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What future for the car?

By
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What future for the car?

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A former politician himself, Hans Jeekel, says politicians are not interested in tackling the long-term issues of car mobility and the underlying social evolution required to bring about change. They should start, he says, by getting rid of rush hour. I would like to talk about the future of car mobility in the next two decades, and for me there is a rather huge reason to do that. I am new in the field of academia; I published my thesis four years ago. The thesis was about the car-dependent society; it was in Dutch and I had the possibility to translate it into an English book with [publisher] Ashgate, *The Car-Dependent Society: A European Perspective*. I wrote that book because for me, car dependence was very important. I had a career as a director of the Transport Research Institute in the Netherlands (but more as a managing director), and in the field of environment, and I was a Member of Parliament. In that time our family grew up; I had to drive our children—our two daughters—to lots of places, and I don't like driving that much. So I asked myself, 'Why am I driving all the time?' Especially with kids, because I was accustomed to going out in the woods and playing everywhere, but my children were driven to a friend's, to hobbies, to everything in between. I started really thinking about what is happening to society related to cars and car use. So that's basically my orientation to write and to tell the story. Seven questions for the future of car mobility I asked myself seven questions when we talk about the future of car mobility, and I would also like to answer those questions.

1. Will the normal car remain?

The first question is looking at cars: will the normal car, the car that we all know now for years, remain? My answer is: probably. It's clear that the car has been a very resilient subject. The car has changed; has become more environmentally friendly; has become more energy-friendly; the car has lots of extra comfort in its style and in its set-up. But there's also an element of 'stagvation' in the car, the normal car. I have to explain that word, I think: 'stagvation' is a combination of 'stagnation' and 'innovation'. The stagnation is the fact that the car is more or less still doing the same sort of things as it did in the Fifties: that basically hasn't changed, the whole set-up of cars hasn't changed. But there was innovation: there was innovation in that small area of stagnation, we innovated a lot and the car industry innovated a lot. Probably there is a plea to make that they will keep innovating, getting more energy-friendly cars, and so on and so forth. That's about the normal, conventional car that we have now.

2. Will we be surrounded by electric vehicles?

The second question is again on cars: will electric mobility do the job? Electric mobility is a lot about hope; everybody hopes that electric mobility will be the future because it looks so nice, it looks so friendly. There is a sort of 'deus ex machina' element in electric mobility; we tried it already a century ago, there was electric mobility. Fifty years ago we talked about electric mobility and we are doing it again at this moment. But when you really look at what has to be changed in the field of infrastructure on electric mobility, that's really a lot. It's questionable whether the organisations that have to change together – the car industry, the infrastructure providers, the people that do the work on batteries, the research areas – whether they all fit together to make a good business case. And even when they make a good business case, let's be clear on one element that is often forgotten when we talk about electric mobility: and that's how long it takes before a car park is changed. In the Netherlands, and I think in France and in Germany, it now takes something from 14 to 16 years before a car park can be changed. Well that was before the crisis – with the crisis we now move with 30 percent less car purchases, which means that the time will be longer. Having said that, you will then talk about changing a car park towards electric mobility; it will take first the years to have a business case, and then something like 16 to 20 years, which means that somewhere around 2035 – 2040 we really have electric mobility.

3. Will “smart” cars overthrow “normal” cars?

The third one: will it be “smart mobility”? Smart mobility is about lots of IT in cars; cars that can speak to each other, cars that can speak with the road, cars that get lots of data, and basically the car becomes a sort of IT product. Well, possibly. But how many people really want to purchase such a car? That's also a question to be put, because basically cars are rather expensive still, and will become cheaper. But there is a big group of younger people that are basically looking for basic mobility and not for all that IT in cars because they already have the IT on their iPhones, on their smartphones, and they will have the IT everywhere else, so they don't need it on the dashboard. It's needed on the dashboard for the group of older people, but there you have a split because the elderly don't need all that travel information; they just go on journeys after congestion time and so on and so forth. They need safety, which is another story. The middle group, the middle-aged, they mostly drive lease cars, they really want IT cars. So here too it is questionable what the situation will be. To sum up those three questions: it's rather unclear what sort of cars we will be driving in the next 20 years. Is that important? Basically it's important what the future of car mobility would look like. Car mobility is now good for 80 per cent of all the miles and kilometres travelled in our Western societies, and we are facing lots of big problems. We are facing the problem of oil, oil delivery: will oil fossil fuel be there all the time in the next two decades, or will we have real problems with the delivery of oil? We have the problem of climate change: really by 2050 you need a 60 to 80 per cent reduction in CO₂ compared to 1995. All the scenarios that we have say, 'well, we can reach something probably like 50 per cent', but nobody has a story on how to reach 80 per cent or 70 per cent on CO₂, so that's a problem.

4. How to cope in a car-dependant society without a car?

The third problem is the car dependence, the car dependence that I wrote a book about, because people who have no car, for them it's now not that problematic but will become more problematic when car dependency grows – and car dependency is still growing. So the non-car households will face problems getting to services with their accessibility to all sorts of situations, that's rather clear. Well are there signs that we really change car dependency? Yes, a lot. We are entering a phase of saturation of the growth of car mobility in the last years. Especially in Germany you see the saturation; not that much in the Netherlands; France is more or less in between. Now can we reach a settlement with the situation of “peak car”, that the car will not grow in the number of kilometres travelled? What I find interesting is the whole situation of the attitude of younger people, who say, “yes, at a certain moment we need a car, we need a driving licence (getting a driving licence at 18 is slowing down at the moment), but we need a car. It may be a rather stripped car: we need a basic mobility; we don't need all the gadgets, all the comfort that our parents have in their car.” That's one element. The other element is

that they say “we don’t need to own the car; we can do far more in car-sharing”. It’s questionable whether that will stay as a big trend, or that the trend has something to do with the crisis, something to do with less money, and so on. It’s not completely clear, but it’s an interesting sign, I think.

5. Is multimodality so easy?

What is also interesting is the idea of multi-modality. Why are cars still important? Let’s do the exchange between public transport and cars, and also other modes. Basically, lots of academic people, lots of technicians, talk about it as relatively easy, but it’s not easy at all. Look at it from a financial point of view: you already have paid for your car, each year you pay a lot for your car. The car stands there so the car has to be used, like a refrigerator. On the other hand when you then go and say, “I’ll leave the car, today I’ll go by public transport”, you have to pay the whole price for public transport because you don’t get all those funny elements that people get who are going by public transport each and every day. So you basically pay twice, and when we are not able to succeed in overcoming the financial problems faced by multi-modality, then it is just another gadget, another idea to talk about, but not something that really changes car mobility in some way or another. Those are the big issues of today.

6. Is climate change at the core of politicians’ car-related agenda?

The sixth question is: are politicians really interested in all the material that I talk about? Well, basically not. That has to do with the fact that most politicians in our Western societies are aiming happiness and acceptance (more acceptance than happiness) with the big majority. The big majority is the middle classes: the middle classes are 60 to 70 per cent of their electorate, and they look at the middle classes. The middle classes only have one problem: They can always afford, some way, somewhere, a car – even two cars – but they have one problem and that is congestion. Basically, the politicians are not busy thinking about climate change for the 60 to 80 per cent; you don’t hear them very much about oil –they find that a far too difficult subject to really discuss and frame; you don’t hear them, quite often, with the non-car households, which are mostly (certainly not all) poorer households. But you hear them each and all the time about accessibility, framed in getting, as speedily as possible from city A to city B, and you hear them talking about congestion. Basically, congestion is only a problem because we have created such an arrangement in society that the timing of society is at the same moment: 8am to 10am, or 7am to 10am, you have rush hour because all the factories, all the offices, all the services start at that moment. We could do that in another way, but it seems to be rather difficult to do it in another way.

7. What if politicians tackled time-stress instead of congestion issues?

That brings me to a big element where I would like to see politicians coming in, and that’s timing of society. Time is very important; we are facing time-stress (at least the people that work), lots of households face time-stress. And the big helper in time-stress is always the car because with the car you can rush around pretty easily; the car is flexible and it is the only possibility for time-stress. Well, the bike in the Netherlands, in Denmark is also helping with time-stress, but other elements like public transport are not basically helping. So we need a sort of timing – and reframing of timing – in society: that’s basically, I think, very important. So my last question is: is it nice to be a researcher on car mobility at this moment? Yes, definitely, it’s definitely nice. It’s so unclear what the future will bring, that it’s very good to present material for societal debate on what sort of futures car mobility could have, related to the wishes of society and the wishes of the people. For me it’s important that we really start discussing this time issue, this issue that opening hours, closing hours, and the way people would like to live their lives – they just don’t fit any more.

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication

industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

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