

AMERICAN AUTOMOBILES AND FRENCH¹

BY CLAUDE BLANCHARD

THE attraction that the automobile exercises over the masses is not the least curious social phenomenon of our modern life. It amounts to a passion, a frenzy. This reflection occurred to me last Sunday while I was walking down the Avenue des Champs Élysées near the Grand Palais, behind whose demoded exterior the products of the most modern and lively of all our industries were being displayed. In bright electric light, a crowd of people was swarming about the shiny steel bodies of innumerable vehicles. The merchants had thrown their doors open to all, to rich and poor alike, and prospective buyers were testing the cushions and caressing the upholstery of sumptuous limousines, and being shown how easily they could shift gears. Outside it was quite different. New automobiles of every make, decorated with flags and streamers, rushed up and down the Avenue, desperately trying to join the cars already parked around the sidewalks. The eyes of every visitor were burning with the same desire — namely, to have an automobile of his own.

In most cases one felt that this long-cherished hope would be realized soon, that it was not an impossible dream, that it would come true to-morrow or the day after, perhaps. The question, which is by no means new, occurred to me whether the automobile was going to enjoy a golden age of popularity like the bicycle. Is it going to become a

practical, cheap vehicle available to people with moderate incomes?

The automobile show always makes us hope that some acrobatic solution of the automobile problem is about to be achieved that will recommend itself to purses of every size. The last show especially seemed another step in this direction. Let us see how far the manufacturers have succeeded, for this great annual display is the best place in the world to judge such tendencies.

In France two companies have specialized in the manufacture of a standardized series of automobiles. They alone have the vast equipment and organization necessary to fill the needs of a moderately situated clientele. The novelty they offer consists in mechanical devices that heretofore have been found only on high-priced cars, and the price they get is certainly not excessive. Considering the price one pays for a short pound of butter, manufacturers of automobiles are prodigal indeed in offering a machine of the most neat appearance for thirty-six one-thousand-franc notes, or even a little less. The interior is well carpeted, paneled with wood, and equipped with a number of watches, gauges, and indicators, while the perfectly finished exterior is beautifully proportioned. On top of all this, four-wheel brakes are a most important advance in construction.

Far be it from me to reflect on the merits of these manufacturers, whose marvelous efforts satisfy the needs of the moment for luxury and comfort,

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but this idea of a series of automobiles leads us further and further away from the purely popular kind of machine that is bound to attract people whom heretofore the automobile has not been able to reach. This vulgarization of the automobile suggests an immediate comparison between the French and the American conception of manufacture. One has only to visit the latest automobile show to be convinced that there is an absolute cleavage between the two continents, in spite of the eagerness that some manufacturers certainly show to combine the advantages of both methods.

In America one has to be very poor indeed not to be able to own an automobile. Statistics show us that the number of automobiles per inhabitant is stupefying. There are states in the Union where there is one automobile to every four people. Estimating four seats per machine, which is a reasonable minimum, it can be deduced that all the inhabitants could at any given moment of the day ride on four rubber-tired wheels.

A Frenchman lately back from New York told me the following anecdote. Walking along the street one day, he noticed an endless line of automobiles along the sidewalk. Asking of a passer-by what celebration or gathering caused this crowd, he was told that a house was being built near there and that the machines were those of the masons and carpenters working on the building.

Why is it that such things are possible on one side of the ocean and not on the other? We are told that American wealth is enormous, that the necessities of life are abundant, and that the industrial organization over there has enabled standardization to reach the highest possible point of perfection. Also the lower price of gasoline has attracted a wider public

to the automobile, and keeps running expenses down to a very reasonable figure. All this is true. But that is only part of the problem. There is another aspect of it — popular psychology. When an American of any class buys an automobile he chooses among a wide variety of makes the kind that corresponds exactly to his means and to his needs, and this leads him almost always to one of the cheapest and simplest models, such as America produces at the rate of thousands a day.

The American ignores the individual type. He has no desire for a machine that stands out from the rest, either in design, in luxury of equipment, or in speed. If he meets thousands of cars exactly like his on the road, he does not mind. His choice of an automobile is like his choice of a necktie, shoes, or furniture — it simply indicates his social status.

On this fact the success of the Ford is based. A certain monotony is bound to be the result of this kind of mentality, but it facilitates life amazingly, and provides the middle class with comforts unknown in the Old World. This state of mind may seem normal enough when it is a matter of cheap automobiles, but it is much more curious as reflected in the expensive cars. Even for these, American buyers show no width of choice — they buy an expensive automobile of a standard model and color; they take just what the manufacturer gives them. Thanks to the fact that standardization is pushed to the very limit, you see millionaires' automobiles that cost a small fortune and include the most subtle mechanical perfections all made alike. There is, for instance, a New York concern that makes a machine on which sixty-odd bearings are oiled with a single stroke of a pump handle.

Is this standardization, which, thanks to the meekness of the public,

has helped the spread of the automobile in America, an unmixed benefit?

Let us return to the automobile show. French experts told me that American automobiles are built on lines that vary only slightly from year to year. That is why, they assured me, standardization is necessary. Manufacturers are loath to introduce changes that will necessitate making over the material organization of their plant and altering the routine of the workers. This is why the American machines at the show possess only secondary refinements and their mechanical structure never has anything novel about it.

The French industry, on the other hand, seems to have changed its construction entirely, and has 'turned out,' as they say in the factory, machines of marvelous mechanical refinement. If at the beginning of this article I seemed a little critical of our tendency to cater only to a rich clientele, it is only fair to say that our manufacturers do achieve admirable perfection.

Here is the situation. On one side is the General Motors Company, a formidable trust including almost all American production. On the other side are Europe and its individualism, full of initiative and progress. Which will carry the day? Even in the United States a battle of giants is being fought between General Motors and Ford, who in the eyes of his adversaries is the

apostle of a fallacious industrial theory. The United States has also recently opened up a campaign in our country to attract French clients. Is this a grave menace? Is there imminent danger of the Americans overcoming us with their weapons? It is most unlikely. The difference between their needs and ours is too great. The Americans possess an immense new country where the automobile is a necessity. Here it will be useful, of course, but its chief purpose is pleasure.

Those French makers whose tendencies toward too much luxury at the expense of utility I was deploring have tried to imitate American methods and to preserve at the same time their own æsthetic advantages, which are the most important factors in the commercial success of the industry in France. The problem was a delicate one, but the French industry has achieved the best results. Charles Faroux, a specialist in these matters, recently wrote as follows about Henry Ford and Louis Renault, the two most representative men of either type: 'Just now one feels that Henry Ford will leave behind him the memory of a great fortune honestly gained, while Louis Renault, in spite of his financial and industrial power, will leave behind the memory of a great mechanical engineer.' How could the economic antagonism in the automobile show be better expressed?

THE PESSIMISTS¹

BY J. B. PRIESTLEY

THEY burst in upon me last Sunday morning, these two young men — we will call them A and B. They came striding through the clear sunlight, in which there was already a faint suggestion of autumn, a touch of her cool forefinger, and descended upon me like the demigods or heroes they are, dusty and roaring and red-faced and clamorous for beer. Within a second or two my cottage was crowded with their sprawling legs and gesticulating arms. I had been spending the morning, laying down one after another of its exquisite pale gold pieces, in meditating a few pages of fine writing, something spun out of a reverie over that first autumnal whisper. It was already taking shape in my mind, a whimsical, melancholy, deckle-edged affair, the very matter for numbered and signed copies. There is something curiously depressing about late August, when the world is dusty and blown and fretful. Summer has gone, dragging her roses off the stage, and there is an interval of waiting, during which we yawn over our programmes, before the lights turn golden and misty for the pomp of autumn. I was beginning to feel depressed myself, and that was why I decided to attempt some fine writing, there being no better cure for this malady, itself mostly a literary affair, than a whole-hearted literary debauch, in which armfuls of gorgeous adjectives are scattered like largesse. But the entrance of my two young friends put

an end to that, and what with the cares of hospitality and the roaring sea of their companionship, on which I soon found myself adrift, I said good-bye to my tender melancholy and fine phrases.

I call these guests 'my two young friends' as if there were whole generations between us, whereas a really elderly person, casually surveying us, would lump us all together as contemporaries. We are not, however, and the difference is significant. They are post-war (one of them is still up at his university, and the other has not been down long), and I am not, and very often they contrive to make me feel as old as I frequently try to appear in my more responsible compositions. Last Sunday they were in magnificent form. They had been walking all Saturday, and had managed to cover an odd ten or twelve miles that very morning. They bellowed their news and stretched themselves in my sitting-room, sang and splashed in the bathroom, and then came down to put away the lunch of six. My bottled beer went winking down their throats. My coffee disappeared between two epigrams. They filled their youthful and aggressive pipes, blew out great blue clouds of old matured Virginia and young raw satisfaction, and then accompanied me into the garden, where we lounged and smoked through the afternoon. We watched the sunlight fall upon the ripening pears. Across the lawn the seven-foot hollyhocks stood like girlish grenadiers. The poppies blazed among the distant weeds. From somewhere

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