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The war against the car

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“The whole world dwelt in cities”

> “Nearly all the towns in the country and almost all the villages had disappeared. Here and there only a gigantic hotel-like edifice stood amid square miles of some single cultivation and preserved the name of a town… The cities had drawn away the workers from the countryside with the gravitational force of seemingly endless work, the employers with their suggestion of an infinite ocean of labour… And as the complexity of the mechanism of living increased, life in the country became more and more costly, narrow and impossible…
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> “After telephone, kinematograph and phonograph had replaced newspaper, book, schoolmaster, and letter, to live outside the range of the electric cables was to live like an isolated savage. In the country were neither means of being clothed nor fed. Mechanical appliances in agriculture had made one engineer the equivalent of thirty labourers, there were no efficient doctors for an emergency, there was no company for loneliness and no pursuits… Instead there was a vision of city beyond city. Cities on great plains, cities beside great rivers, vast cities along the sea margin, cities girdled by snowy mountains…
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> “Everywhere now through the city-set earth the same cosmopolitan social organisation prevailed and everywhere, from Pole to Equator, the whole world was civilized. The whole world dwelt in cities.”

These extracts are from *The Sleeper Awakes*, by H. G. Wells, a novel published in 1898, but set in 2048 and capable of describing our civilisation in half a century’s time in words that are not only startlingly convincing in what they predict, but even more revealing in what they fail to take account of.

Wells’ world of cities for example not only uncannily anticipates the nightmare urban future so mindlessly extolled in ‘Towards an Urban Renaissance’, the 1999 report of the Urban Task Force chaired by Lord Rogers of Riverside, Chief Adviser to the Mayor of London on Architecture and Urbanism, but at the same time fails to anticipate the rise of private transport in the shape of the motor car and thus ignores the dis-urbanising re-colonisation of the countryside that it has brought about.

Because it presents an essentially nineteenth-century image of the city of the future, ‘Towards an Urban Renaissance’ shares this blind spot. It shows us that despite more than one hundred years of motoring and at least fifty years of purpose-made motorway construction – all of which has encouraged dispersal and decentralisation in living and working patterns all over the world – our official vision of the future remains stubbornly urbanised and historicised, compact and densely populated.

Ignored by our greatest futurist, yet going on to become the most successful product of the twentieth century, cars have nonetheless run into trouble in the twenty-first. Even though virtually everybody has a car and needs it for the maintenance of civilised life, cars have become criminalised. Now they are officially referred to, not as “my car”, or “my Renault”, “Audi” or “Ford”, but as THE CAR, a politically incorrect species ominously reminiscent of THE LAW.

Cars, it seems, have so proliferated in number that they offer more seats with seatbelts than there are people in the country, an achievement that, were it to be matched in bed spaces by the building industry would end the housing problem overnight, but which is seen as delinquent by a government whose transport policy is now directed towards minimising their use, ending what is sarcastically described as our ‘love affair’ with THE CAR, and beaming us back to the bus culture of circa 1955.

This policy is so counter to the grain of life as we have known it that it has produced a kind of stunned schizophrenia in the media, a split best summed up by a recent issue of the ruralist magazine *Country Life* that boasted one hundred and twenty pages of advertisements for houses in the country (accessible only by car), followed by an editorial denouncing cars but praising an experimental public transport scheme involving three buses in the vale of Pusey, followed by a wildly enthusiastic road test of a 240bhp two seat sports car costing £28,000, “but still £6,000 cheaper than a Porsche Boxter.”

If this is a fair summary of the view of the use of the motorcar held by affluent country dwellers, why does it combine total dependence on the automobile with virulent anti-car prejudice? The answer is that the editorial policy of *Country Life* is framed by urbanites, whilst its readership is rural.

The undeclared war

Urban dwellers believe that there is a conflict between a ‘humane’ built environment and the continued use of the car. They also believe that cars have had a negative influence on the design of towns and cities because it is thought that the built environment should be designed for less mobility, not more.

All of this reasoning misses the essential point about the difference between THE CAR and MY CAR, or YOUR CAR. The difference is summed up in the immediate loss of the existential dimension that occurs when we start talking about THE CAR. It is like talking about your children as THE BOY, or THE GIRL. A cruel objectivity – appropriate at best for the crew of a slave ship – that can never really be present in any relationship with any car, not even in the case of “the car blocking my driveway”, or any of the ensuing stages of road rage.

The semantics of the government’s injunctions to get on your bike, walk, or catch a bus all give the game away. The last one particularly, CATCH A BUS… It reminds you of CATCH A FISH, an expression that conveys not only the need for a great deal of patience but also the strong possibility of ultimate disappointment. MY CAR doesn’t have that problem. Unless you put speed bumps the length of the M4, it’s going to take me home.

For a species with a relatively short life span and a death rate of one hundred per cent, human beings spend a lot of time talking about what is ‘humane’ and what isn’t. Streets are supposed to be ‘humane’ while towers are not. Bright colours are supposed to be ‘humane’ while dark colours are supposed not to be. Transparency is ‘humane’ while opacity is not. Whales excepted, virtually all big things are not ‘humane’, while most small things are ‘humane’. Wood is ‘humane’ while steel and plastic are not. Security is not ‘humane’. Hand made objects invariably are. Machine made objects on the other hand are supposed not to be. Following this

erratic logic is not easy but the end is soon in sight. Clearly one of the most inhumane things imaginable is a big, dark coloured car with tinted windows and central locking.

If you don't believe this, check it out on page fourteen of the Chairman of the Urban Task Force's earlier book, *Cities for a Small Planet*. There you will find: "The car has become a mobile fortress, tinted windows disguising the identity of occupants, bullet-proof glass protecting them from armed attack, doors that can be instantly centrally locked from within creating ever greater alienation of the individual from the city."

Amusing, perhaps. But in its overstatement this judgment contains an understated truth. Cars *are* antithetical to cities, or at least to the mythology of cities that so many people profess to believe in today. Cars *rescue* people from cities so they are in conflict with urbanity – and were for the whole of the last century. Cars and cities are different species fighting for control of the same territory. They are at war, locked in a death struggle, the city an elephant, its enemies an army of ants in the guise of cars.

The city fights back

THE CAR is alien to the city because it represents an alternative scale of interior space for living and because it is a means of escape, just as a fire escape is a means of escape from a burning building. The easier ingress and egress to the city is made by road, the more the car can control the city, literally capturing its space, consuming its air, draining its life blood and spiriting its treasure away.

The harder ingress and egress are made, the less power the automobile has – although, even when stationary it still has advantages. Unlike passengers in overcrowded commuter trains, cars locked in a traffic stream may be temporarily immobilised but are still inalienable rooms with a seat for everyone, spacious, comfortable air conditioned recliners in the vast electronic chat room so accurately described by Brian Sewell (*London Evening Standard*, 17 July 2001) when he compared driving in traffic with travelling in the Underground:

"The Underground is congestion far worse than anything suffered by the motorist in the luxurious leather seat of his air conditioned capsule, his jacket on a hook, his radio playing the world's news of the day, a disk soothing his ear with Schubertian melody, a drink at hand in the cup holder that all new cars provide, a telephone at the ready to transmit his every trivial thought to home and family. He may be moving at a snail's pace, but he is not standing jammed between his fellow passengers, feeling their body heat, sharing their hot breath, his clothing drenched in sweat…"

In this country almost all our towns and cities date from before the automobile age so they could no more have been designed for cars than Stonehenge could have been designed for astronauts. The topography of towns and cities, together with their original street patterns, invariably originated out of the needs of water transport. Purpose built motor roads only came onto the scene millennia later. They missed out the canal age and the railway age, even to some extent the air age – as can be seen from the motorway network's original 1950s routing from city to city, extended to ports and airports only as an afterthought in later years.

Taken as a whole, over the twentieth century the influence of the car upon the city has been less than the influence of the city upon the car. Indeed, there has in this country only ever been one period when the car became the driving force in town and city planning, and that was in the 1960s, when serious attempts were made to make room for elevated urban motorways, and predict and provide parking everywhere, roof top and underground, public and private. This strategy ended abruptly with the financial crises of the 1970s and the collapse of Keynesian

public spending. Ever since then the episode has been virtually disowned by city planners in favour of a bollard culture, ragbag of art historical mumbo jumbo about the value of old buildings, strategic views, walks, vistas and so on.

The abandonment of the London Motorway Box in the early 1970s represented the final defeat of the invasion of the city by the motor car. In the end the city had won by attrition, deploying the administrative slowness of infrastructural work in built-up areas, soaring house prices and the cost of compensation in a masterly fashion.

With the coming of the present government new anti-car weapons like scare stories about air pollution, the rising incidence of asthma and the imposition of six per cent over inflation annual fuel hikes joined bollards, speed bumps, bus lanes, speed cameras and even more direct means of starving cars of road space. But the real penalty has been paid by the victims of urban concentration, the workers who add four months a year to their working lives by being forced to travel long distances to their jobs and spend up to a third of their take home pay funding their daily commute into London.

The best of the city to the countryside

Make no mistake, if THE CAR remains THE CAR and is not allowed to gestate into such useful subspecies as exclusively urban forms of PRIVATE TRANSPORT, this will be a war to the death that will only end when – in the case of London – the M25 becomes a neo-medieval city wall within which cars are no longer allowed.

As the 1960s showed, with the best will in the world, urban infrastructure is infinitely slow to build or change and no crash programme can ever match the speed of political expediency. Politically it will always be easier to blame the traffic than to dismantle the city to make room for it – which is what our Victorian ancestors would have done. Technically it will always be easier to modify and improve THE CAR than modify and improve its infrastructure – hence the huge off-road vehicles that are nowadays advertised for their ability to negotiate speed bumps effortlessly.

It is entirely possible that within cities the mass motoring experience of the twentieth century will dwindle to the level of the motor racing games already to be seen in every motorway service area amusement arcade – complete as these parlours now are with racing seats and steering wheels, full harnesses and operable controls, all securely bolted to the floor.

But defeat or trivialisation in the cities is not the same as defeat in the world outside them. Just as the car represents an alternative spatial experience and a means of escape from the city, so does it represent a means of transporting urban convenience to the countryside. Today, despite New Labour's opposition to THE CAR, Ford Focus man and woman can drive the length and breadth of England, or penetrate deep into continental Europe in a single day. They can live in Oxford and work in Southampton or vice versa. More importantly they have learned to live in the country. Today country life, ten, fifteen or fifty miles from the nearest town or city is entirely possible with a car – and entirely impossible without one.

It seems to have dawned on no one that there is a deep irony in the spectacle of the government offering farmers money to get out of farming because there is no future in it, whilst at the same time trying to persuade the house building industry to erect sixty per cent of its new dwellings on sites within cities. Yet, as the wine lakes and butter mountains of the Common Agricultural Policy first demonstrated, and the take-up on set-aside later confirmed, there is an enormous and growing surplus capacity in agriculture – and surplus capacity in agriculture means more and more uneconomic farms and unused land.

Before World War II farming did well to produce a tonne of produce for every acre under cultivation. Within forty years science quadrupled those yields. In the last ten years genetic modification quadrupled them again. Now there is plenty of room to build as well as farm in the countryside. Is this not where housing should be built instead of in inner London where there is so little space to build anything that house and flat prices are rising at fifteen to thirty per cent a year? Surely that is a pressure cooker housing policy masquerading as enthusiasm for city life.

In the broadest possible sense every significant development in science, technology and society over the last century has strengthened the centrifugal dispersal of human settlement and weakened its centripetal opposite. Only governments, forever dedicated to throwing good money after bad by opposing every irresistible trend, offer any encouragement to the chimera of an Urban Renaissance. Everything else points the other way.

The whole idea of compacting the entire population into cities and “ending the love affair with the motor car” while the countryside turns itself into a picturesque wilderness is absurd. Urban concentration is not efficient, it is expensive, inflexible, undemocratic and dangerous. Low-density networks of human habitation make sense of information technology, energy efficiency, distribution systems and – most important of all – cars.

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