

# **Ban cars in cities**

*Henrik Valeur, 2016*

## **The problem**

Do you know the feeling? You're stuck in traffic and you can literally feel your blood pressure going up as you become increasingly frustrated with the time that is being lost because of all those morons who are blocking the way ahead. You may also begin to wonder what all those gasses and fine particles of soot, which are being emitted from all those idle engines in front, are doing to your health. And, if you're less of a narcissist, you may begin to take pity on the poor cyclist who is being bullied by the big SUV or on the woman with her bags and children who is unable to cross the road.

But there are many more problems related to current modes of traffic than what can be immediately observed. The inconsiderate and often ruthless behaviour towards each other is but one of many social problems. Others are related to the marginalization of the roughly 90 percent of the urban population who do not drive a car, for instance by taking away street space that used to provide livelihood opportunities for the poor and opportunities for children to play, for the elderly to take a morning or an evening stroll, and for gatherings and random and unexpected encounters between people from different strata of society.

The environmental problems range from smog and acid rain, which may erode natural eco-systems, wildlife habitats and human heritage sites and monuments, and may cause soil deterioration, water contamination and "tree deaths", through the overheating of the city caused by running engines, paved roads and parking areas, to global warming and climate change. The construction of infrastructure for motorized transportation may also deplete fertile land and natural environments while obstructing natural metabolism and the movement of wildlife.

As for one's own health, the problems are not only related to air pollution, though that is bad enough: being the cause of often irreversible pulmonary, cardiac, vascular

and neurological impairments, as well as various forms of cancer, damage to the immune system and impaired fetal development. There is also another type of pollution – noise pollution – which is hardly less damaging to human health, since it may not only reduce hearing abilities and induce tinnitus but may cause heart diseases, changes in the immune system and sleep disturbance. Even birth defects can be attributed to noise pollution, which may also cause stress and stimulate aggression and anti-social behavior in a self-reinforcing vicious cycle. And then, of course, there is death and mutilation caused by accidents and the multiple adverse health effects, including the impairment of the immune system and bodily decay, related to physical inactivity, which can also lead to cognitive impairment, depression and reduced self-esteem as well as obesity and the various mental, social and physical problems related to that condition.

These and other problems related to “modern” mobility are particularly prevalent in cities and as cities continue to grow, both in terms of the land area they cover and the number of people and activities they accommodate, and as people in cities become wealthier and thus able to buy more, say, more cars, those problems may multiply and, in the end, make those very cities uninhabitable for human beings. Some may argue that they already are.

There are many things that can be done to solve these problems: technical improvements of combustion engines and use of cleaner fuel, which would likely have to be induced by the regulation of emission standards and taxes on non-renewable fuel and on vehicles using that kind of fuel; incentives to reduce car ownership like taxes on private vehicles, parking fees and the restriction of parking spaces; incentives to reduce car use such as the odd-even scheme, which may unfortunately cause people, those who can afford it, to buy more cars; the implementation of car-free streets and car-free days; and the promotion of alternative modes of transportation through the planning of transit-oriented and mixed-use development, the design of sidewalks and bicycle lanes; as well as campaigns to change the mindset and behaviour of people. But these are all partial solutions and some of them are not even that but are merely obscuring or delaying the problems.

A good example is Delhi, where several measures were taken to curb air pollution in the late 1990s and early 2000s, following an order handed down by the Supreme

Court. This resulted in a temporary drop in the level of air pollution. But then the air quality began deteriorating again, as the use of motorized transportation continued to expand, and, according to the World Health Organization, Delhi is now the most polluted city in the world.

But even those measures, which relatively quickly were overtaken by events, did nothing to solve the many other environmental, human health and social problems related to motorized transportation.

### **The solution**

Thus, as I see it, there is really only one effective, comprehensive and lasting solution and that is to ban cars and other means of transportation that are powered by non-renewable energy, including two-wheelers, buses and auto rickshaws, in cities. Here it should perhaps be noted that electricity is not a renewable energy source if it comes from the power grid since most of that electricity is produced by coal-fired power plants. This does not mean that collective transportation systems, like metro systems, which have been extremely costly to implement, should be abandoned, but actions should be taken to reduce these systems' dependency on non-renewable energy.

Now you may object that in a democracy, you cannot take away people's means of transportation. And you'd be right to do so, of course, were they not being replaced by other and better alternatives. But that's the point, exactly! Harmful means of transportation should be exchanged for harmless ones – and if possible even healthy ones. And the need for transportation should be reduced. The problem should be solved at the root, so to speak, rather than by adding more layers of technology like “smarter” traffic lights and more surveillance cameras, etc. However, it should also be made clear that democracy is not a blank check to do whatever you want, regardless of the consequences for others, such as taking away their opportunities for a healthy and productive life. Rather it's about making common decisions, through enlightened discussions, that may benefit all of us.

About ten years ago I went to Shanghai, China, to live. I liked it there, although I was rather annoyed with the constant honking. But people told me that I better get used to it because *that's Chinese culture*. Later on, the government decided to ban honking

in that city, as it was considered a nuisance to the general population, and then, apparently, it was no longer Chinese culture. Now in India, people are telling me that I better get used to honking here because *that's Indian culture*. I am happy to inform them that culture is constantly evolving – or degenerating. In any case, it's never static – Indian culture, least of all, I should think. Then they tell me that a ban on honking could only happen in China because of its different political system, but I have seen similar measures being taken in Indian cities. In fact, the first city I visited in India, more than five years ago, was Chandigarh where, somewhat to my surprise, I must admit, I found that they had banned the use of plastic bags and smoking throughout the city, thus, at least in those domains, making that city more forward-looking than any other I knew at the time and proving that Indian cities are indeed capable of adopting strict measures in order to secure the well being of their inhabitants and of the environment.

But the benefits of banning plastic bags and smoking dwarf in comparison to the potential benefits of banning cars and other harmful means of transportation in cities. This is because doing this would not only yield manifold environmental, human health and social benefits but would also create a huge demand for new mobility solutions in cities, thus stimulating innovation, entrepreneurship and economic growth across various sectors.

This is, in fact, an already emerging global market with vast future potential. Why shouldn't India be the leading breeding- and testing- ground for new enterprises in this field –as it has been in so many other fields?

Of course, this would require a lot of “thinking outside the box”, not only among business leaders, investors and entrepreneurs but just as much among policy makers and policy implementers, planners and designers, environmentalists and technologists, public opinion makers and the public itself.

Why not put Indian ingenuity to the test? I'm pretty sure it would pass, with flying colours!

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