THE MAKING OF THE FINNISH AUTOMOBILE SOCIETY
Comparative, Social and Economic Perspectives

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The making of the Finnish automobile society is part of a history of the permanent increase in all kinds of transport. This increase has been most dramatic in road transport in the twentieth century.[1] In this article my intention is to look at one of the most fascinating fundamental questions of social and economic history: How have global technological and economic processes evolved locally and nationally? Therefore I examine statistics for the Nordic countries to find out what is different and characteristic for the Finnish adaptation of the automobile society.

Per Østerby has written about the making of the automobile society in Norway. The subtitle of his book, *The integration of the automobile to Norwegian society,* clarifies his research themes.[2] I prefer the word '*adaptation'* because it encapsulates nicely, how political and economic structures and events of Finnish development have influenced this process, and how the breakthrough of an automobile society has had a crucial impact on political and economic development in this peripheral country. The making of the Finnish automobile society is very much about the interaction of technological, social, economic and political forces. This interaction has had many shades: conflict, divergence, confusion, dislocation, mutual cooperation, rejuvenation of industries and business and many structural changes in everyday life.

Technological innovations and their adaptations are a pivotal part of all transport history. Canals, steam engines, combustion and diesel engines, aeroplanes and shipping containers have all shaped transport networks, trade, industries and societies. The automobile has also had a profound impact on nearly all societies in the world. In many countries it infiltrated many vital processes of society, such as road building, housing, family life, holidays, economic development, children's hobbies etc. Therefore it is surprising how national automobile history has been.[3] Looking at the Nordic statistics gives some hints as to what was special in the Finnish development.

This article is based mainly on statistics that look accurate and precise in tables and figures, but unfortunately only give a rough draft and general picture of the development due to several problems with statistical data. In the early 1900s the numbers of cars in the official registers varied from summer to winter.[4] The Nordic countries have different ways of classifying and naming different types of automobiles. This is due to, for example, different tax codes. Therefore comparing Finnish development with other Nordic countries is very problematic until the breakthrough of private cars, which happened later in Finland than in the other Nordic countries. The popu-

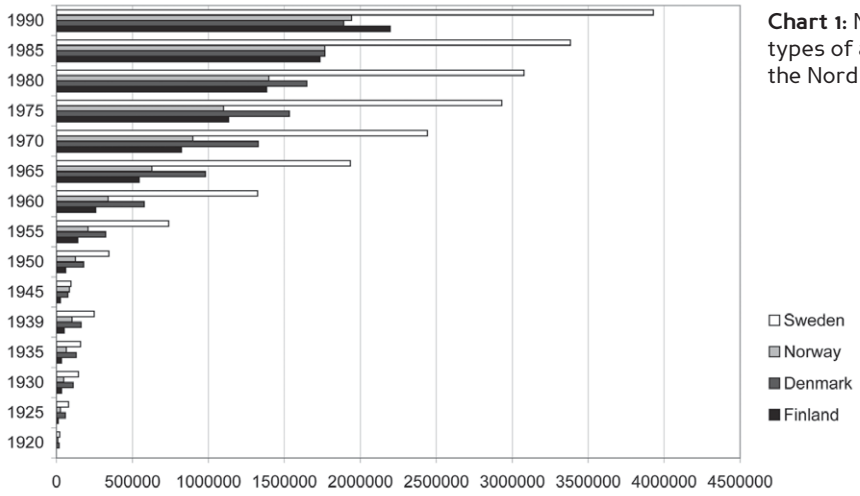


Chart 1: Number of all types of automobiles in the Nordic countries.

lation figures in the Nordic countries also vary in different statistical sources.

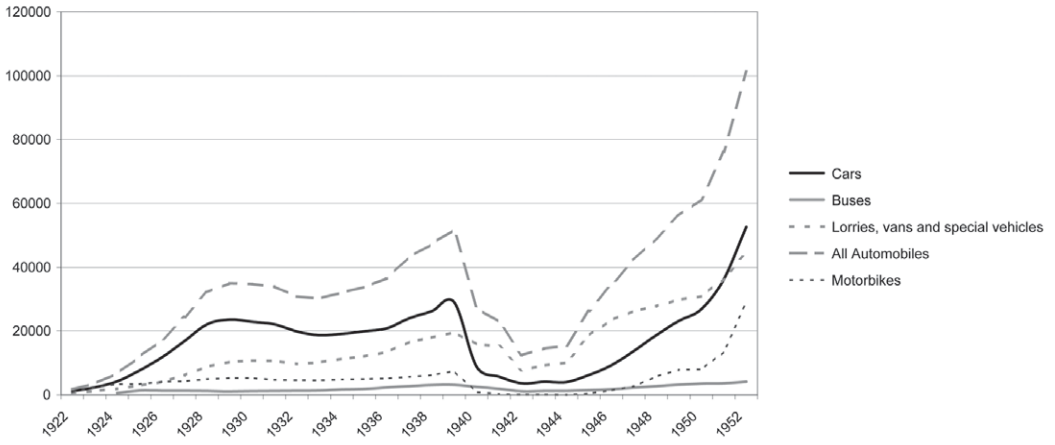
A large amount of important research in the field of road transport history has been published in Finland, but this has been mainly from some special and therefore limited angle. Road building and use, coach and bus transport, cultural and economic history of taxi transport, lorry transport, road transport companies and transport workers' trade unions have had their histories written. General and comparative approaches across Finnish borders where historians have looked upon the development of road transport and rise of the automobile society have been rare.[5]

Mobility of the future

Bicycles and cars were associated with speed and societal futuristic dreams in late 19th and early 20th centuries The predictions were correct in that the pace of modern times was interwoven to independence from capricious animals and the elevation of men and women to master their own movement through neighbourhoods, fields and forests, based on their own choices of routes and tempo. Timo Kalanti has proposed that the magic of the car is mainly due to automobiles turning human beings into centaurs.[6] Riding bicycles made people centaurs with human brains and additional mechanical strength for the first time. Automobiles gradually multiplied this empowerment of individuals. Bicycles introduced the personal experience of ecstasy connected to velocity to the general public. Pleasure rides, road trips and picnics away from home were part of the enjoyment with bikes. Professionals and workers also used bicycles to speed up their journeys to customers and workplaces. In this way bicycles paved the way for the automobile society. In Finland the close connection between bicycles and cars was obvious when the bicycle association in Helsinki changed its name to the Automobile and Bicycle Club of Helsinki in 1907.[7]

It was obvious in the very early stages of automobility, that cars, lorries, coaches and buses were inevitably the main features and essence of transport in future societies. Predictions concerning impending transport even in peripheral Finland were pre-

Chart 2: Registered automobiles and motorcycles in Finland 1922–1952.



dominantly deterministic. Horsemen knew that they were part of the past and did not belong to the future of transport even though the development of the automobile society was slow compared to other Nordic countries and during and after the Second World War animal horse power had a minor revival in Finnish transport industry.[8] This general technological determinism did not prevent horse and cart men to resort to many kinds of resistance to postpone the imminent destruction of their livelihoods.[9]

The development of organised and professional lorry, taxi and coach traffic was chaotic and piecemeal because these were all mixed together. Coaches took care of transporting general cargo, lorries were used for personal transport and taxis could have scheduled routes to serve local customers. The slow rise of motor road transport in Finland was connected to criminal activities during the prohibition period, from 1919 to 1932. The delivery of illegal liquor provided additional income to many working in the Finnish transport industry during those years. It also enhanced the development of coach traffic during and after prohibition.[10]

Tapani Mauranen has underlined the substantial changes and underlying instability of the development of the number of automobiles in Finland before the 1970s. The fragility of the Finnish automobile society was clear during the severe recession of the 1930s. Finland was the only Nordic country where the combined number of all motor vehicles as well as that of cars diminished during the years 1930-1935. During the recession and the upturn following it the structure of Finnish road traffic took a divergent route compared to the other Nordic countries. Private cars had a minor importance in Finland where coaches, buses, lorries and vans had a more dominant position. This dominance of utility vehicles compared to private cars became more entrenched during the Second World War, when the majority of automobiles were supporting military operations. It took until 1952 before cars made over half of all registered vehicles in Finland. Lorries were dominant even in personal traffic in the first years after the war.[11]

Even though motor road transport developed in Finland at a much slower pace than in the other Nordic countries some

substantial structural changes are hidden if one looks only at the number of vehicles. In the 1930s, coaches, buses and lorries became such an important part of Finnish society and economy that investment in better roads and capacity to keep roads open during winters grew even during years of economic depression. The war effort – i.e. military operations, agriculture and industrial production – was so dependent on road transport that the length of roads open to winter traffic actually increased during the Second World War in Finland.[12]

From Automobile Scarcity towards Automobile Society

The poverty and backwardness of the Finnish society between the World Wars is perfectly portrayed in the number of automobiles compared to the other Nordic countries. After the Second World War, war reparations to the Soviet Union took a heavy toll on resources. German (actually to a great extent Austrian) forces demolished buildings and infrastructure in Northern Finland, when they retreated after Finland had made peace with the Soviet Union and abandoned Germany as an ally. Other parts of Finland had to wait for upgrades in road infrastructure, because rebuilding of roads, railways and bridges in northern Finland was a priority in the 1940s. Therefore roads in southern Finland were in very poor condition in the 1950s.

The Finnish State started to invest into road infrastructure in more densely populated areas in southern Finland. The state issued special bonds to finance these road-building schemes. Upgrading Finnish roads meant the slow retreat of gravel and grit. Paving increased gradually from town areas to the main roads connecting the biggest cities. Heavy investment in the state-owned oil refinery gave support to the prerequisites for the breakthrough of the automobile society. That the state-owned company could produce and deliver products to make tarmac and asphalt, and that the road transport authorities increased investment in these materials, was not a coinci-

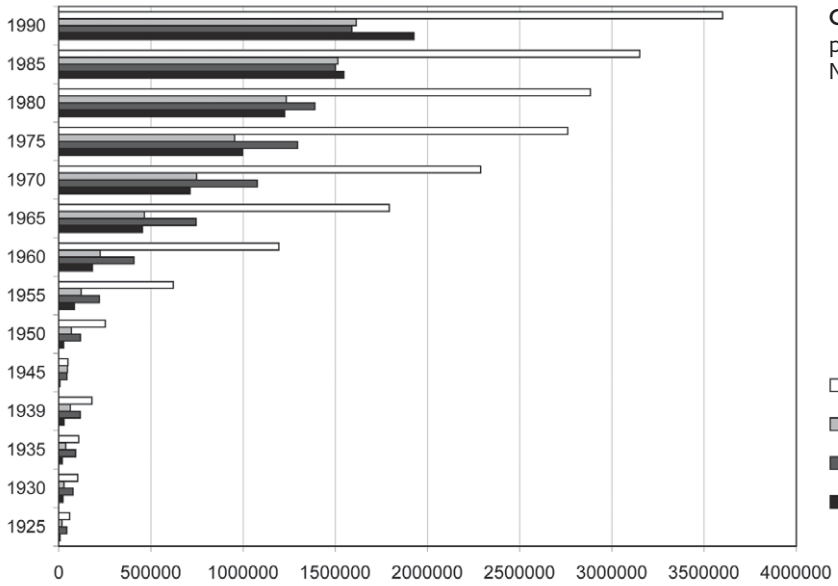
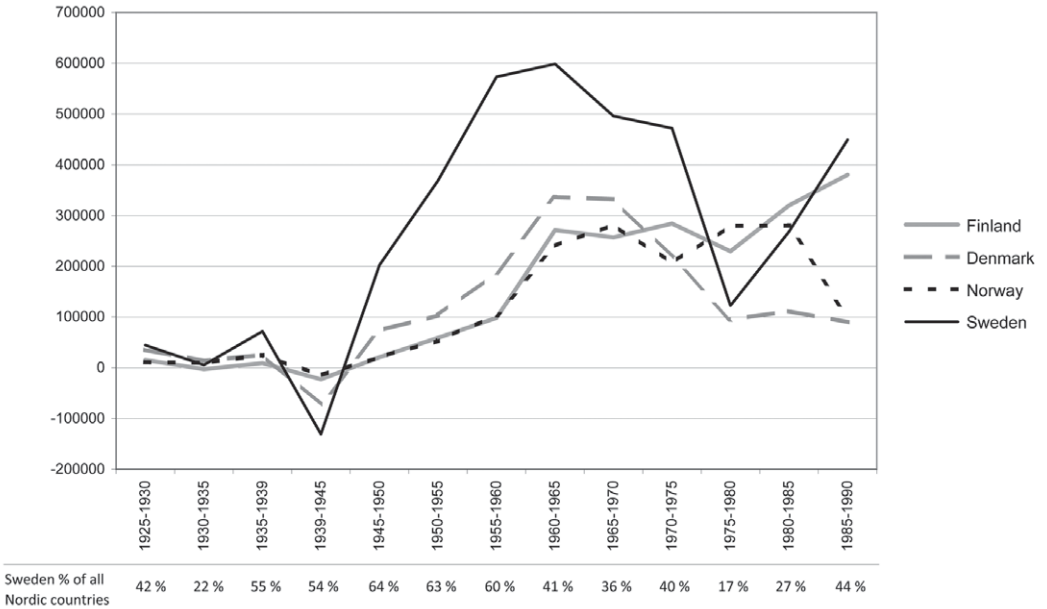


Chart 3: Number of private cars in the Nordic countries.

Chart 4: Change in number of private cars in five year periods.



dence. Investment in the roads accelerated in late 1960s and early 1970s, when Finland got several loans from the World Bank for highway building projects.[13]

Resources were rationed and foreign trade regulated heavily until 1952 in Finland. Even after rationing was abandoned, import licensing made it difficult to import automobiles to Finland. Sweden took an early lead in the proper breakthrough of the automobile society after the Second World War even though before the war Denmark had been the forerunner in adaption and use of automobiles. The Swedish automobile industry and Social Democratic government had a symbiotic relationship in the making of the mobile welfare state. In the years 1945–1960 Sweden outgrew all the other Nordic countries combined in the increase of the number of private cars. Its share of the growth was much bigger than its relative population within the Nordic countries.[14]

Norway and especially Finland were very restrictive towards the import of cars for private use until the foundation of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) in 1960. Finland was not a full member of EFTA but made an association agreement with the organisation in 1961. Finland started to open up its market for import in 1958. In Finland Eastern European cars dominated the market of private cars and taxis until 1958. The association agreement with EFTA had surprising and unintended consequences, when Finnish restriction on automobile import diminished rapidly from 1962. Import of European and American cars multiplied but Japanese cars also gained a large market share. Finland became the bridgehead for the intrusion of the Japanese automobile industry into European markets. Freedom of choice enhanced the demand for new cars.[15]

Due to the severe restrictions in importing cars, from the 1940s to the early

1960s Finland resembled Cuba after the US embargo. Even extraordinarily old cars were kept in traffic in the 1950s because new cars were not available to satisfy the immense demand. One particular proof of the very late development of the automobile society in Finland was that the problem of abandoned scrap automobiles only became acute and important in the mid-1960s. Only then did the state nominate a committee to look into this problem and introduced regulations about abandoned scrap automobiles.[16]

Compared to the other Nordic countries, Finland has been a relatively unstable society in political and economic terms. The instability of the Finnish society is such an important research topic that it should also be discussed in connection with the automobile society in Finland. The severe recession of the 1930s and the Second World War substantially diminished and restricted the number of automobiles in Finland. Especially the introduction of mass private car ownership was delayed. The statistics show a steady increase in the number of cars after the Second World War without any signs that economic conjunctures had an impact on the rise of car ownership. This is actually not the case. Car sales were and are very volatile. Good employment figures enhanced sales and high unemployment meant a slow down in registrations of new cars. Why is this not visible in Finnish statistics after the Second World War? Why is the increase in the number of registered cars actually quite stable? An explanation for this superficial inconsistency is also connected to conjunctures. During economic upturns old cars were scrapped but during downturns they were kept in traffic.

The making of the Finnish automobile society had many characteristics in common with Norway, but Finland still lagged substantially behind the western neighbour of Sweden during the 1960s and 1970s. Finland and Norway were followers of the earlier developments in Denmark and Sweden. These two Nordic follower countries experienced a rapid increase from the 1960s, but

Chart 5: Change in all types of automobiles in the Nordic countries.

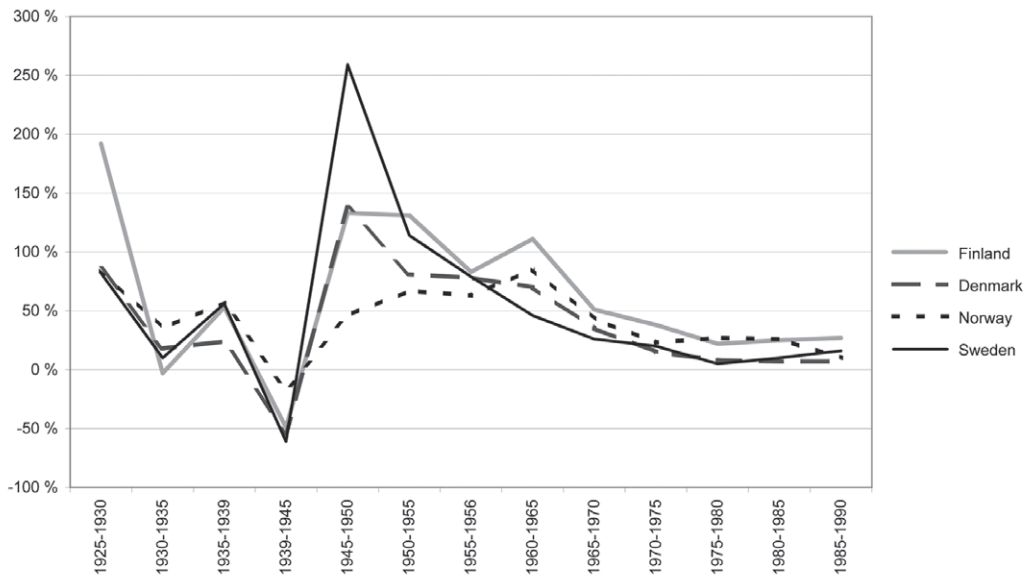
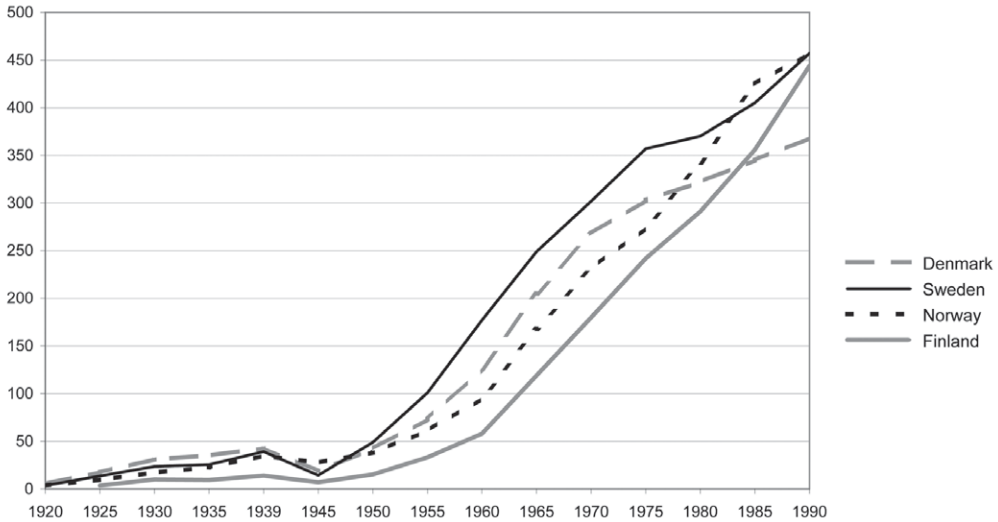
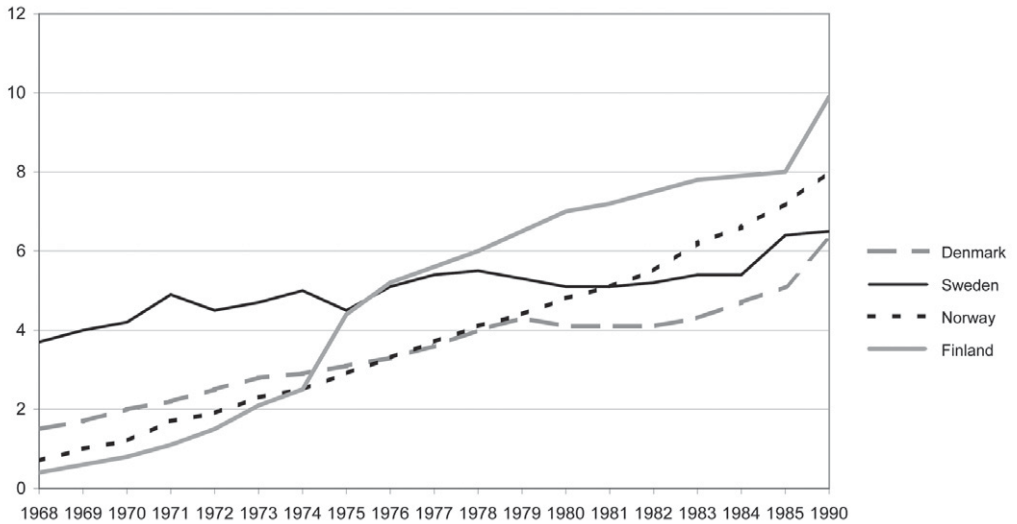


Chart 6: Cars per 1000 inhabitants in the Nordic countries 1920–1990.



only during the ten-year period from 1975 to 1985 did they both manage to outgrow Sweden and Denmark. The Nordic countries had different rhythms and at the end of the 1990s their paths looked quite divergent. The rise of road transport became sluggish in Denmark from the mid-1970s and at same time car ownership accelerated in Finland. A slowdown in Denmark meant that Finland bypassed that country in the mid-1980s, when automobile numbers are measured in terms of population. Growth of numbers of private cars cooled down in Norway in the second half of the 1980s

Chart 7: Lorries and trailers with over 10tn capacity per 1000 inhabitants in the Nordic countries 1968–1990.



and in Sweden car sales heated up. From chart 6 it is possible to see how the intrusion of the automobile society into Sweden was about 10–15 years ahead compared to Finland. The Finnish and Swedish economies were both overheated at the end of 1980s. Inflated growth numbers in car sales during that decade were bad omens for the future.

The mass expansion of private car ownership was not the only way in which Finland became thoroughly an automobile society. Diesel buses, coaches and lorries took gradually over the road transport industry from the late 1950s onwards. Better roads meant an enormous and rapid increase in heavy lorries and trailers. Road transport gained new capacity and a greater share of all cargo transport. Road transport prospered, inland waterways and railways stagnated or lost freights. Finland still had the smallest capacity in road freight traffic in the Nordic countries in 1968, but in twenty-two years Finland became a republic of truckers and all Scandinavian kingdoms were left behind. Chart 7 shows that Norway had a similar, but slower, development in road cargo transport capacity.[17]

Safety against freedom

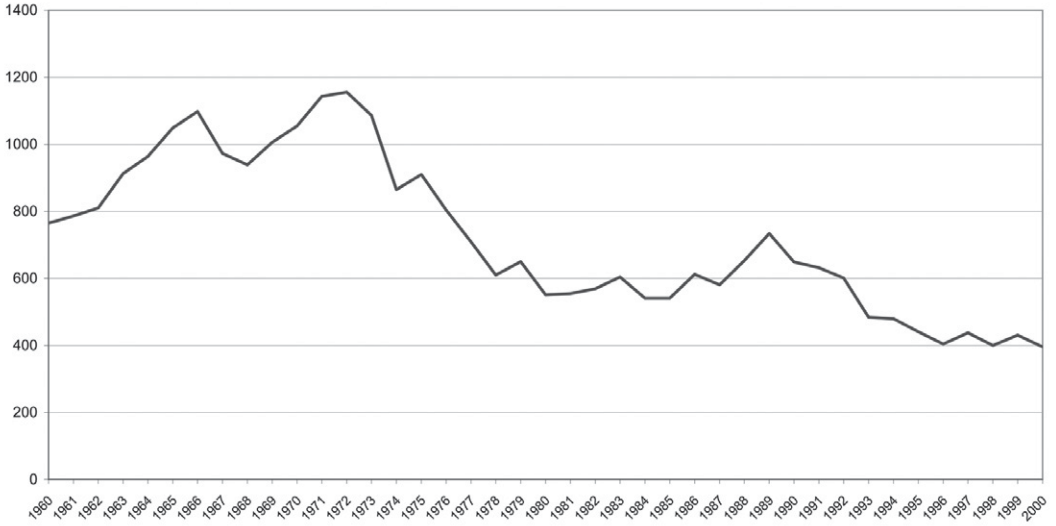
"Institutions matter" was a catch phrase introduced into comparative social sciences, history and economics at the turn of the millennium.[18] An essential part of the adaptation of new technologies and innovations into societal practice is the cultural and behavioural change of people in society. In the making of the Finnish automobile society changes of formal and informal rules were important and their codification and implementation into practice were severely contested. Norbert Elias has described the diminishing number of road traffic accidents compared to the number of automobiles as a sign of civilisation and human adaptation to a new technological system. This downward trend in accidents is also called Smeed's law, because Reuben Smeed presented this statistical pattern in an article published in 1949.[19]

For many decades, the Finnish legal framework or the normative infrastructure for an automobile society was underdeveloped, at the same time weak and restrictive. As late as in 1934, a number of non-governmental organizations started to organise traffic culture weeks which later, in 1937, became the traffic security week. The Finnish road transport legislation was better adjusted for an automobile reality when several laws were enacted, and governmental statutes and further guidelines from other authorities given in 1937. Speed limits were changed so that on the highways private cars had no speed limit at all.[20]

Both roads and automobiles improved substantially in a very short time in the 1960s. Average speeds increased which meant a sudden upsurge in fatal traffic accidents. In 1958 the death toll in Finnish road traffic was 548 but eight years later, in 1966, it had doubled to nearly one thousand one hundred (1098). Major conflict ensued between automobile organisations and road safety reformers. Statutory speed limits were the hottest debated issue. Educational work and advice were the only weapons against traffic accidents that the automobile lobby and right wing parties could accept.

The opponents of speed limits took a short downturn in fatal accidents in 1967 and 1968 as proof that education had changed the behaviour of Finnish drivers to a more civilised direction. Unfortunately this positive trend was only temporary. More bitter arguments ensued. The young researcher Risto Näätänen wrote a book in 1972 called *Death on the Highway* (Maantiekuolema), which convinced even the president of Finland, Urho Kekkonen, that

Chart 8: Fatal road accidents in Finland.



educational work alone was not enough to diminish traffic accidents. The sudden rise in the price of crude oil started an energy crisis in 1973. This gave extra impetus to imposing speed limits on Finnish road traffic. The death toll nearly halved during the 1970s even though the number of automobiles and traffic increased rapidly. Finnish car drivers were forced to become more civilised and pedestrians – especially children – also learned to avoid unnecessary risks. Finnish authorities helped to make Smeed's law valid also in Finland.[21]

The Nordic countries are different

Looking at the development of road transport reveals major differences between the Nordic countries in the making of the automobile society. There are geographical, historical, cultural, social, economic and political reasons for this. The Finnish automobile history looks like many other features of social and technological history of a peripheral Nordic country. Within the Nordic group, Finland was lagging behind in the number of cars for a long time. But this is not the whole story. Suddenly, cars penetrated the fabric of Finnish society even more thoroughly than the Danish society. At the end of the 1990s Finland bypassed Denmark and nearly caught up with the other Nordic countries.

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Charts by Terhi Ketolainen.

Author's note:
The main arguments of this article have been previously published in Finnish as Bergholm, Tapio: "Suomen Autoistumisen yhteiskuntahistoriaa", in Toiskallio, Kalle (ed.) *Viettelyksen vaunu. Autokulttuurin muutos Suomessa*. SKS, Jyväskylä, 2001. They are here made accessible to those who do not read the Finnish language. In reworking this text I had several new ideas. Therefore the structure and content differ somewhat from the Finnish version. New charts have been included to underline my new findings. So even those familiar with the earlier version may find something new.

[1] Baker and Gerhold, 1993.

[2] Østerby, 1995.

[3] Per Østerby has employed Nordic comparison in his very insightful research only once. He does not compare Norwegian development during the years 1930-1985 to Finnish development even though he has the information about Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden in the table appendix at the end of his book. See Østerby 1995, 304, 306.

[4] For problems of Finnish automobile and road transport statistics see Viitaniemi,1998.

[5] Bergholm, 1988, 1997, 2000; Blomberg, 1996; Blomberg, Kurkinen and Nummela, 2000; Herranen, 1990; Mauranen, 1995; Mauranen and Levä, 1999; Moisala, 1983; Perko, 1977; Masonen and Hänninen, eds. 1995; Vähäkangas, ed. 2000; Seppinen, 1992; Masonen, Antila, Kallio and Mauranen, eds. 1999; Sornikivi, 1996; Viitaniemi and Mäkelä, 1978.

[6] Kalanti, 2001.

[7] Bendtsen, 2005; Flink, 1990, 3-6, 9, 14, 16, 20, 27-29, 40, 45; Laaksonen, 1994, 8.

[8] Bergholm 1997, 337-342; Katajala-Peltomaa, 1999a, 186-187; Mauranen 1995, 18-19, 52-55; Seppinen 1992, 89-91; Sornikivi 1996, 74.

[9] Mauranen, 2013.

[10] Aalto and Rentola, 1992, 764-769; Ahtokari, 1972, 29, 82, 120-122; Katajala-Peltomaa, 1999b; Mauranen 1995, 125-127, 132-133; Viitaniemi – Mäkelä 1978, 63-76, 154-160; 172, 482-486.

[11] Bergholm, 2001, 71-73, 76-77; Moisala 1983, 195-197; Mauranen, 2001, 53-55; Mauranen, 2012; Viitaniemi and Mäkelä 1978, 291-292.

[12] Levä, 1992.

[13] Antila and Nenonen, 2000; Hiekka, 1989, 94-95; Karppinen, 1979, 52; Kuisma, 1997, 232-241.

[14] Blomqvist, Paper presented at Oslo, 2000; Blomqvist, 1999. About the development in Sweden see also: Blomkvist, 2005.

[15] Bergholm, 2001, 78-80. About Norway see Østerby, 1995, passim.

[16] Romuautokomitean mietintö, Komiteanmietintö 1966:B90, Helsinki 1966.

[17] Bergholm 2001, 81-82; Blomberg 1996; Blomberg, Kurkinen and Nummela, 2000.

[18] See for example Ingram and Clay, 2000; Rueschemeyer, 2009, 204-227; Thelen, 1999; Hall and Soskice (eds.), 2001.

[19] Elias, 1995; Smeed, 1949; Summala, 2001.

[20] Antila, 1999, 256-282; Laaksonen 1994, 26-27; Perko 1977, 36-46, 62-90; Seppinen 1992, 84-101.

[21] Editorial in Moottori 3/1969; Ahtola, 1973; Bergholm 2001, 82-84; Flink 1990, 382-383; Lampinen, 1985, 177-237; Härkänen, 1998, 9-93; Näätänen, 1972; Wahlgren, 1979.

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