

Consulting Editor's Editorial: Desocialization by Automobile

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“Road rage,” as aggression on the roadways is called, has become a common phenomenon. Like a riot or revolution, it is not without a cause. It may be pathological, warranting a diagnostic category in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (1994) (Yasgur, 2001), but pathology has an etiology.

Medication or a driving psychology curriculum has been offered as panacea (James & Nahl, 2000). John Butcher, a member of the British Parliament, fed up with the boredom and tedium of driving and sitting in traffic jams, urged his government to allow jugglers and acrobats to perform on the highways to soothe the jangled nerves of motorists. With traffic moving so slowly, there would be little danger that they would be injured.

When an infant has a temper tantrum, we try to ascertain what is causing it, and we may try to do something about it. We do not dismiss it out of hand. It may not be due simply to bad manners.

The increase in aggressiveness on the roadways has been attributed to traffic congestion, feeling endangered, being insulted, frustration, time pressure, fatigue, and competitiveness. According to Darwin, human aggression is a biologically programmed response no different from the rage reflex of animals when they are attacked or threatened, but humans, unlike animals, have mediating processes such as judgment and choice that interrupt automatic responses.

Be that as it may, the automobile is driving people mad. A lot of things make people angry—their employer, paperwork, and low wages—but traffic drives them crazy (Max, 2000). The breaking point for Michael Douglas in the film *Falling Down* was getting stuck in traffic. People do not dump their cars, for as a practical matter, they have become a necessity. In the film *What Dreams May Come*, Robin Williams depicted life in heaven—there was superb public transportation and no automobiles. For that, we will have to wait for heaven.

Advertisements convey the message that the automobile is consonant with an attractive, invigorating environment and that ownership is a requisite of a full, rich life. In fact, however, the automobile way of life brings ugliness, pollution, economic waste, agony, injury, and death. It is an immoral, wasteful way of life. Verily, it is a crime against nature. Integrity in advertising would call for portraying the automobile not in a sylvan setting, as is now done, but rather in a traffic jam or collision.

Unlike our forefathers, who stepped out of their doors into a rich communal setting, we encounter arteries of traffic. The streets are now monopolized by the automobile, which has displaced children, pedestrians, bicyclists, street cars—in brief, everything but other automobiles, parked or in motion. In 1908, in the *Yale Law Journal*, H. B. Brown, retired Supreme Court Justice, urged the courts not to disregard the rights of others in favor of the motorist. His plea went unheeded.

The number of automobiles has been increasing five times as rapidly as the human population and is the principal cause of environmental degradation. The automobile not only causes noise and air pollution but also makes enormous territorial demands. An automobile requires 1,400 square feet of space for turning and parking, equivalent to the living space of a family unit. The shopping or apartment facility is dwarfed by the space allocated for parking lots. Concrete-covered terrain and “service stations”—not for humans but for cars—at nearly every corner are rapidly replacing all rustic scenery.

The rotting downtown, the sterile suburbia, the ticky-tacky shopping center, and the desolate motel are all vulgar monuments to the auto culture. Our national flower, observed Lewis Mumford, is the concrete cloverleaf. In *The Highway and the City* (1963), Mumford wrote:

In using the car to flee from the metropolis the motorist finds that he has merely transferred congestion to the highway and thereby doubled it. When he reaches his destination, in a distant suburb, he finds that the countryside he sought has disappeared; beyond him, thanks to the motorway, lies another suburb, just as dull as his own. . . . In short, the American has sacrificed his life as a while to the motorcar.

As the car gained prominence, the outside became less a place for living than for driving through, and community activities faded away. Urban space became degraded. The once charming Zocalo, the public square in Mexico City, where people used to gather and stroll, is now a maelstrom of traffic, noise, and pollution. A once beautiful Los Angeles basin has been turned into a disaster area. Indeed, one is hard put to find a place that has retained its charm in the face of the mechanical invader.

There is irony in Henry Ford's claim that the mass production of cars would allow almost anyone to “enjoy with his family the blessing of relaxation in God's free, clean air.” The disintegration of our cities began with the advent of the cheap, mass-produced car (combined with cheap fuel) and became catastrophic after World War II when the majority of people could buy one. Not included in the sticker price, however, was the cost to society at large.

“Every man a king,” promised Louisiana Governor Huey Long, “a car in every garage.” But the car (or two) now presiding in every garage has reduced its owner to a chauffeur rather than elevating him to an imperial level. Mother today doesn't cook much of a meal, but it's not her fault—she's driving a car pool, chauffeuring the kids around, or tied up in traffic coming home from work. And one who finally gets through the traffic to get to a psychotherapist is so exasperated by the hassle

that they spend the time there unwinding. A cartoon in the *Wall Street Journal* (Sept. 28, 2000) depicts a psychoanalyst saying to a patient who is sitting on the couch as though he were holding a steering wheel, "Good, good—let's get all that road rage out in the open."

Every man a lover, the automobile industry promises. At one time, the car did provide access to a hideaway, but the plethora of vehicles and the vast network of highways to implement them have now destroyed virtually every romantic setting. A multitude of ads continues to depict the car as synonymous with sexuality, but showing one off today, including Mach I, produces only a yawn. A car produces only an illusion of power and sexual magnetism. "Putting a tiger in your tank," as one petroleum company once advertised, does not do much good if there's a jackass at the wheel, and that's what the automobile really makes out of people.

Man-turned-into-jackass spends hours each day at the wheel; hours parking it; reading or listening to advertisements about it; insuring it; fueling, cleaning, or repairing it; recovering from injuries or backache from driving it; and attending funerals of friends or family who have died in collisions (45,000 a year in the United States). We seem to worry more about the car than about baby. Our every thought seems to revolve around the car. Illustrative is the recent experience of a kidnapping victim. Upon her release she went into a drugstore to telephone home. Seeing her in tears the druggist asked, "What's the matter, lady, you got car trouble?"

With no viable alternatives, buying and insuring and driving a car is a voluntary act as peristalsis. Although forced to drive, the motorist—not the automobile industry—is held responsible in the case of collision. A cordial invitation, "Have one for the road," is fraught with hazard—as we can get about only by car, drinking is perilous, day or night. The seatbelt and airbag, although possibly reducing injury, complete the ludicrous picture of man imprisoned in a capsule. Children, the elderly, the poor, and others who do not drive due to poor vision or other handicap are all immobilized prisoners of another kind. Generally, public transportation is unavailable and taxi fare is too expensive for regular use. The old song, "I don't get around much anymore," is descriptive today for many.

In cities, cars are used as much for crime protection as for transportation. In our cities, in "the land of the free and brave," people are afraid to walk. *Valet parking* is a euphemism for crime protection. When we think about livable communities, we think about green spaces, shopping and recreational opportunities, safe streets, and an effective and efficient transit system.

In the suburbs, where there is relative safety, streets are not designed for people; they are designed to get in and out by automobile. What do we have? Residences on curvy, dead-end streets (often cul-de-sacs), devoid of sidewalks, that feed into high-volume roadways leading to shopping malls.

More and more people in the United States are overweight, and much of the blame goes to the automobile way of life. We sit in cars, and we are deprived of physical activity, which is relaxing. We do not walk or ride a bicycle to school or work (as in the Netherlands where people are not obese).

The constitutional rights to freedom of movement and association are being curtailed by the very technological development that was heralded as implementing these rights. The automobile creates a style of life that extends distances—it disperses shops and dwellings—that in turn requires an automobile to get about. As these machines multiply, however, they immobilize even themselves. Traffic on the average moves more slowly today than in 1905.

Not only community life but family life is frustrated by the automobile. The outside has been lost as a place where people can spontaneously meet, talk, or sit or walk around with others. They are cooped up either at home or in a capsule. They take out their agony and frustration on their spouse or children. The relationship of the automobile way of life to divorce, child abuse, and crime should not be underestimated.

The automobile way of life made Solzhenitsyn react as fervently as he did to the labor camps. In a lengthy letter to Soviet leaders in the fall of 1973, he warned against the horrors of the automobile, and he urged the Kremlin not to encourage the emulation of that style of life. He wrote: “And all of you are old enough to remember the old cities, before the advent of the automobile—cities intended for people, horses and dogs. . . . In spring the sweet scent of gardens wafted over the fences into the streets.” He pleaded, “Do away with the automobile.”

People in the United States arriving at work no longer say “Good morning.” “What’s good about it?” I am asked by students just coming off the so-called freeway. The *freeway (expressway)* is verily a euphemism for a gulag archipelago. To be sure, it is marked by torture and frustration. It is more than enough reason to be angry.

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