The Streetcar Conspiracy: Critical Analysis

The historical conspiracy theory that I am going to be examining, would be The Streetcar Conspiracy. According to Peter Norton, an American programmer, software publisher, author, and philanthropist; “There’s this widespread conspiracy theory that streetcars were bought up by a company National City Lines, which was effectively controlled by General Motors, so that they could be torn up and converted into bus lines,' (Stromberg). There is a legend that states that in the 1940s, General Motors engaged in a large capitalist conspiracy to buy all of the electric streetcars all around the United States. After accomplishing this feat, the General Motors company then replaced all of the trolleys with buses, giving users no choice but to use other forms of automotive transit (Myers). In the late 1880’s the only form of transportation were animal-drawn streetcars – formally known as the horsecar – were among cities throughout the United States. Later on, in the 1900’s all of the streetcars were converted to utilize electricity as a means of energy. This quickly became the most used form of transportation in many cities. Running streetcars was a popular and profitable business. As Cities expanded, and people found themselves living too far from work, and therefore, depended on the streetcars as a primary means of transportation. Over time the businessmen who ran the streetcars, formally known as the 'traction magnates', as they combined ownership of multiple lines, which therefore established powerful, and oftentimes, corrupt monopolies of the public transit business (Stromberg). Around the early 1900s, there was a large number of economic issues, specifically in the United states, despite having started off with a bright outlook on the economy. The confidence of many Americans was shaken fast by the harsh stock market crash in 1907. The first sign of financial panic was a run on the Knickerbocker Trust Company of New York, which collapsed the banking and credit system. (Encyclopedia.com). By the 1930s, most streetcar systems were beginning to age and break down, losing not only their physical integrity but the owners of the streetcar companies’ money as well. Due to this economic disparity, service to the public, therefore, began to suffer. Yellow Coach, a leading bus manufacturer founded in the year 1923 in Chicago, worked tirelessly in their attempt to influence the transit companies to replace streetcars with buses but were unsuccessful in their efforts. Due to the unsuccessful persuasion technique of Coach Yellow, the larger companies who owned streetcars did not move to motorize, as they did not want the change for fear of losing their form of income. (Wikimedia Foundation). There was also an issue with the operation of the streetcars after the population of automotive vehicles, specifically cars. Due to the fact that cars had the ability to drive on streetcar tracks, therefore limited the function of the streetcars, as they could not properly operate and run the same routes as they had before. This is solidified by the fact that; 'Once just 10 percent or so of people were driving, the tracks were so crowded that the streetcars weren't making their schedules,' (Dawid). This is one of the many reasons that streetcar usage started to decline over time.

There is evidence that could convince someone that the conspiracy is actually fact. For instance, the business with a large stake in cars and buses were prosecuted 5 years ago by the federal government for conspiring to destroy the streetcars across the United States. The businesses included in this act of conspiring were General Motors, Standard Oil, Firestone Tire & Rubber, Phillips Petroleum and Mack Truck Manufacturing Company. in turn, blamed the Red and Yellow cars’ demise on Los Angeles’ love of their automobiles, arguing that residents had grown increasingly irritated over the streetcars’ overcrowding, the increase of fares prices, run-

down equipment, accidents and the absence of routes going into the new suburban areas of Los Angeles (Rasmussen).

Even though there is a lot of evidence to support this theory there is just enough to go against it. it's tempting to believe that malicious forces that are to blame for the downfall of streetcars. There are a lot of historians that are in agreement about how General Motors and the other huge companies only helped to speed the end of the railway, which already was not going to exist in a short amount of time. (Rasmussen). There are many other factors that contributed to the decline and later, end of the streetcar. The main factors to contribute to this, include buses and automobiles. Cities started to replace their streetcar lines with buses starting in 1917. The percentage of all-bus cities grew to 10% by 1924 and went up to 20% by 1929. Most cities had a few bus services by 1929 either to take people to their street rail lines or as a limited replacement for particular routes (Slader). By 1920 buses were beginning to become more competitive with the streetcar, with statistics from the year prior, suggesting that an efficient bus service was going to make a profit. Part of this change is because of the introduction of larger buses that could carry more passengers, decreasing the operating cost per passenger. Buses were also gaining more popularity with commuters with the introduction of comfortable inflated tires that made for a more comfortable ride, and more consistent service. There was also the appeal of being a new technology associated with a feeling of progress (wikibooks.org). There is one other big reason why the streetcars usage declined so much is because of the creation of the car. After the car people felt like they had a sense of exclusivity. There was only the higher class who could afford a car. With the increased popularity of the car came the decreased use of streetcars. With cars now sharing the road with streetcars, there were issues with the streetcar's efficiency. People were now relying more on cars because the streetcars had boundaries to where they were able to go. The vehicle trend of the 1920s was negatively affecting streetcar companies. The streetcar companies began to salvage their bottom line by getting rid of the streetcar lines that became made the least amount of money and replacing them with more bus services. In many cities including Los Angeles and Baltimore, this process was rushed by increasing competition with new bus companies (Perry).

This conspiracy theory is one with good arguments for and against. With all of the research that I have done and all of the information that I have seen I do not believe that this conspiracy theory is true. This is because I think that even if there was no involvement of general motors in the streetcar industry, I still think that streetcars usage would significantly decline. With the invention of cars and busses and the streetcars diminished and eventually became obsolete. Although there was a possibility of general motors and other big companies having something to do with the decline of streetcars, I do not think that they were the only factor in the demise. There were many other factors that were stated earlier. I do not think my decision to believe that this theory is not true is due to emotional reasons. I do think it is because as soon as I see something that looks like it might not be real or true, I immediately believe that it is fake. I am someone that when they make their mind up about something, it then becomes quite hard for another conclusion to be made without solid evidence or proof pertaining to it. In other words, I tend to believe what I want to believe. Even with evidence for the conspiracy being true I still came to the conclusion that the theory was just a myth. I am also someone that is skeptical about a lot of things. Before I had done the research I already made up my mind that this conspiracy theory was not real. When I saw some of the counterarguments, I immediately did not believe that the conspiracy theory was credible. Overall, after analysing the streetcar conspiracy theory I have concluded that this in fact is false, as the streetcar industry was beginning to decline regardless of the big companies like general motors but instead, they just

sped up the decline.