

Ford Turns One Hundred

...and Car Culture Keeps Killing

Fifth Estate Collective

This year the Ford motor company celebrates its 100th anniversary. To proponents and critics alike, Ford is the perfect illustration of the corporate world-view. Henry Ford's rationalization of the assembly-line process was a great advance for industrial technology, and the mass production of the automobile led inevitably to the creation of a world—through auto-centric urban design and the creation of America's highway system—in which the automobile became an expensive necessity rather than a luxury.

Anticipating the current system of globalized, multinational capital, Ford pioneered the idea of opening factories around the world in order to create and control more markets for his product

As a wealthy industrialist, Ford was a natural enemy of organized labor. He used newspapers he owned to publish anti-Semitic essays, which were later published as a book. As is well known, Ford and Adolf Hitler held each other in great esteem.

Henry Ford helped finance Hitler's rise to power. In return, in August 1938, Hitler awarded Henry Ford the Grand Cross of the German Eagle, a Nazi decoration for distinguished foreigners. It was the first time the Grand Cross had been awarded in the United States and was a gift in honor of Henry Ford's 75th birthday. Henry Ford's portrait was prominently displayed on the walls of Hitler's personal office and a translation of Ford's anti-semitic writings sat on his desk.

More recently, the Ford motor company has suffered from the whims and excesses of the global capitalist regime it helped to install. Product recalls, consumer and employee lawsuits, and highly publicized quality problems have damaged the company. Ford has posted \$6.4 billion in losses and a roughly 60% decline in its share price.

Today, the company takes great pains to appear "green." However, environmental promises from corporate bureaucrats are hollow attempts when we consider the devastation that the automobile has visited on our planet

With roots in the motor city, we have always been especially vehement critics of the automobile. The following two excerpts from the FE archives are a taste of the anti-car theory that has appeared in these pages.

Excerpt from "Kill the Car—No More Roads!" *Fifth Estate*

[[<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/348-fall-1996/>][#348, Fall, 1996]]

The car very rapidly becomes 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.

The car and car culture are integral to nearly every destructive pathology in modern capitalism. The more miles of road that 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 the land, the destruction of forests and farmlands, the oppressive alienation of exurban, car-generated pseudo-villages of strangers, a banal and empty person-hood 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.

Excerpt from “Aberration: The Automobile,” *Fifth Estate*
[[<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/325-spring-1987/aberration-the-automobile/>][#325, Spring, 1987]]

The luxury that the automobile was meant to incarnate, which, like any other luxury, implied privilege and ease, was never intended for modern wage-earners; it was through a fascinating aberration that luxury has lent its name to the inconvenience of modern objects.

Motorists, who work to go to work, are doubly ill-treated, and are directly controlled by the police down to their least significant actions. The network of roads is the drivers' immense work camp. Feared as potential murderers, motorists personify to perfection the human model of a decadent society; they are obedient and aggressive; powerless and anxious to dominate; pathetic and narcissistic. They lack two virtues when operating their machines—sophistication and mastery. In effect, they exist only as representatives of the objects they put into motion.

As we approach our 40th anniversary, look for reprints from classic FEs in every edition.

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