *On the Road*, both dated to 1949. In El Paso the narrator Sal Paradise and his companions contact the travel bureau in the hope of finding someone willing to contribute to their petrol costs: 'The travel bureau is where you go for share-the-gas rides, legal in the West. Shifty characters wait with battered suitcases' (Kerouac, 1991, pp. 162-3). In Denver 'there was a tremendous offer to drive a '47 Cadillac limousine to Chicago', the owner having decided to complete the journey from Mexico by train. Sal presents identification papers to 'the travel bureau man' that convince him that the car will be safe in his hands. The intending passengers are 'two Irish boys from an Eastern Jesuit school, waiting with their suitcases on the benches' (p. 224). Although *On the Road* is often cited as a key literary source for hitch-hiking (see, for example, the reference below to Green (1995)), it is only in the first of the three journeys recounted that Sal hitch-hikes; in the later two he travels by car, and hitch-hikers are viewed solely as a possible source of help with travel costs. Sal's first attempt at hitch-hiking is dated to July 1947; he needs five rides to carry him 40 miles out of New York, when he becomes stranded in the rain in the 'Bear Mountain wilderness' (he manages eventually to get a lift, although 'I looked like a maniac of course with my hair all wet, my shoes sopping') and has to take a bus back to New York and, the next day, to Chicago (p. 13). He is given a lift from Chicago by a woman who wants someone to share the driving to Iowa, where he becomes 'scared' as night falls and he is stuck on a lonely cross-roads. Again he has to make for the bus station. Later he meets another hitch-hiker who he thinks is running from the law: 'He said we ought to hitch together. I should have said no, because he looked pretty awful on the road' (p. 18). A driver later tells him that 'I used to hitchhike myself, that's why I always pick up a fellow', and Sal replies, 'I would too if I had a car' (pp. 23-4), but he does not seem to remember this sense of obligation during the later journeys. The 'greatest ride in my life' is on the back of a truck driven by two Minnesota farmers transporting farm machinery from Los Angeles, and therefore driving west in an empty truck. They give lifts

to everyone, including 'hobos' and 'young city boys hitchhiking around the United States for the summer' (p. 25). No single image of the American hitch-hiker of the late 1940s emerges from *On the Road*: apparent respectability is important in improving one's chances of getting a lift, and hitch-hiking is associated with being on the run and with shiftiness; but it can also be a way of touring America for a summer holiday, and - through the 'travel bureau' - a means of transport for poor but respectable college students. Sal Paradise is presented as a rather nervous and not very successful hitch-hiker; he is not equipped to sleep outdoors if stranded for the night, and he often has to resort to public transport.

<sup>4</sup>The editor and main author of this valuable journal, Gordon Inkster, died in July 2001, to the great sorrow of all independent spirits at Lancaster University and of friends, colleagues and InkyText subscribers throughout the world. An InkyText archive dedicated to Gordon's memory is accessible at <[www.maths.lancs.ac.uk/~rowlings/InkyText/index/html](http://www.maths.lancs.ac.uk/~rowlings/InkyText/index/html)>.

<sup>5</sup>There were similar developments over the same period in north America and western Europe (Scull, 1977).

<sup>6</sup>Jasper (2000, pp. 68-9) writes: 'Even the counterculture, while rejecting some aspects of American materialism, embraced the supposed freedom of the car culture', and alludes to Kerouac and Ken Kesey, who with his 'Merry Pranksters' famously crossed America in a bus (not a car) whose destination screen read 'Furthur'. The lower costs of buying and running cars in America may well have made hitch-hiking a less attractive or necessary option than in Europe. But in the late 1960s the environmental movement was in its infancy everywhere, and environmental considerations can at most have been marginal to the motivation of hitch-hikers.

<sup>7</sup>The references to hitch-hiking are of course ours, not Urry's.

<sup>8</sup>Sheller and Urry are thinking primarily of journeys by train or bus, that involve periods of waiting or walking in public or semi-public spaces. But no form of mobility is more fragmented, less seamless, than hitch-hiking.

<sup>9</sup>The Reclaim the Streets movement has developed on the basis of exactly this recognition. It seeks to rescue roads from the car and re-establish them as public places that are safe for sociable and communal activities.

<sup>10</sup>For example, *Le Monde* of 13 November 1998 reported a revival of 'auto-stop' during a bus drivers' strike in Rennes, and various forms of car-sharing and lift giving schemes were suddenly found to be possible during the fuel blockades in Britain in September 2000.



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