

The Importance of the Car to the Modern Economy

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Who needs roads?

Do roads harm everyone's interests? Liberal critics of the road and motor industry add to the list of woes above the following points:

1. Roads are becoming increasingly less cost effective; the cost of 'improving' them is going up.
2. And as soon as new roads are built and old ones expanded, they fill up because increased road transport is encouraged. Congestion is therefore not improved and businesses pay the cost of traffic jams.
3. Finally the liberal critics argue that particular car/road capitals are cutting 'everyone's' throat in the long run because 'we' can't carry on indefinitely using resources in this way.

But, although particular capitals tend not to operate in terms of the future interests of capital in general, there is no reason in principle why a 'greener' capitalism can't be developed. (In fact, it is being developed right now to recuperate the developing 'green rage' into consumer channels.) So why has the car been preferred to more eco-friendly (less ecologically disastrous might be a better term- invasive DTEF! ed.) alternatives, such as rail transport? Tracing the development of the motor car industry — and thus road expansion — historically, we can observe a number of forces at work.

Capital needs transport

To put this history of car industry expansion in perspective, however, we need to point to capital's general requirements. Capital is a relationship which necessarily seeks to expand itself. Capital is, essentially, the boundless expansion of value (i.e. of alienated labour) — it is the need and striving to achieve such indefinite expansion. In other words, the economy must expand or die! Thus one important indicator used by economists to gage the health of an economy is percentage growth in gross national product.

From the capitalist's perspective, one way of creating profit (i.e. surplus-value) more quickly, and hence speeding expansion, is to reduce turnover times; the capitalist always seeks a way of producing goods more quickly and getting them to market more quickly.

Expansion and faster turnovers require efficient transport. Raw materials need to be moved from their source (e.g. mines, farms etc.) to factories to make new commodities. These commodities in turn may need to be transported to further factories to modify their use-value and value before they reach shops. Finally they are transported to shops in order to realize their values in the realm of consumption.

The need for the road-building programme is the need of an alien power. Roads are not simply for moving commodities about per se. Capital needs more roads simply because the motor industry still represents a key locus for its expansion.

As it has grown to serve the needs of particular capitals, the motor industry has developed new needs and desires of its own — desires which draw their energy, vampire-like, from the energy of its host, the proletariat, and which have pushed the motor industry into a pivotal position in its own right in developed economies. But how has it been able to do this?

Railways and the rise of industrial capitalism

A hundred years ago it was not roads, but the railways which were the dominant capitalist mode of land transport. Railways were the iron sinews that had drawn industrial capitalism to its feet. Indeed, the spread of railways across the globe was then synonymous with the spread of industrial capitalism.

Providing the rapid and efficient transport of people and commodities over vast distances, railways had made possible the concentration of production in factories centred in large industrial cities. Whereas before production had been dispersed in traditionally based cottage industries and sold for the most part in local markets, the railways had made it possible to concentrate and totally reorganise production in huge factories that could supply both national and world markets. In this way the railways had facilitated the destruction of the old craft skills, which had given workers a large degree of control over their labour, and had thereby served to impose the real subsumption of labour under capital.

With workers concentrated in factories under the direct organisation and supervision of the capitalist and his functionaries, the railways provided the means for the further subordination of the worker to capital that came with the mechanisation of factory production. Mechanisation of production required huge quantities of steel to build and maintain machines and even greater quantities of coal to power them. It was the railways, that are so perfect for hauling bulk materials rapidly over large distances, which provided the vital means of transport without which mechanisation of production would have been impossible.

Yet the railways did not merely make industrial capitalism possible, the railways epitomised early industrial capitalism. The mechanical regularity of the machine that reduced the movements of the worker to its own rhythms in the factory were replicated in the punctual regularity of the railway timetables that confined movement of people to the discipline of precise departure times. The railways after all were the mechanisation of transport.

Having facilitated the development and concentration of industrial capitalism, by the end of the nineteenth century the railways had come to stand alongside iron and steel and coal as one of the central pillars of monopoly capitalism. But with the turn of century this era of capitalism entered into a period of grave crisis whose resolution saw the decline of railways and the rise of the motor industry as a central locus of capital accumulation.

The crisis of monopoly capitalism and the decline of the railways

The development of the factory system and the growth of huge industrial cities brought with it the emergence of the urban industrialised proletariat that stood opposed to capitalism. But capital was not simply confronted by the sheer numbers of the working class that were now concentrated together in the factory and the city but also by their growing power within production. Although the old craft skills that had given the traditional artisan control over his work had been swept away by industrialisation, many industrial workers had become able to define, develop and defend new industrial skills that were vital to the industrial production process. Such skills were evident on the railways as any other industry. The management could not hope to understand the complexities and idiosyncrasies of driving and stoking a steam engine any more than they could hope to develop the finely tuned ear of the wheeltapper.

In response to the growing power of the working class, the bourgeoisie pursued a policy of divide and rule. While attempting to repress the demands of the mass of unskilled workers, skilled workers were conceded higher wages while their limited control over production came to be tolerated. To pay for such concessions capital either had to cut the costs of raw materials by increasing the exploitation of the colonies or else by exploiting their monopoly positions to push prices up at the expense of non-monopoly and pre-capitalist sectors of the economy.

In most industries monopoly prices could only be obtained by restricting domestic production and thus severely limiting the scope for domestic capital accumulation. Consequently, this excess of both commodities and capital drove nationally based capitals to find foreign outlets. With the drive to export capital and commodities, and the need to secure cheap raw materials to cut production costs, international competition and imperialist rivalries intensified.

By the first decade of this century this intensification of international competition, together with the growing power and militancy of the unskilled working class, had reached the point where the capitalists were forced to begin to reconsider their compromise with the skilled workers. However, attempts to cut skilled wages and to wrestle back control over the production process through the introduction of Taylorism (i.e. scientific management through time and motion studies etc) only served to increase the militancy of skilled workers who now in increasing numbers began to flock to the banners of revolutionary syndicalism under the slogan of ‘workers control of production!’.

With the mutual intensification of international competition and class conflict capitalism faced a severe crisis which threatened its very existence. The question of the day had become that of, war or revolution!

In 1914 war broke out and engulfed the capitalist heartlands of Europe. Three years later, after millions had been slaughtered in the trenches, revolution broke out in Russia which then sparked a wave of revolutionary movements across mainland Europe. After several years of bitter and intense struggles the revolutionary workers movements in Europe were both defeated and defused one by one by social democracy, fascism and stalinism. Yet despite such defeats, it was not until 1945, after another bloody world war, that capitalism was able to resolve the crisis of monopoly capitalism and establish the basis of a new era of accumulation centred around what has become known as the post-war settlement.

The post-war settlement and the rise of the car

With the class compromise of the post-war settlement, which was established in varying forms throughout the advanced capitalist nations, the working class, in effect, abandoned all hopes for the end of capitalism and relinquished much of its existing control within production. In return the working class was offered the welfare state, the promise of stable full employment and rising living standards.

Yet the post-war settlement, and with it the post-war boom, was only made possible on the basis of a new strategy and mode of accumulation — Fordism. Fordism was based on the mass assembly line production of standardised consumer goods which was made possible by the replacement of the skilled worker by semi-skilled assembly line workers, that then allowed management detailed control over the labour-process. With such detailed control, assembly line production opened up a huge potential for the application and refinement of ‘scientific management’

and automation which together opened the way for an enormous growth in the productivity of labour.

This scope for raising labour productivity meant that, within the bounds of increased productivity, both wages and profits could rise at one and the same time. With rising wages, and the relative secure employment offered by Fordist production methods, Fordism was then able to provide the basis for mass consumption which was a necessary condition for its own reproduction. The mass production of consumer durables created the effective demand for such consumer goods by creating a relatively prosperous working class.

The analysis of Fordism, and the institutions such as collective bargaining and Keynesian demand management that arose to ensure that the mass consumer demand was able to match the expansion of mass production, has been dealt with in great detail elsewhere. Our main concern here is to stress the centrality of the motor industry for Fordism.

Fordism, as its name indicates, was first pioneered by the Ford motor company in the 1920s, and further experiments were made in Nazi Germany with the development of the Volkswagen (the peoples car) and the building of the Autobahns across Germany in the 1930s. As such the motor industry became the model for whole number of consumer durables that followed its lead, such as vacuum cleaners, washing machines, hi fi's etc

But the car was not merely the first in a line of consumer durables to be produced by Fordist production methods it was also the foremost. After housing the car has become the biggest purchase an ordinary consumer is likely to make, being the equivalent to several months wages. Furthermore, the production of a car involves a wide range of industries ranging from rubber, steel, plastic, electrical, oil together with support industries such as road construction, advertising and finance. The broad range of such economic linkages has meant that large and diverse sections of the modern economy have become dependent on car production to such a degree that car production has become an important economic indicator in its own right. As has been said, 'when General Motors sneezes America catches cold!'

But it not simply at an economic level that the car, as the exemplar of Fordist production, has served to sustain the post-war settlement and the partial truce in the class war. The car has played a prominent role in altering the life and conceptions of the working class which has served to consolidate the social and ideological conditions of the class compromise established within the post-war settlement.

With the post-war reconstruction of bombed cities throughout Europe the opportunity was taken by capitalist state planners to break up the old working class communities and relocate the working class in new tower blocs, new towns and 'Garden cities' and in the middle class suburban areas that had grown up in the inter-war era. This dislocation of the working class from the location of production was at first made possible by the development of public transport, but its further development was consolidated by growing car ownership.

This relocation of the working class, which was increasingly made possible by the spread of the car, was in many ways a major advance for many who were able to escape their old slums and claustrophobic communities for modern housing with inside toilets etc. But it was a gain that had its cost. With the break up of the old communities came the break up of the old working class solidarity to be replaced by the isolated individualism of the new sterilised housing estates. Neighbours are now never seen as they rush past in the motor cars and as neighbourhoods become more dangerous and unpleasant due to increasing traffic more and more people retreat into the comfort of their houses.

Thus the car has become a bubble, a sealed environment, a shield from the picket line; it renders relations more distant in the way that public transport cannot. For businesses, motor transport has become an ideal way to employ scab labour. Potential militancy by railway workers, who could gather together and organise co-ordinated shut-downs at stations and depots, preventing vast amounts of commodities and raw materials moving, could be bypassed with a fleet of individual contract lorry drivers. The lorry has almost become identified with the scab, particularly since the role of TNT in the News International dispute.

Thus although the working class is still concentrated in urban areas this threat to capitalism is mitigated by containing the working class as consumer citizens esconed in their little metal boxes, forever moving past one another in the incessant movement of traffic.

The car and bourgeois freedom

Crossland, the great labour politician of the 1950s who saw in the post-war settlement the advent of socialism, once said 'after one man one vote: one man one car!'. Clearly for the post-war ideologues, from Crossland to Thatcher the car epitomises freedom and democracy, and we would say indeed it does!

For the individual car ownership does offer a leap in freedom and opportunity. The freedom to go where and when you want. A freedom undreamt of for working class people of earlier generations. Indeed, for man learning to drive is the major break from the stifling restrictions of the family and the first step to adulthood.

Yet this increase in individual freedom serves to reduce the freedom of everyone else. Other car drivers now face that much more car congestion and delays; pedestrians, particularly mothers and children, become more restricted by the fear of death or serious injury by one more car; while people suffer more traffic noise and that much more pollution.

The freedom of movement offered by the car becomes increasingly a formal freedom, a representation of freedom, as everywhere becomes the same as it is tarmaced and polluted to make way for the car. As the car becomes the norm, the freedom of the car becomes a necessity, as the mundane acts such as shopping becomes impossible without access to a car. This has already become the case in Los Angeles and is rapidly approaching with the development of out of town super stores.

In casting us as consumer citizens the freedom of the car, like all bourgeois freedoms throws us into a war of all against all where other car drivers serve as merely obstacles and restrictions to our own inalienable right of movement. This inalienable right of movement consequently demands the duty to obey the highway code and traffic laws which is in turn enforced and guaranteed by the state. Through policing the roads and by giving an open ended commitment to provide new road space, the state ensures the bourgeois freedom of movement.

Yet as the volume of traffic grows at a rate faster than road construction the car has nowhere to go (except to take its owner to work) but yet has everything to say. The car has long since become less of a mere means of transport and more a means of identity. In curtailing the possibility of direct communication the car has to say what we are for us. Whether it is that we are upwardly mobile or a conscientious environmentalist the car says it all.

Although the working class offensive of the 1960s and 1970s which threw the Fordist mode of accumulation into crisis and forced a major restructuring of capital, this has not affected the

continuing centrality of the car. Indeed the associated struggle of women and youth against the old patriarchal family structure which found its modern material expression in the family farther driven car designed with a wife and 2.4 kids, has long since been recuperated in the drive to sell cars to women and the young (and would be young).

So the car has not only become central to the accumulation of capital over the past fifty years, but has also become a vital means in consolidating the class compromise that has made such accumulation possible. The promise of physical freedom and mobility offered by the car has led to the political demobilisation of the working class.

Developing European markets

Infrastructures must be improved and updated in line with sources of raw materials and new markets. The European Union, for example, is an internal market, an attempt to integrate European national capitals and particular capitals within European Union nations to maximize the realization of surplus-value by stabilizing market relationships. The European Union has drawn up plans for the massive upgrading of a number of strategic road systems across Europe as part of a 'Trans European Route Network', an infrastructure to serve the needs of European capital as a whole by allowing greater efficiency in the movement of freight. The plans for British roads are centred around those trunk-roads serving the Channel Tunnel (e.g. the Folkestone to Honiton road, the M25 and all those roads coming off it) and the links between the Eastern ports of Harwich and the Western side of the country. Roads ministers talk of the individual elements of these roads (e.g. the A27, A35 etc. on the Folkestone-Honiton route) each being 'improved' independently but in fact they are being massively upgraded and augmented in conjunction to accommodate (and encourage) freight lorries. Aside from these public plans there are schemes that have been evolving 'organically' with the growth of bypasses. Now many new bypasses are to be linked up to form 'superhighways'. The widening of the M42, M6 and M1 is part of this process.

The increasing integration within the world market of the eastern European markets of Russia, Poland etc. represents further expanding needs by capital for road development. Raw materials and finished commodities now need to travel regularly across the whole of Europe, hence the EU's plan to integrate a road system all the way from Cork to Moscow.

Just-in-Time

Even without the efforts of the planner-union, particular capitals in the form of factories, retailers and road haulage firms are increasingly demanding and filling more road space. One trend which has been becoming more influential in this escalating need for road space and lorries is use by businesses of the 'just-in-time' system. The just-in-time system began as a production strategy aimed at economizing on time and space on the shopfloor by having efficient communications in the production process to ensure that only what was immediately required was built, thereby saving on warehouse/storage space. A firm using this system therefore attempts to save money by cutting down on warehouse workers, managers and bookkeepers etc. The just-in-time system reduces turnover time by reducing production time to the time actually spent in valorization itself — eliminating latent (i.e. potential) productive capital and unproductive labour.

Their 'economizing', their reduction of 'costs' is our intensification and rationalization of work. Just-in-time is essentially a method for imposing discipline on workers through surveillance and through their internalizing the regime's rules and needs.

Factories using the system have many small deliveries a day (instead of a single larger delivery) from their suppliers, many of who in turn would be adopting the system. This amounts to using the road itself instead of a warehouse! What they save on warehousing costs, we pay in terms of loss of environment and air quality!

Worse still, since the advent of the bar code, communications technology has allowed the just-in-time system to be extended to retailers. Major stores are increasingly moving to huge out-of-town sites and using less site space for warehousing; they use bar code scans at checkouts to determine which items are selling and have them delivered constantly from manufacturers and their own warehouses on other sites. These out of town stores choose greenfield sites not far from major roads to which they add service roads. Or if they cannot find a big enough out of town site near a major road, they will offer money to a local council for a 'bypass' which will then be used by their lorries. This is what has been happening, for example, in Yeovil with a proposed Sainsbury superstore.

The motor industry remains a key indicator in the world economy. The nexus of related industries which depend for their continued expansion on the car point to its crucial position. The massive growth of cars has required a massive growth of roads. In Britain and the USA the underdevelopment of the railways means that the roads are in many cases the essential artery for the creation of virtually all commodities and the realization of their value in the market place. Given all this how can cars and roads be neutral? They are forms of technology, and no technology is developed outside the class war. They represent a particular definition of progress; and all definitions of progress depend on who has the power to decide what is good and what is needed.

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