

100th Anniversary of the Automobile

Kill The Car—No More Roads!

Fifth Estate Collective

1996

When eager crowds pushed through the turnstiles of Detroit's North American International Auto Show last winter, they had the look of fans at a championship game or dreamy-eyed kids thinking of presents under the Christmas tree. Although all of them must have been aware, at some level of consciousness, of the carnage, property damage, and pollution these icons of fantasy and desire create, they were there to ooh and aah the futuristic concept cars and the latest models.

1996 is the centenary of Henry Ford's first automobile, and Detroit, the so-called Motor City (even though only one percent of auto production currently occurs here), has seen a spate of official celebrations sponsored by car companies and the auto union. Michigan even issued special commemorative license plates.

Smash Out the Wall

The story has it that on June 4, 1896, young Hank discovered that his first car was too big to make it through the doors of the workshop where he had built it. Taking up a sledgehammer, he smashed out the wall around the door to provide an opening large enough for the vehicle. Since that time, the automobile has been doing more or less the same thing to the planet's ecosphere.

The car very rapidly became the central artifact of the individualistic subjectivity of modern industrial capitalist civilization. When they purchase a car, people aren't simply obtaining needed transportation, but pseudo-identity, and the illusion of freedom. Too bad if this fetish brings about unprecedented catastrophe for the life web of the planet—forests, waters, soils, the atmosphere—and for the half a million people currently killed globally every year in motor vehicle accidents, one third of them children. Motorized vehicles have also revolutionized war, making possible far greater panoplies of mass destruction.

As Jan Lundberg, editor of *Auto-Free Times* (magazine of the Alliance for a Paving Moratorium), notes, "We live in an autocracy. Future generations, the biggest victims, will be incredulous over our Dark Age. But both Clinton and Dole, as well as your friendly corporate news media, promise more jobs through cars—and cars through jobs."

According to Lundberg, "The so-called love affair with the car may be real for the would-be cowboy or phallic-driving Greedball, but really it's a case of lack of choice. Just look at the polls of motorists indicating they want more public transit. Or consider the criminal conspiracy that General Motors hatched with two oil companies, a tire and truck company to destroy 85 American cities' rail trolley systems earlier this century so we could get buses, pavement and freeways instead." One can, of course, "choose" not to own a car in many cities, as Lundberg, who lives in pedestrian-friendly Arcata, California, has done. But in a lot of places, for example, Detroit, there is no real choice. Like landless peasants eating the seeds for next year's crop, people have been driven to drive to survive, and driving, undermines their long-term survival.

The modern Driver a Drudge

Not only is the modern driver little more than a variety of drudge engaged in mindless (mostly unpaid) labor (“Drive to work, work to drive,” goes the saying), petroleum is the requisite, foundational resource fuel for industrial capitalism. Lundberg believes oil will run out in the near future, but we are not convinced. Corporations continue to announce the discovery of potential vast reserves in unlikely places all over the planet (Greenland, Southeast Asia, etc.). The fact is that some definitive, fossil fuel-generated ecocide will likely come long before the wells run dry.

We and the *Auto-Free Times* do agree that little or nothing is being done about the rapidly approaching cataclysm, either because of the inevitable consequences of an ongoing production-consumption economy, or because of the logical consequences of a possible depletion-collapse. Instead, even after the horrors of the Persian Gulf War, denial remains the name of the game, with some thirty million new cars produced each year looking for buyers. And nothing, not even the last remnants of relatively pristine wilderness, be they Ecuadorian rainforest or arctic tundra, are immune from this fever. The command may come from above, but it is supported by the thoroughly conditioned below: keep drilling. It doesn’t seem to matter, for example, that corporations could drain the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and get at best 400 days of gasoline for the U.S. fleet of 150 million cars.

Oil Wars and Chemical Spills

The car and car culture are integral to nearly every destructive pathology in modern capitalism. The more miles of road are built, the more all the interrelated, exponentially expanding ecological and social crises are manifest, from the mass extinction of species, to atmospheric collapse, Not only oil wars and massive oil and chemical spills, but every ongoing, undramatic disaster can be linked to it, among them a million or so animals killed every day by cars, the wantonly negligent abuse of land, the destruction of forests and farmlands, the oppressive alienation of exurban, car-generated pseudo-villages of strangers, a banal and empty personhood based on speeding from one blank, degraded place to another. Also, worsening air pollution and diminished human health: every car produced leaves fifty barrels of toxic wastes in the process of production, and that doesn’t count the car itself, which is also a toxic product.

Car Production Is Suicide

To mention just one other health effect, each year the Big Three automakers use more than ten tons of mercury—one of the most deadly substances released into the environment by industrial production—for “convenience light” switches in cars. This is not an example of people destroying themselves to meet what might be thought their immediate, basic needs—for example, using petroleum in agriculture and basic transport-of food and the like at least until some other more reasonable forms of sustainable life can emerge—but for the most trivial kind of conditioned comfort. It is a madness that must eventually take the world’s elites and their proletarians down together into oblivion—not through the mutual destruction of contending classes, as Marx once put it, but their mutual suicide through class collaboration to create a fundamentally pathological and unsustainable society.

Here in Detroit, one thinks of a particularly repulsive display in the latest Labor Day parade down Woodward Avenue. There, auto workers waved from a motorized float draped in American flags and showcasing a red Ford Mustang (provided by the company). The fast car, usually seen barreling alone through some stunningly beautiful desert at sunset, an image familiar to anyone who has ever seen a commercial for the automobile, is every mass man’s (and every mass woman’s) most pyrrhic psychic-sexual power fantasy. But the paved over cities of the future, contaminated and uninhabitable from what Henry Ford’s invention has done to them, are the real, far less beautiful, lifeless landscape awaiting us.

As Ivan Illich argues, social and ecological conversion demand economic and industrial inversion. People are going to have to find better ways to spend their time than making and driving cars. Let us reiterate our desire to

rid ourselves, once and for all, of that most representative creation of capitalism and everything that is most foul, imbecilic, and corrupt about it, most thoroughly destructive of the possibilities for genuine ecological and social harmony. Down with the Car Culture! Kill the Car!

FE Note: Though we have our differences with Jan Lundberg and *Auto-Free Times*, but we admire their project and support their idea of a paving moratorium. For a year's subscription/membership, which also covers occasional Road-Fighters' Alerts, send \$30 to Fossil Fuels Policy Action, P.O. Box 4347, Arcata, CA 95518. To inform the Alliance of any road building schemes in need of defeat, write or call (707) 826-7775, No More Roads!

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