

The car is political

by

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While we are here in Paris, debating Carsharing 3.0 and getting steamed up about the issues, unfortunately, very few people outside this circle are interested.

For many years, transport was not really a topic that moved people. Transport was not something you thought about; transport worked; it was a basic functionality, as it were. It only hit the headlines when there were enormous traffic jams, spectacular accidents or gigantic bridges and tunnels to be opened. It appeared as something that had been there all along. The fact that the number of cars in the cities was constantly growing, and that there were more and more traffic jams and other irritations, was part of everyday life from the 1970s onwards. It was annoying, but not really relevant; yet in an endlessly repeating rhetorical ritual, government after government recommended that people use buses and trains at least occasionally.

From the end of the 1980s, the idea of carsharing took hold and was enthusiastically supported by everyone. Yes, that was the solution to our traffic problems. People would no longer need one or two cars; instead, many people could share one car. The idea found fast approval everywhere; above all politicians always seemed to be in favour! But it was nothing more than gentle discrimination! To this very day, hardly a single government has ever advocated car sharing. A particular ambivalence characterizes the relationship in the country where car sharing was born: Germany. There is even a car sharing law here! We Germans do like making laws: for example, we'll soon have a law for long-distance cycle routes. Unfortunately, we don't have any long-distance cycle routes. The same applies to car sharing. The law only says that if a federal state wants municipalities to be able to designate areas for car sharing vehicles, they may do so in specifically defined circumstances.

In practise, this is not yet a reality in Germany.

Driving cars on German roads and parking private cars on public roads is still a kind of "commons"; it is a good of a higher order that cannot be changed by law.

One principle continues to apply to this very day: promote the private car first and foremost! Let me tell you a few facts about Germany that are typical for the whole of Europe:

- The entire automobile system costs 90 billion euros annually
- We only recoup about 50 billion euros in direct taxes related to cars.
- Germany spends 8 billion euros each year on subsidizing the price of diesel.
- Privately used company cars are subsidized in Germany to the tune of 3 billion euros.
- Almost everywhere in Germany, public parking spaces are available free of charge to private users: only about 8 per cent of the parking spaces in the German capital Berlin are under

commercial management; for residents, a parking permit costs 10 euros and 40 cents – per year!

- By contrast, parking a carsharing vehicle costs, on average, 85 euros per month.
- Even parking bikes from bikeshare schemes will soon be punished in Germany with a typically German invention: the "Sondernutzungsabgabe" or special usage fee.
- In Europe, the EU Parliament can adopt a lot of resolutions and the EU Commission can reach decisions, but in transport policy, the German Federal Government alone determines how far limits on pollutants will be lowered, whether transport will be integrated into a CO2 certificate trading scheme and whether or not quotas for electric cars will be introduced. And the German government always decides in the interests of the car industry, which, together with Germany's very strong trade unions, protects the many jobs in this industry.
- Although the EU limits for nitrogen oxide have been regularly exceeded in more than 80 cities over the past eight years, the federal government has done nothing. At the beginning of this year, the EU Commission took Germany to the European Court of Justice. That was the legal basis for the now famous Leipzig ruling that puts the health of city dwellers higher than the freedom of diesel drivers. Now, at last, there is a legal basis for driving bans.

The governing – and here I mean governing in the truest sense of the word – rules for transport in Germany, and therefore in Europe too, are as follows: dear citizens, please drive as many cars as far as possible provided they are fitted with German internal combustion engines. We'll do everything we can to ensure that this remains nice and cheap.

This has worked: The car is deeply burnt into the mental structures and soul of the people of Germany and Europe, and has been, as an unquestioned and self-evident part of the landscape, withdrawn from the political discourse. Anyone who wants to discuss the end of free parking for private cars in a German city today is viewed in the same way as someone who questions the basic laws of thermodynamics.

The political intention that lay behind the popularization of the car and which led to mass motorization is no longer discernible. But it is still effective. The car is still political, so to speak.

But what kind of world do we really live in today? Do we still love our cars in the same way and understand them as an important part of our familiar world, together with our own house and garden? Or is having your own car a symbol of the dream of the good life that has long since gone out of style? Is the post-war narrative of a happy life and its longing for a private life inscribed – in technical sociological terms – in private car ownership, a narrative which was politically produced and frozen within society as an artefact, so to speak, and which gave the formed society of the 1950s and 1960s its technical expression?

While visions of the family and lifestyles have changed, the automobile has remained untouched as the protected and cherished materialized core of this political promise. If today, our self-understandings, promises of happiness, and orders of values have since shifted, if we have arrived in a post-materialist society or are even living in a Second Modern Age, and if life courses are becoming more individual and plural and societal differentiation continues to progress, then we may have reached the use-by date of a car-centric transport policy.

If a different, more diverse, ambiguous society exists today, one whose values and lifestyles have changed in comparison to those of post-war society, then alternatives to the private automobile should also be discovered and made politically viable. For growth is presumably also occurring in the groups in society who no longer feel that a car-fixated transport policy alone meets their needs, who

want more green spaces in cities, who want more space for pedestrians and cyclists, and who experience the noise and stench on our main roads as a burden.

In a nutshell: society has changed. Now the use of cars must also change.

In the summer of 2018, a kind of *Götterdämmerung* seemed imminent. Even in Germany. The unquestioned and eternally stable consensus suddenly started to falter. Diesel. And: Germany no longer feels like the permanent football world champion; Chancellor Angela Merkel no longer seems capable of ruling for all eternity. Perhaps this also applies to the private car.

The dream of modernity could be furthered, the connection between freedom, diversity, social balance and sustainability could be developed, and a basis for increasing social mobility and dissolving social rigidities could be created by re-allocating public space and providing access in the transport sector. The transport sector once created the conditions for social differentiation and societal modernization; why shouldn't a new multi-optional, digitally networked, regeneratively operated and collectively usable transport landscape be the starting point for social modernization once again?

The car has long been a commodity, an unbranded good such as gas, water and electricity. What is and remains brandable is the way in which it is provided and integrated into products and services. Even in Germany. The car has been stripped of its exclusive quality; it has become part of a collective dispositive mass. A promise that sounds utopian has long since become part of social practices and thus has the chance to become a political norm.

What does the car sharing industry need to do? We must not be politically naive and we must think bigger: we therefore need a manifesto for change. Who owns the city, who controls public space, how do we want to live?

In the first step, parking a private car will have to cost just as much as the parking space it necessitates. Underground garages or private parking spaces will no longer be permitted or will be strictly regulated. There should only be exceptions for shared vehicles.

In the second step, charging for road usage will have to be introduced. This will have to apply to all roads, from national motorways and primary routes to smaller rural and municipal roads. Shared cars should pay a reduced rate. So, in this regulated transport market, anyone who is on the road – and that includes all public roads and spaces – will have to pay handsomely to use a private, exclusively used vehicle in the future. The possibilities offered by the digital economy and the mobile internet are already making this technically feasible. This new world will not be able to do entirely without cars, but it will be able to do without private car ownership and will thus literally open up space for diversity in transport and a greater degree of mobility.

In addition to charging for the use of public space and public roads, the third component is the reinvention of public transport. European cities need to commission public transport operators to orchestrate digital platforms in such a way that large arteries can perform optimally at peak times, but that flexibility and accessibility are ensured around the clock, every day. In the future, public transport will no longer be a place for the leftovers of society, but the control centre for all traffic in large urban areas, a networker of all devices, buses and trains.

The car will thus be transformed into a collective commodity, embedded in an intermodal supply structure. This will provide better support for social transformation processes than the idea of the private car. The slogan of the day is therefore obvious:

We need change

We can create change

But change will not just fall from the sky