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AUTOSTOP

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AUTOSTOP

Contribution by Ivan ILLICH and Jean Robert
to a Symposium on bicycle freedoms in Berlin,
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We want to tell a story that reflects some nonsense about our way of life, and that story is about traffic. We tell the story because we believe that tomorrow morning all could live in a more quiet and perhaps even bicycle-centered society if only people believed that modesty can guide political choice.

Reasoning shows that transport can enhance freedom of movement only within the limits in which one can renounce it. Today, such renunciation is barely viable in a society where the traffic jam has become paradigmatic for all kinds of consumption. Transportation, public or private, carries inevitable consequences. Beyond a certain threshold, it diminishes personal mobility in proportion to more passenger miles generated. Thus transportation is a monument to the basic experience of the age. The more refined and more integrated the transportation system, the more we live in a society of morning joggers tied down during the rest of the day.

Starting with this insight, we invite you to a mental experiment. By limiting the compulsory auto-disempowerment produced by transportation, a society can increase the freedom of movement enjoyed on foot or bicycle.

Not so long ago, everyone knew that the world was accessible. And until quite recently, the "third world" lay within reach of their feet for most of its inhabitants. People could trust their feet, experience their world. And for several decades now, U.S. border guards have admitted their helplessness as they are overrun by auto-mobile transgressors - moving on foot.

In the 1950s, Mexico City was already a metropolis of nearly three million inhabitants, with some forty plazas containing popular markets. Most of these markets were on the same spot where Cortez had found them 450 years earlier. In any given week, less than one out of every hundred persons moved beyond the border of their respective barrio. Since then, the population of the city has increased seven-fold. Engineered traffic patterns tear neighborhoods apart; multi-lane, one-way throughways separate people into artificial ghettos; a high proportion of the population is the boxed-up victim of daily, long-range transport - there is an efficient subway. Such transport encloses students as well as pensioners, employees as much as women needing pre-natal tests. Five million persons - according to official count - must travel daily to reach inaccessible places.

Historically, walking was never an act of pure leisure. At times, it could be dangerous, painful, disappointing, but at other times adventuresome, enjoyable or exhilarating. But that is not the issue. What counts is that using one's feet came at no cost. Of course, everyone had to find the pennies to pay the ferryman. A mule or carriage were confined to the rich. Generalized mobility was enhanced by social virtue: tolerance of the outsider, hospitality, charity and conviviality at resting places. For the majority, these were more important than inns. People lived in the experience that the place on which they stood was a place they had reached with their feet.

We would like to ask a question: What does it mean that so very little of that which enabled and graced freedom came in the nature of a commodity? Now modern engineers claim that feet are underdeveloped means of self-transportation! Indeed, what equipped our forefathers was inexpensive, from staff and sandals to cloak and sack; later, the bicycle. Distances, when they were counted, were measured in days; they were perceived as life time, not as watch time. There was nothing like the concept of a passenger mile on land until the postal coach appeared, late in the 18th century; and then the railroad in the early 19th.

The railroad created the minute and the fare that measured the time cost of bridging passenger miles. These concepts are basic and acquire full validity with motorized traffic. Only on the basis of such assumptions could the locomotion of human beings be made into a commodity. And this commodity - traffic - was produced by employed workers, whether railroad men or chauffeurs, proto-passengers making up the consumers. All this changed with Henry Ford's Model T. This innovation brought the news that mobility would be an industrial product to be enjoyed only through unpaid labor. Each employee now had the "privilege" of purchasing a car. With this investment, he had to deliver his own work force to the factory door. For many, then, the car became the condition for selling themselves on the labor market, to purchase household needs, to educate their kids, to visit their aged parents.

For twenty-five years we have reflected on transportation because we see in it an Ideal Type of post-industrial commodities: a synthesis of installment payments, operating costs, insurance premiums, and unpaid labor to make the investment actually useful. Shadow work - the unpaid, time-consuming, disciplined, risky improvement of a commodity to make it pay - became a foundation of modern existence. It is quite surprising how completely this self-enslavement has remained a blind spot among the first two generations of car owners. But we now see that a powerful spell has been cast over them. A mixture of fashion, vanity, commodity fetishism, and greed sharpened by clever, no-holds-barred advertising created the fantasy of the automobile as a liberator - from schedules, waiting lines, limited horizons, pre-established routes. For most of those born before 1970, the auto is still an enticing symbol of personal freedom through an industrial product. But for a later generation, this is a transparent oxymoron. Rarely does one find the distance between two generations so great.

Now let us come to our story. And the reader can decide whether it is a serious project or a cautionary tale. The story begins with a judgment, one passed down by the Supreme Court. According to the Court, the use of tax-supported roads shall be limited to vehicles in public service. In effect, this means that every car with a free seat must stop when asked. To implement the decision, Congress passes a law that restricts licences to drivers who produce passenger-miles and earn income by doing so. No Samaritans needed. Henceforth everyone who is not a driver will be chauffeured, and all drivers are available as chauffeurs.

Is the unthinkable feasible? Can a simple judicial judgment turn the way we now think about economic "goods" topsy turvy? Without any technical innovation, can a society transform its social and physical environment? Can a small change in the character of transportation lead to a moral reevaluation of place?

How imagine the details? Every citizen receives a Hack-Card. If a would-be passenger signals a passing car with an empty seat, the driver must stop. The car contains a computer with as many slots as there are seats. For the construction of the black box, ways of billing the patrons and paying the drivers, Toshiba and the IRS are obviously competent. Or let Sprint instruct highway departments on the management of channels (they have experience following the court decision on the monopoly formerly enjoyed by Bell Telephone).

Let charges be entered on one's tax return (which could make travel cheap and/or free for those with limited incomes) or let them be sent out like the phone bill today. Place regular waiting stops where people signal their direction, and where every passing car with an empty seat must stop if hailed. Make them cozy or warm on lonely corners, and shade them where the sun beats down. Let the people themselves police their waiting lines, as they have learned to do gently in Havana or Mexico. They can report any vehicle which runs a stop. If muggers are rampant in the area, what better place to be but in a car, with one's Hack-Card signalling the whereabouts for the police?

For those who see a project here, there are many practical questions to be examined. For example: How much would traffic accelerate by eliminating tie-ups ? How much space would be created for pedestrians and bikes? How many would renounce transportation, and when? And who would finally be able to afford it? How many new jobs would be created for drivers as against those lost in the car industry? What social consequences would result from discontinuing company and government fleet cars? Could one limit the privilege of the policeman to step ahead in line when in uniform? What would be the ecological impact? And would such a decision accelerate the transition to less polluting vehicles? How much would be saved in public investments? How quickly could this saving create the funds to cover the societal "loss" through fewer cars being manufactured, purchased and driven? How face taxi driver unions when they try to challenge the Supreme Court decision? How tell a better story to open up "the sociological imagination"?

If this is just a cautionary tale, why do we have the experience of people getting angry when we tell it? Are they angry because we do not propose a new technology? Nor defend an ideology? This seems but a simple proposal for thoughtful consideration.