

Public Transportation Is a Human Right

BY

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For a century our cities have been transformed by the car industry, making way for drivers at the expense of cyclists and pedestrians. A renewed movement for urban public transport is pushing back.

Review of James Wilt, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Cars?: Public Transit in the Age of Google, Uber, and Elon Musk* (Between the Lines, 2020)

After decades of building new roads and expanding highways, commuters are still losing more time in traffic and their commutes keep getting longer. The evidence shows that adding more roads doesn't relieve traffic; it simply encourages people to drive more.

That reality seems to finally be sinking in with a growing segment of the American public. There simply isn't the room to fit more cars on congested roads, and that's leading to renewed investments in other forms of mobility.

In recent years, ballot measures have been proposed around the United States to expand public transit and other non-auto transportation — and they've been very successful. Los Angeles' Measure M passed with the support of 70 percent of voters in 2016 and will funnel \$120 billion into transport projects over the next forty years. It's not alone. In 2019, nearly 90 percent of transit ballot measures were successful, continuing a growing trend over the past few years of residents voting to raise their own taxes to fund better transit.

But not everyone's excited about such a future of public transit projects. For the past decade, the tech industry has been adamantly pushing technological enhancements to cars that they promise will solve the congestion, the carbon emissions, and the deaths that, in the US alone, number in the

tens of thousands every year and balloon to 1.35 million around the world. But the electric cars, ride-hailing services, and autonomous vehicles that are proposed as our mobility saviors aren't the silver bullets they've been presented to be. In fact, the Kochs have even been financing opposition to transit ballot measures using the prospect of self-driving cars to position transit as outdated.

With transport volumes much lower than usual as a result of the pandemic and growing calls to open streets to cyclists and pedestrians, we face a rare opportunity to start making major changes to our transportation system. James Wilt's new book *Do Androids Dream of Electric Cars?: Public Transit in the Age of Google, Uber, and Elon Musk* was published at the perfect time to give us the tools to challenge tech's arguments for more cars and imagine a better, collective way of organizing our transportation system.

Car Tech Won't Save Us

The tech industry's approach to transportation is dominated by the belief that technological innovation alone can solve our problems. To that end, instead of encouraging transit or cycling, the tech industry promotes the notion of "three revolutions" — electric cars, ride-hailing apps, and self-driving vehicles — that will solve the problems of auto dominance while allowing us to keep all the cars.

But there's a more insidious aspect of this plan that's aimed at kneecapping the growing desire for alternatives to cars. As Wilt argues, the three revolutions threaten "to deliver a fatal blow" to transit. Their success depends "on sustained austerity, weak regulations, and complicit politicians," and the venture capitalists funneling billions of dollars into these unprofitable ventures understand that this moment will decide "whether the next century of transportation is guided by a neoliberal privatism or aims for a more collective and livable society."

But tech's solutions continually fail to produce the benefits they claim. Electric vehicles, for example, are advertised as helping to eradicate tailpipe emissions, and with it the industry's carbon footprint. Yet as Wilt explains, it's much more complicated than that.

Sure, they might eliminate tailpipe emissions, but electric vehicles have much higher production emissions, with around half of the lifetime emissions of the vehicle coming from the making of the battery itself. And the minerals necessary to make those big batteries could require "a 70 percent

increase in the production of neodymium and dysprosium, a doubling of copper output, and over a tripling in cobalt mining.” That would be terrible for the communities and environments in the Global South that are already being destroyed by resource extraction.

The problems don’t end there. When Uber launched its ride-hailing service, CEO Travis Kalanick made a lot of big promises, including that it would reduce congestion and better serve urban residents. However, a decade later, we can see these claims didn’t pan out.

Instead, a growing body of research shows that ride-hailing services make congestion worse, increase emissions, and mainly serve well-off, college-educated urbanites. They also specifically target transit by making bus services less reliable by increasing congestion and reducing its ridership. Meanwhile, drivers are terribly paid, receive no benefits, have to provide their own vehicles, and were given little support during the pandemic. But replacing them with a machine won’t make things any better.

Since a self-driving car killed a pedestrian in Tempe, Arizona, the sheen has arguably come off the idea of a driverless future. As Wilt explains, the rollout of autonomous vehicles will not make cars safer; rather, it “will likely necessitate a complete overhaul of cities and towns, making them even more hostile to pedestrian and cyclist traffic.” In short, it will be the next stage in a transformation that began in the early to mid-twentieth century, when cars and roads started to take over cities. As transport historian Peter Norton told Wilt, “You and me in an AV are the oil well. They are going to pump us for data. And they’re going to sell it.”

These technological solutions will not deliver the benefits they claim, but will extend the dominance of a transportation system that benefits capital at the expense of much of the public. We can do much better.

Coronavirus Won’t Kill Transit

Since the advent of the pandemic, there’s been some concern that fears of catching the virus might cause people to shift back into cars — but that’s hardly a guarantee. A study from MIT claimed that the New York City subway was “a major disseminator” of the virus, but the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and a number of experts refuted its conclusions. In Seoul, which kept the virus under control despite its dense population, masks were required on transit, additional

capacity was added, and cleaning was increased. Similarly, Japan and France have had no clusters of the virus connected to subways, trains, and buses.

As long as governments, transit agencies, and health officials can show that transit is safe, people will use it again when they're able. In New Zealand, transit ridership in major cities had already returned to between 70 and 80 percent of 2019 passenger numbers within days of moving to Level 1, which lifted restrictions on social distancing.. But they're still moving forward with efforts to give more street space to pedestrians, including a trial to make the main thoroughfare in Auckland's central business district almost exclusively for pedestrians starting this month.

It's clear that the pandemic presents an exceedingly rare opportunity to rethink the way we plan transportation in cities. As Wilt put it, "There's no way around it: services like Uber and Lyft should be abolished, replaced with high-quality transit. We must seize this moment of crisis for truly democratic involvement, with transit riders and workers having actual power over planning." And the road to such a victory involves cooperation between labor, environmental, and community groups — who would all see immense benefits.

Rather than making labor more precarious, as ride-hailing services try to do, or eradicating it, as is the goal with autonomous vehicles, transit services provide good, unionized jobs.

Environmentally, transit is much more efficient than personal vehicles — even when powered with diesel — and electrifying them makes them even better. An "electric bus running in peak conditions can be at least five times as efficient as an old diesel bus," and that can be even further improved with trolleybuses that are powered by overhead wires and require even smaller batteries for the times they drive without connection.

But the collective benefits could be even greater. Wilt believes that transit should be "ecological, reliable, free, and accessible," not something that's provided only as a last resort. Since transit would be free, we wouldn't have fare cops beating people up for jumping the turnstile.

At its core, Wilt's vision is one that sees transit as a key piece of a different kind of society. He argues that the "universal right to transportation serves as a foundation of a broader struggle against capitalist commodification and exploitation," and that the "foundational principle of radical transit politics is one of togetherness — which in turn means a coherent opposition to white supremacy, anti-migrant xenophobia, ableism, and union-busting." As the lockdowns ease, that's exactly the kind of society we need to fight for.

Better Transportation for a Better Future

During the pandemic, people around the world remarked at the clean air in their cities once most of the cars were off the road. Now, polls show people want new restrictions to keep it that way. Similarly, bike shops in the United States, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, have reported increased sales as cities around the world are planning to build new bike lanes and give more space to pedestrians — some temporary, but many permanent.

There is a serious shift taking place, and we must seize the opportunity to reclaim our cities from the automobile as much as possible. In 1973, André Gorz wrote that, “After killing the city, the car is killing the car.” It wasn’t dead yet, however, because it had successfully arranged “for the alternatives to disappear, thus making the car compulsory.”

The fight for better transportation should be driven not just by getting rid of the automobile, but, as Wilt writes, it must be “one for democratic control over communities” — of which transit is a key part — and “to build a much more beautiful world.” After the death and devastation wrought by the pandemic, especially in the United States, that’s exactly the kind of vision we need.

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