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Auto-Destruct

Cars are ruining our lives. We should cut their use by 90% over the next 10 years

It's the last straw. Parked outside the hospital doors is a minibus with the engine running. The driver is playing on his mobile phone. The fumes are blowing into the atrium. I step up to his window and ask him to turn the engine off. He does so, grumpily. Then I notice he's wearing a health service uniform.

I walk through the atrium, down a corridor and into the cancer department (not for cancer this time, but to talk about reconstructive surgery). I look around the huge waiting-room and wonder how many of the people sitting here might be ill as a result of air pollution. I think of people in other departments: children with asthma attacks¹, patients being treated for road injuries, or suffering from a lifetime of inactivity, as wheels replaced their feet. And I'm struck by the amazing variety of ways in which cars have ruined our lives.

Let's abandon this disastrous experiment. Let's recognise that this 19th Century technology is now doing more harm than good, and plan our way out of it. Let's set a target to cut the use of cars by 90% over the next ten years.

Yes, the car is still useful, for a few people essential. It would make a good servant. But it has become our master, and it spoils everything it touches. It now presents us with a series of emergencies, which demand an emergency response.

One of these emergencies is familiar to every hospital. Pollution now kills three times as many people² worldwide as AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria combined. Remember the claims at the start of this century³, projected so noisily by the billionaire press: that public money would be better spent on preventing communicable disease than on preventing climate breakdown?

It turns out that the health dividend from phasing out fossil fuels is likely to have been much bigger. (Of course, there was nothing stopping us from spending money on both: it was a false dilemma).

Burning fossil fuels, according to a recent paper⁴, is now "the world's most significant threat to children's health".

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/jul/18/asthma-deaths-rise-25-amid-growing-air-pollution-crisis>

² [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(17\)32345-0/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(17)32345-0/fulltext)

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/sep/01/scienceandnature.highereducation1>

⁴ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29295510>

In other sectors, greenhouse gas emissions have fallen sharply. But transport emissions in the UK have declined by only 2%⁵ since 1990.

The government's legally binding target is an 80% cut by 2050, though even this, the science now tells us, is hopelessly inadequate. Transport, mostly because of our obsession with the private car, is now the major factor⁶ driving us towards climate breakdown, in this and many other nations.

The number of people killed on the roads fell steadily in the UK until 2010, at which point the decline suddenly ended⁷. Why? Because, while fewer drivers and passengers are dying, the number of pedestrians killed has risen by 11%. In the US, it's even worse⁸: a 51% rise in the annual death rate of pedestrians since 2009. There seem to be two reasons: drivers distracted by their mobile phones, and a switch from ordinary cars to sports utility vehicles. As SUVs are higher and heavier, they are more likely to kill the people they hit. Driving an SUV in an urban area is an antisocial act.

There are also subtler and more pervasive effects. Traffic mutes community⁹, as the noise, danger and pollution in busy streets drive people indoors. The places in which children could play and adults could sit and talk are reserved instead for parking¹⁰. Engine noise, a great but scarcely-acknowledged cause of stress and illness¹¹, fills our lives. As we jostle to secure our own road space, as we swear and shake our fists at other drivers, pedestrians and cyclists, as we grumble about speed limits and traffic calming, cars change us¹², enhancing our sense of threat and competition, cutting us off from each other.

New roads carve up the countryside, dispelling peace, creating a penumbra of noise, pollution and ugliness. Their effects spread for many miles. The deposition of reactive nitrogen from car exhaust (among other factors) changes the living systems even of remote fastnesses. In Snowdonia, it is dropped at the rate¹³ of 24kg per hectare per year, radically altering plant communities. Wars are fought to keep down the cost of driving: hundreds of thousands died in Iraq partly for this purpose¹⁴. The earth is reamed with the mines required to manufacture cars and the oil wells needed to power them, and poisoned by the spills and tailings.

A switch to electric cars addresses only some of these issues. Already, beautiful places are being wrecked by an electric vehicle resource rush. Lithium mining, for example, is now poisoning rivers and depleting groundwater from Tibet to Bolivia¹⁵.

⁵ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/776083/2017_Final_emissions_statistics_one_page_summary.pdf

⁶ <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-uks-co2-emissions-fell-for-record-sixth-consecutive-year-in-2018>

⁷ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/744077/reported-road-casualties-annual-report-2017.pdf

⁸ <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/money/cars/2019/02/28/pedestrian-safety-crisis-deaths-ghsa/2993321002/>

⁹ <https://trid.trb.org/view/886453>

¹⁰ <https://www.monbiot.com/2015/01/06/the-child-inside/>

¹¹ <https://ehp.niehs.nih.gov/doi/10.1289/ehp.1409400>

¹² <https://www.monbiot.com/2005/12/20/the-anti-social-bastards-in-our-midst/>

¹³ junc.defra.gov.uk/pdf/4Page_booklet_1_nitrogenDep.pdf

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/mar/11/usa.iraq>

¹⁵ <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/lithium-batteries-environment-impact>

They still require a vast expenditure of energy and space. They still need tyres, whose manufacture and disposal (tyres are too complex to recycle) is a massive environmental blight¹⁶.

We are told that cars are about freedom of choice. But every aspect of this assault on our lives is assisted by state planning and subsidy. Roads are built to accommodate projected traffic, that then grows to fill the new capacity. Streets are modelled to maximise the flow of cars. Pedestrians and cyclists are squeezed by planners into narrow and often dangerous spaces: the afterthoughts of urban design. If we paid for residential street parking at market rates for land, renting the 12 m² a car requires would cost around £3000 a year in the richer parts of Britain. The chaos on our roads is a planned chaos.

Transport should be planned, but with entirely different aims: to maximise its social benefits, while minimising harm. This means a wholesale switch towards electric mass transit, safe and separate bike lanes and broad pavements, accompanied by a steady closure of the conditions that allow cars to rampage through our lives. In some places and for some purposes, using cars is unavoidable. But for the great majority of journeys they can easily be substituted, as you can see in Amsterdam, Pontevedra¹⁷ and Copenhagen¹⁸. We could almost eliminate them from our cities.

In this age of multiple emergencies – climate chaos, pollution, social alienation¹⁹ – we should remember that technologies exist to serve us, not to dominate us. It is time to drive the car out of our lives.

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¹⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/30/worse-than-plastic-burning-tyres-india-george-monbiot>

¹⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/sep/18/paradise-life-spanish-city-banned-cars-pontevedra>

¹⁸ <https://www.fastcompany.com/40550701/how-the-humble-bicycle-can-save-our-cities>

¹⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/14/age-of-loneliness-killing-us>