

1. Opinions



Let's plan for the final days of cars

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In France, cars represent almost 40 million driver's licenses, and 80% of driven kilometers. They're extremely popular, despite the many negative impacts on our lives that are sometimes dramatic and often irreversible. Illustrations © Les Infotographies

Real impacts

In France, cars represent almost 40 million driver's licenses, and 80% of driven kilometers. They're extremely popular, despite the many negative impacts on our lives that are sometimes dramatic and often irreversible.

First of all, air pollution, from which motorists themselves are, ironically, the first to suffer, as in their cars they are exposed to pollution rates up to five times higher than those of the air outside. Each year in France, more than 45,000 premature deaths are caused by air pollution: this equates to the population of Saint-Malo disappearing every year. Road accidents add to this toll: every day, in France, 7 people die in car crashes or accidents involving a car. The cost of purchasing and maintaining a car also weighs considerably on household budgets: 6,000 euros a year! A very expensive object, that is often stationary, and therefore useless by definition 95% of the time. The car imposes its inconvenient presence, but also its speed and pace. It leaves little room for other practices such as active modes (walking, cycling...) and wandering. It allows little room for the elderly, for children.



Prisoners of a system

As well as being popular, it is also necessary. Automobile dependence, for certain journeys, for certain living environments, is indisputable. This is true not only in periurban or rural areas, but also in small and medium-sized cities: the location of industrial and/or commercial areas and warehouses now leads people to commute from periphery to periphery, where connecting public transport is almost non-existent. These motorists have no choice. But we don't want to see it.

The choice - or precisely, the lack thereof - to use one's car stems from very concrete and immediate needs: to pick up the children from school on the way home from work, and before going to the supermarket to do the shopping for the week. Let's stop the moral lecturing: a change in individual behaviors won't, by itself, make a difference. We've found ourselves trapped in a system built around oil, speed, and cars - a system we neither wanted nor chose. A system that pushes us to travel ever further, ever faster, ever more often. A system that contributes to the homogenization of our landscapes, to urban sprawl and to the specialization of territories. All in all, a system that conditions and constrains our lifestyles and the way we move every day.

A system, above all, whose climate impact can no longer be ignored. It's becoming imperative to make real systemic change, geared towards reducing the number of vehicles on the road and the number of trips people make. And while this long-term process needs to begin now, the urgency of the situation requires that we implement high-impact measures based on the tools we have today, even if - and this is the case with the electric vehicle - they are not miracle solutions.



How can we act right now?

Governments, clearly, have a role to play. The Mobility Orientation Act currently being voted in France on in the Assembly provides for a ban on motor vehicles by 2040. But why should we want to throw away fully functional vehicles, rather than just replacing their engines? Let's avoid a huge waste of raw materials and energy.

What about effecting change through companies? Today, nearly 40% of new vehicles produced in France are destined for corporate fleets. The first step would be to force these companies to have more electric and diverse vehicles, including scooters and electric bikes.

It is now clear that the solution will not come from car manufacturers, no matter how much they promote a green rhetoric in their public relations. In a recent report, the NGO Greenpeace denounced the air pollution caused by SUVs and 4x4 vehicles, which are heavier and larger than average. Let's ban their production, in favor of smaller, lighter, less polluting vehicles.

We are being told to "Stop using your car," "Think about the planet," "Change your behavior." But at the same time we are instructed to buy the latest SUV - that's what the ad tells us to do. "Drive freely in a city miraculously free of traffic jams, in incredibly unspoiled natural landscapes."

Let's get rid of these conflicting injunctions. And let's act now.

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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