

AUTONOMY: THE LIBERATING BENEFITS OF A SAFER, CLEANER, AND MORE MOBILE SOCIETY

America's love affair with the automobile has become a cliché, often a snide one. But in the early days, there was real passion. "You know, Henry, your car lifted us out of the mud," a farmer's wife living near Rome, Georgia, wrote to Henry Ford in 1918. "It brought joy into our lives. We loved every rattle in its bones."

Even American reformers and intellectuals were favorably inclined. In his 1916 book, *The Romance of the Auto Industry*, James Rood Doolittle expressed the belief that the car would "increase personal efficiency ... make happier the lot of people who have led isolated lives in the country and congested lives in the cities; [and] ... serve as an equalizer and a balance." Conservationists saw the automobile as a great advance—no longer would vast quantities of fertile farmland be lost feeding horses. And, with mobility, rural youth might even stay on the farm, rather than rushing away to the big city.

But those early positions have long vanished. Today's intellectuals and reformers have little respect for the automobile—or for automobile culture. The car's very convenience seems an indulgence, a waste of resources and money. "The Soviet Union's greatest contribution to world peace was the fact that it did not put a car in every Soviet citizen's garage," says Ralph Nader.

Political activists such as Nader have no monopoly on hostility to the automobile. Among the well-educated and well-to-do, nostalgia for train travel and paeans to subways are as common as complaints about traffic congestion. But those who prescribe subways for America's

cities rarely hold the jam-packed trains of Tokyo up as a paragon; the Washington Metro, whose modern cars often travel all but empty, is a more appealing model. And those who sing the praises of mass transit are the first to complain about crowded airplanes. One begins to suspect that the problem with automobiles is that they're too democratic: They let too many people on the road.

The specific charges levied against the only truly democratic form of transportation are many: the destruction of traditional urban America, condemning Americans to the sterility of suburbia; the deaths of over 40,000 people annually; the consumption of vast quantities of "nonrenewable resources;" the fouling of our air and our climate; congestion that has made a mockery of the car's promised mobility. Critics assert that Americans must renounce this faithless machine and accept the virtues of collectivist transportation. Schemes ranging from doubling the gasoline tax to odd/even rationing plans to outright bans of automobile ownership are eagerly proposed.

But the charges lodged against the automobile are largely incorrect, and the accompanying prescriptions are flawed. The coming of the automobile not only brought mobility, but also relieved pollution and improved safety. And many of the problems associated with automobiles are the result of too much, not too little, political control.

The reformers' rejection of the automobile reflects, in part, their distaste for capitalism and its main beneficiaries. Intellectuals have particular contempt for the self-expressive gaucherie of American car

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culture—tail fins, hot rods, drag racing, and, worst of all, the Pink Cadillac. To a large degree, their hostility to the automobile is simply a manifestation of their larger hostility toward unfettered American individualism.

The automobile offers not only personal mobility but personal space. Ensnared within their cars, drivers may sing along with the radio, avoid panhandlers, hang fuzzy dice on their rearview mirrors, put on makeup, and otherwise behave as if they were in their own homes. Early car proponents noted that automobiles, as opposed to public transit, preserved women's modesty, protecting them from pawing or unsavory gazes from strangers. Of course, automobiles from the beginning also provided convenient sites for lovemaking.

By giving individuals control over when and where they go, automobiles render impossible the planned world so desired by the coercive utopians—those well-meaning despots who seek to stifle human nature and thereby save humanity. As Brock Yates, former author of “The Dream Machine” column in *The Washington Post*, has noted: “The ownership [of cars] is discouraged in totalitarian societies. A mobile population is a population essentially out of control of centralized government.”

When *The Grapes of Wrath*, the powerful film depicting the plight of the Depression-era rural poor, was shown in the Soviet Union, audiences were struck less by the pitiable condition of the Joad family than by their mobility. “I will never forget the American film made from Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*,” wrote Lev Navrozov in his 1975 book, *The Education of Lev Navrozov*.

The author and the filmmakers wanted to show the life of the poor in the thirties. The poor rode about in trucks. The Russian audience stared. Even a small dingy car 30 years old is a status symbol here perhaps as high as a yacht in the United States. But the ownership of a truck is something as would, in the United States, be the ownership of, say, a fleet of dirigibles. The audience perceived Steinbeck's wrathful message of poverty as a futuristic fantasy about extraterrestrials riding about in their fleets of dirigibles.

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Although the automobile was not invented in America, it was here that mobility was first democratized. In the late 19th century, cars were the toys of the rich—beautiful handcrafted items requiring vast effort to build and maintain. The automobile, Woodrow Wilson feared, would stimulate socialism by “inciting the poor to envy the possessions of the rich.” And in Europe, cars did remain unavailable to all but the wealthiest until after World War II.

But in America, Henry Ford's populist vision and capitalist genius put the world on wheels. His pioneering assembly-line production methods could produce a car in 70 man-days; in Europe, where carriage-trade practices still held sway, 3,000 man-days were required. When the Model T was discontinued in 1927, over 15 million had been sold.

European governments saw cars as luxury items and adopted policies early on that kept them in that class until after World War II. From the beginning, very high horsepower and fuel taxes priced automobiles out

of the range of moderate-income Europeans. (In the British Parliament, Herbert Asquith argued in 1907 that a tax on cars was “almost an ideal tax because it is a luxury which is apt to degenerate into a nuisance.”) No such restrictions hampered American industry, which responded by producing inexpensive autos that quickly increased in quality and performance.

American manufacturers also had the benefit of a more promising customer base than Europeans. The flat terrain of the Midwest was more suitable for early, poorly powered automobiles than mountainous Europe, and the large and relatively prosperous rural population was already familiar with steam- and gasoline-powered farm machinery. In 1908, when Ford introduced the Model T, half the U.S. population lived on farms or in towns of less than 2,500. Farmers eagerly adopted the automobile, and it dramatically changed rural life. In 1909, *Collier's* reported that in Iowa one out of every 34 farmers owned an automobile, versus one family out of 190 in New York City.

Entrepreneurs reinforced this demand by pioneering rational consumer financing arrangements. General Motors Acceptance Corporation was launched in 1919. Within two years there were more than 100 car-financing companies in the United States. Buying on time made it possible for most employed Americans to gain automobility.

Consequently, the growth in car ownership in America was explosive. In 1910, there was one car for every 44 households; by 1930, it was one for every 1.3 households. England didn't reach that level until 1966. In 1929, the U.S. companies manufactured 5.3 million motorcars—10 times the total of the combined output of all the rest of the nations of the world.

Eight thousand vehicles were registered in America by 1900; by 1940, the number had reached 32 million.

Before the coming of the car, many Americans relied on the sort of fixed-schedule mass transit prescribed by today's auto critics—trains, subways, and trolleys. Trains, in particular, were vital to rural life. But depending on a combination of horses and fixed transportation rendered the rural population essentially immobile.

The speed of the horse was only about six to eight miles per hour, and a horse could only go about 25 miles without extensive rest. To travel the 25 miles from Oregon, Illinois, to the neighboring town of Rockford, for example, took about four hours by horse. Most people, however, took the train, confronting a fixed schedule that made one-day round trips nearly impossible. (Norman T. Moline's study of Oregon, *Mobility and the Small Town, 1900–1930*, provides a detailed look at the automobile's effect on life in rural communities.)

Before the automobile, Oregon residents made understandably few trips to Rockford. A diary kept by Oregon resident Hugh Ray records three trips to Rockford from 1901 to 1903; 10 years later, the Ray family could travel with auto-owning friends and made eight trips from 1911 to 1913. After the Rays bought their own car in 1916, they began to visit Rockford every three or four weeks.

The automobile, which traveled more slowly than a train but adhered to its owner's personal schedule, knit Oregon, Rockford, and surrounding communities together. Although we associate the car with urban sprawl—

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cities spreading out from their centers into the suburbs—it also created new metropolitan areas by bringing small towns together.

For city dwellers, mobility began to improve prior to the automobile. Both the bicycle and street railroads created swifter means of travel about urban areas. The “safety bicycle” was first popularized in 1885 and laid the basis for the industrial structure that would soon be converted to automobiles.

By 1900, there were some 850 electric trolley systems operating over 10,000 miles of track. Today, anti-car intellectuals look back on the trolleys as Edenic carriages overthrown by the automobile serpent. Trolleys did provide clean, reasonably priced service, but they were inflexible and there was no easy way to bypass a disabled vehicle. The costs of building and maintaining the rail infrastructure were very high.

Nor were trolleys immune to public criticism. By 1918, the Los Angeles streetcar system’s five-cent fare could no longer cover its costs, but public resentment made increases politically impossible. Riders complained bitterly about being forced to stand in crowded cars. “Is it not about time you took steps to ascertain just why the Pacific Electric [the famous Red Cars] gets by with the putrid brand of transportation they are dishing out?” a Venice citizen complained to the local board of trustees in 1920. “Is there no redress for the hundreds of citizens in this community who are forced to pay high fares—to be handled like cattle?”

Long before the freeways, Angelenos were escaping public transit and buying private automobiles at a far greater rate than other Americans. In 1915, Los Angeles had one car for every eight residents, compared to a national average of a car for every 43 people. These cars caused

downtown traffic jams—less when they were moving than when they were parked.

Then, as now, many drivers expected to park at the curb for free, as they had in the days of horses. The city briefly tried to ban curbside parking from a congested area of downtown, only to face a political rebellion. Eventually, the city backed down, the streets remained crowded, and paid parking lots began to appear. More importantly, stores moved out of downtown to less crowded areas where they could provide private parking lots for their customers. Contrary to the claims of automobile critics, such “free” parking does not constitute a subsidy, since it is included in the store’s cost of doing business and passed along to customers in the prices they pay. The same cannot be said, however, for free curbside parking.

Los Angeles also pioneered a common Progressive-Era policy: squelching the private jitney services that sprang up to offer commuters group transportation via automobile. Some jitneys were full-blown businesses, running regular routes or offering door-to-door service. In other cases, commuters simply stuck signs in their car windows announcing their destinations and charged a nickel to any passenger going their way. The jitneys cost the same as streetcars but carried passengers at speeds 150 percent to 200 percent faster.

Said Atlanta jitney proponent and auto dealer George Hanson:

Jitneys mean convenience in transportation to the public never dreamed of before by those who have ridden on badly heated and badly lighted streetcars which have dumped them off at street corners, in the middle of the street, probably in a mud

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puddle. Not so with the “jitney.” The ladies will not have to get their feet soaked with rain and mud. The “jitney” will drive you to the curbstone in front of your residence.

Naturally, such service posed a grave threat to the financially troubled streetcar monopolies, and cities from Los Angeles to Atlanta quickly moved to outlaw or severely restrict jitney service—depriving urban dwellers of an inexpensive form of “public” transportation that offered much of the automobile’s comfort and flexibility.

Politics also intervened in road building. As car ownership increased, people began to demand better roads. The first American limited-access highway exclusively for automobiles was a 45-mile, privately built toll road linking Great Neck, New York, to Lake Ronkonkoma—the Long Island Motor Parkway, begun in 1908. However, toll roads were opposed by the highway establishment, and politicians rushed to preempt private solutions.

One spokesman noted that a toll road would generate only 30 percent new traffic, while a “free” road might generate twice that amount. The concept that traffic volume, rather than willingness to pay, was the appropriate measure for determining highway decisions introduced a major bias into highway investment and operating decisions. Roads were justified on the basis of proposed usage levels, not on the basis of the value of that usage. (The value of roads need not only have been measured by tolls; traditionally, many roads had been paid for and

maintained by the adjacent property owners, who wanted access to their homes, farms, or businesses.)

To finance road construction, state governments elected to focus on more-diffuse tax approaches rather than tolls. The early preference was for the gasoline tax. Oregon, New Mexico, and Colorado were the first states to impose this “user fee,” beginning in 1919. By 1929, every state and the District of Columbia had imposed such taxes, generally at about three cents a gallon.

Unlike Europeans, Americans have tended to restrict gasoline taxes to road-related projects. But that principle has gradually eroded, as other political constituencies—including anti-car groups—have gained power. In 1982, for the first time, Congress diverted one cent per gallon of the increased federal gasoline tax to mass transit. Later, politically preferred fuels (ethanol and methanol) were exempted from the federal user-tax system.

The automobile’s critics often note the irony of a technology that promises mobility ending in gridlock. But, of course, most drivers make most trips without ending up stuck in traffic. And congested highways are not inevitable. The very concept of “congestion” is an artifact of political control. Early on, we opted for a financing system that severed the relationship between the price paid for access and value to the user. Drivers who use uncongested roads or who travel at less popular times of day pay the same gas taxes as people who clog the freeways at rush hours. And there is no incentive, other than political pressure, to add capacity to overcrowded roads.

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Can one imagine a private provider viewing a situation in which too many people wish to use his services at current prices as a “problem”? Yet in the absence of a rational pricing policy, the only rationing system available is based on the willingness to sit still on the freeway. Although it creates a vibrant market for car phones and books on tape, this is not the way a reasonable system allocates resources.

Cars create pollution. This most common indictment of the automobile is, of course, true. But it’s also true that cars may well have dramatically decreased overall pollution.

Pre-car America bore less resemblance to the spotless museum world of Colonial Williamsburg than to a stockyard. A horse produces approximately 45 pounds of manure each day. In high-density urban environments, massive tonnages accumulated, requiring constant collection and disposal. Flies, dried dung dust, and the smell of urine filled the air, spreading disease and irritating the lungs. On rainy days, one walked through puddles of liquid wastes. Occupational diseases in horse-related industries were common.

In this day of animal rights, it is hard to imagine a world of dray horses dying in harness, but that world is less than a century behind us. New York City in the 1880s removed 15,000 dead horses annually. Like the car carcasses of today, they were not always disposed of in a timely fashion. And an abandoned horse is a far more troublesome nuisance than its modern equivalent.

The Club of Rome did not pioneer predictions of doom that ignore technological innovations. In 1885, A British writer described the future of London:

It is a vast stagnant swamp, which no man dare enter, since death would be his inevitable fate. There exhales from this oozy mass so fatal a vapour that no animal can endure it. The black water bears a greenish-brown floating scum, which forever bubbles up from the putrid mud of the bottom. . . . It is dead.

From this we were saved by the automobile.

The automobile also encouraged developments that reduced air pollution. Before the automobile, most urban homes and businesses were heated with coal, an extremely dirty source of energy that spewed sulfur dioxide, particulates, and toxic ash into the air. As the demand for gasoline stimulated oil exploration, heating oil and natural gas became cheaper and more readily available.

Of course, as other sources of air pollution were reduced, the automobile became a significant residual source of various air pollutants, particularly carbon monoxide, hydrocarbons, and nitrogen oxides. Even today, however, these emissions pose neither health nor visibility problems in most places. But under selected climatic conditions, in dense urban areas, these pollutants can cause a level of discomfort that the inhabitants find unacceptable. This happens regularly in a very few cities (notably Los Angeles and Houston) and a few times a year in some other cities. Rural areas are not troubled by poor air quality.

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A rational society seeking to ensure wise management of airsheds would devise institutional arrangements that harnessed pollution-mitigation technologies to the incentives of those causing the polluting—charging specific polluters for the specific harms they do. Instead, we have instituted a moral crusade against the sin of emission (and against the automobile). By failing to recognize that emissions can create more or less damage depending upon whether they occur in rural Missouri or downtown Los Angeles on a summer day, we spend most of our resources controlling emissions in areas where no pollution occurs.

In *Rebel Without a Cause*, James Dean competes in a suicidal drag race. The film fate of his challenger foreshadows Dean's own death in the California desert at the wheel of a Porsche Spyder bearing racing stripes and the legend "Little Bastard" on the tail. The automobile as animistic evil force is later explored in Stephen King's *Christine*, which features a blood-red 1957 Plymouth Fury as the automobile equivalent of Dr. Frankenstein's monster.

These are extreme expressions of a widely held view that automobiles are inherently dangerous. The belief that the automobile has made the world less safe is natural for a conservative people. A new technology introduces new risks, even when it makes the world much safer. Safety can only be increased by prudent risk taking. Fire introduces the risks of burns and asphyxiation; this is outweighed by the reduced risks of exposure, starvation, and wild animal attacks. But new risks are always

weighed more heavily than are older, more-accepted risks, and the automobile is no exception.

Indeed, early cars were by all accounts unsafe. A turn-of-the-century postcard depicts a motorist leaning out of his car to ask a hunter in the field, “Killed anything yet?” He receives the reply, “No, have you?” Early cars combined relatively high power with an absence of reliable braking, steering, suspension, and other safety features.

The roads were little more than cleared paths, and the experimental vehicles of the day were often shaken apart.

But even the early cars were seen as much safer than horses. Rene Bache, writing in *The Saturday Evening Post*, reported that some three-quarters of a million people were injured by horses in 1900. In 1899, *Harper's Weekly* said, “a great many folks to whom every horse is a wild beast feel much safer on a machine than behind a quadruped, who has a mind of his own, and emotions which may not always be forestalled or controlled.” Women and the elderly, in particular, could not always control a horse team. And the brakes and other controls of the early cars were already superior to those of horses.

The automotive industry began to introduce safety features almost immediately. Typically, a new feature would be introduced on a luxury brand and then over the next four years would become standard equipment on most cars. Four-wheel hydraulic brakes, balloon tires, and laminated glass windshields were all widely available by 1927. Unlike horses, cars could and did rapidly increase in safety over time. In 1921, there were 25.3 highway fatalities per 100 million miles of

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travel; in 1941, there were 12.0, and in 1947, 8.8. The figure had dropped to 5.2 by 1966 and to 2.2 by 1989.

We should also recognize the risks of an immobile society, and the advantages of rapid and flexible transportation, particularly in emergencies. After the wealthy, the first group to purchase automobiles was physicians. Urban doctors initially accounted for more vehicles than all commercial uses, and the country doctor was the first rural inhabitant to adopt the automobile. The November 1905 edition of *The Horseless Age*, a magazine promoting automobiles, printed 89 articles written by doctors describing their experiences with cars. Automobiles could travel more quickly than horse-drawn vehicles and often withstood blizzards and heat waves better than horses.

Automobiles have done much to improve the world. They have increased mobility, reduced pollution, and improved safety. But the success of the automobile, paralleling the success of capitalism in general, has enraged rather than appeased its enemies. That is why efforts to make the system work more effectively (privatization, tolling, targeted pollution-control strategies, deregulating insurance) are vehemently opposed by the automobile haters.

The unfettered, unstructured, private nature of automobile travel offends them. Their goal is not to rationalize transportation resources, but to force people out of their cars. But people won't leave their cars easily. As Richard Smith, a Lexington, Kentucky, resident, told researcher Priscilla Lee Denby, "The normal person would not squawk as much,

numerically speaking, to have to give up freedom of the press, etc., as freedom to travel. This freedom is his privacy. I think if you took individual cars away, the psychological stress would be incredible.”

Economist Kenneth Boulding, quoted in *The Green Lifestyle Handbook*, describes the automobile as a “suit of armor with two hundred horses inside, big enough to make love in.” He notes, “Once having tasted the delights of a society in which almost everyone can be a knight, it is hard to go back to being a peasant.”

But, the anti-car groups realize, if America won’t rush into this masochistic policy, how can we ask the rest of the world to forgo economic growth? This won’t be easy. “Trouble is,” notes auto critic Michael Walsh, writing for the World Watch Institute, “we don’t have the political mechanisms to impose pain on citizens in a democratic society.” Not yet, anyway. Individual autonomy irritates those who long to mold society to their own tastes. It’s not surprising that this paternalistic Daddy wants to take the T-Bird away, for good.

Originally published in Reason, August/September 1990. Kathy Kushner, director of environmental policy at the Competitive Enterprise Institute at the time, assisted in writing this article.