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## **A Proposal for a Post-automobile Future**



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Chapô

It is becoming apparent that widespread diffusion of autonomous vehicles and other innovative mobility technologies is going to take longer than champions have promised. The current pause provides an opportunity to reassess options and consider alternatives that have been relegated to the sidelines by the recent rush to embrace smart-city visions unlikely to enhance capabilities for human flourishing in a carbon-constrained world. This article considers how we might envisage and create urban futures that are substantially less reliant on automobiles.

Présentation longue

The last few years have been marked by breathless anticipation about an imminent transport revolution. Elon Musk and other heedless crusaders of autonomous vehicles have been baiting us into thinking that self-driving cars are on the verge of displacing human operators in their multitudes. <br /><br /> It now turns out that the fanatics have hoodwinked us once again. Rather than being just around the corner (Musk declared that the anticipated date was “sometime next year”), we have more recently learned that autonomous vehicles are unlikely to be a realistic option for at least two or three decades<sup>[^1]</sup>. Alas, the engineering challenges are greater than writing a few algorithms and fine-tuning the lasers<sup>[^2]</sup>. In hindsight, we should not be surprised by how this episode has unfolded because it conforms to a familiar pattern outlined by the sociology of expectations, a field that has developed over the past decade and focuses on how anticipations and visions shape innovation pathways<sup>[^3]</sup>. <br /><br /> Elaborating on the contours of this conceptual

framework, though, is not the current aim. Instead of talking about technology triggers and hype cycles, the intent here is to take advantage of the current “time out” which provides an invaluable occasion to reflect on whether we really want to rely on robotic automobiles. The present moment allows an intermission to consider if in our mad rush to embrace autonomous vehicles we have prematurely closed off other trajectories that ultimately provide humanity with better chances to flourish<sup>[4]</sup>. <br /><br /> Insufficiently considered to date has been whether we might enhance our prospects by largely eliminating cars, whether piloted by actual drivers or their computer-driven simulacra, from our lives. Phrased in somewhat different terms, does a post-automobile future offer a scenario that we should proactively consider<sup>[5]</sup>? <br /><br /> How might we embark on such an exercise? Let us start from a perspective that might not be immediately obvious, namely, that there are amidst the vast seas of contemporary motorization notable islands of car-free liberation. These uncolonized enclaves are not merely inadvertent havens but rather emancipated sanctuaries that could offer edifying possibilities of a better future. An informative thought experiment is to scan through one of the online lists of car-free places (a good place to start is the Wikipedia entry on the subject). If this is your first time to peruse such an inventory, you are apt to be surprised by the seeming limitlessness of the roster which scrolls on and on at considerable length. A related diversionary activity is to explore curated catalogues of the most popular tourist destinations that prohibit the use of automobiles. <br /><br /> What accounts for the apparent wonderment conferred by these destinations? Is it not curious that in a car-suffused world some of the most heavily toured locales are places that have renounced motorized travel? More specifically what is it about these sites that the denizens of automobile society find appealing, and are prepared to spend down their savings account to visit? It is probably true that most ordinary sightseers do not actively attribute their enjoyment of such places to the absence of cars. Regardless, we can at least partly ascribe the popularity of these destinations to the kinds of experiences that planners are able to create when automobiles are written out of the script of daily life. Disneyworld is an especially striking example. While the facility is arguably the most carefully constructed and assiduously managed car-free zone in the world, this achievement is fraught with incongruous contradictions. Visitors celebrate the amusement park as a venerated showcase of consumer culture, but one the sources of its success, ironically, is due to design strategies that purposefully eradicate consumerism’s most iconic vestige. <br /><br /> Could we be looking at a situation where there is a latent and insufficiently articulated public desire to

overcome automobile reliance and to chart a pathway toward a post-automobile future? It is typically difficult for insurgent practices to emerge because supportive institutional arrangements heavily favor incumbent systems<sup>[^6]</sup>. Novel routines (and let there be no mistake—living car-free meets this description) face profound difficulties because they lack a constellation of vested interests to effectively advocate on their behalf<sup>[^7]</sup>. Established infrastructures and lifeways have built up over decades and enable powerful supportive networks that impede competitors from gaining footholds that would enable them to build out radiating alliances<sup>[^8]</sup>. Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that public desires are frequently frustrated by what appear to be immovable sources of obstruction. <br /><br /> We thus are caught in a kind of trap where we—perhaps even a majority of us—are unable to have what we want. Students of innovation refer to these lamentable outcomes as “lock-in” which highlights how combinations of social and technical factors conspire to maintain suboptimal conditions long past their expiration dates<sup>[^9]</sup>. The most compelling part of this challenge is the Damocles sword that economically powerful companies hold over the political system. By amplifying anxieties about potential job losses, financial risks, and social instability, they are able to extract valuable concessions that are simply not in the toolbox of proponents of untested and still amorphous alternatives. <br /><br /> How then do we overcome lock-in as it pertains to the current transport system? We are unfortunately caught on the horns of a vexing dilemma. Climate scientists contend that we must annually reduce greenhouse-gas emissions by 13 percent if we are to avoid exceeding a 1.5° increase in average global temperature. Yet we must overcome three obstacles: extremely weak institutional capacity, lack of political enthusiasm for required investments in new infrastructural systems, and apparent absence of public willingness to embrace requisite behavioral changes. What is the likelihood of a seismic shift that impels sufficient movement across all three domains? Some observers contend that we can mobilize ourselves for a rapid transition—and indeed to work on sustainability problems effectively demands maintaining confidence that such a future is within reach<sup>[^10]</sup>. Perhaps it is just a temporary lapse of faith (a symptom of Trump Affective Disorder?), but these days I am not holding my breath. Unsatisfactory and impolitic though it may be, the best that we may be able to do for the time being is to plan for incrementally achievable transformation and to engage simultaneously in numerous experiments while trying to retain a measure of strategic focus. Such a muddling along strategy has a long pedigree<sup>[^11]</sup>, though it will surely mean that we will be forced to make very accelerated progress making emissions reductions once

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autonomous cars; future of mobility; sustainable mobility

Thématique

Cars

Ecological transition

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