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Greening the Media

The Insanity of a Car-Based Transportation System

Further evidence that American individualism accelerates environmental decline.

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Following up on our last column, we'd like to explore a bit further the way American individualism contributes to environmental decline. Here our example focuses on the national love affair with cars. Our provocative title derives from the thoughts of the eminent sociologist, Raewyn Connell, when pondering the major expansion of freeways during the 1970s.

But this choice of topic really came into focus with the horror of dozens of injuries caused last week by a driver in New Orleans, where one of us is currently living. During this special season of Mardi Gras, men could be seen alighting from their vehicles mid-morning, decanting vodka from large glass containers into small "water" bottles, then happily barreling along to the next drinking event before stumbling back to their cars. Meanwhile, riders dumped dozens of beads all around them, oblivious to the appalling environmental impact of the baubles and the labor exploitation that produced them.

We understand that car culture is a fixture of US life and the cornerstone of the nation's suburban planning and forced mobilization of a labor force that can't afford to live near their jobs, of gated-community fears, and the frail sense of individual autonomy and family security. It's also the perfect aspirational good for YOYO (you're on your own) America. The notion of the car as a cosmic sign of individual freedom dominates our airwaves, as per this Mercedes commercial, which juxtaposes the single dude with the satisfied boy and his girlfriend. Each guy has "his" very own type of C-Class to match his relationship status on social media.

But shouldn't the spectacle of alcohol-laden fragging of fellow revelers in New Orleans elicit the same level of outrage experienced by anti-gun analysts and activists confronted by the pious chorines of the Second Amendment? How did it become normal for people to shoot themselves and other people; and why do we accept the media-made reality that blames gun deaths on minorities when in fact it's mostly white people who want guns everywhere, all the time?

As a weapon of destruction, the automobile is also known for its carbon emissions. Regulators have been pressing auto makers to clean up their act for years, but this may change when former Oklahoma Attorney-General Scott Pruitt, Trump's newly confirmed pick for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), takes over. The media's lack of attention to his background has hidden the fact that he is utterly unqualified for the job, having been a puppet of fossil-fuel lobbyists who love him best when his intolerance for the EPA's core mission and work are on display. Even former President George W. "heck-of-job-Brownie" Bush finds Trump's antics appalling.

And it matters a great deal that the media buried this story.

Fiat Chrysler, GM, and Ford have jumped on the Trump bandwagon, hoping to halt new vehicle-efficiency standards in a pleading letter to the Administration. The state of California, which has an exemption from the FDA to set its own standards in excess of Federal ones, the inspiration to many other parts of the country, may

lose that power—Pruitt has refused to commit to states’ rights on this issue. Odd for a Republican, one might say.

Let’s look at the context to understand why we should worry about the Pruitt appointment.

The Union of Concerned Scientists tell us that “cars and trucks account for nearly one-fifth of all US emissions, emitting around 24 pounds of carbon dioxide and other global-warming gases for every gallon of gas. About five pounds comes from the extraction, production, and delivery of the fuel, while the great bulk of heat-trapping emissions—more than 19 pounds per gallon—comes right out of a car’s tailpipe.” The EPA (for now) advises that 90 percent of transportation fuel is based on petroleum, and our emissions have increased at a staggering 7 percent year on year since 1990. The average passenger car emits just under five metric tons of CO2 annually.

You can look for serious coverage of these facts from Fox News or the Washington Times, but all you’ll get are conspiracy theories and not much else.

So what can be done, given that dispensing with individual vehicles just isn’t going to happen, and we have a craven servant of the extractive sector atop the EPA?

One size doesn’t fit all, as Scientific American explains. The horrifying diseases that proliferate as air quality diminishes in cities across the globe must be mitigated in varying ways. The bowl-like topography of Mexico City and Los Angeles makes for different problems with car pollution from those encountered in London or New York. But some things are certain—deadly diesel cars must be banned immediately, and we need investment not only in mass transit but convenient pathways linking different forms of it.

And we must end the massive subsidies to vehicle owners by making them pay the cost of road repair and construction and public health incurred by their love affair with fossil-fueled mobility. The 8,000 schools that are within yards of freeways expose our children day after day, hour after hour, to toxic emissions. The people who do the emitting (drivers, manufacturers, and oil companies) should be liable, and gas and carbon taxes and toll-road fees are not yet high enough to pay for the social liabilities of a free-wheeling America. Raise those costs, and you reduce the amount people drive.

And we must support initiatives like those in California. Los Angeles has restored part of what was perhaps the world’s leading mass-transit system, to the point where people of color can take the subway to enjoy the beach rather than just endure a lengthy bus-ride to manicure West-side liberals’ lawns and floors. And the state’s mid-21st-century high-speed rail link north to south looks a reality.

The force of history is clear—our climate is changing; humans are making it do so; US residents have been overwhelmingly responsible; and drivers are among the most problematic. We can’t undo the past damage done, but we can mitigate it, and place its real costs where they belong. And we can build a new tomorrow, where it will be safer and easier for Louisiana revelers, Texas ladies-of-the manor, California commuters, and freeway children alike.

   

5 Comments

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