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Is post-automobile mobility possible ?

By **John Urry** (Social Scientist) 10 June 2013

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Is post-automobile mobility possible?

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By the end of the 21st century, cars as we know them will be gawped at as dinosaurs in museums. The post-car society will have a flexible, smart-assisted mobility in which private ownership of vehicles is likely to be a thing of the past, predicts Professor John Urry.

In the history of the 20th century the car industry has been utterly central both to the economy and to the forms of social life that have developed, and in that century it was presumed that that industry would continue to expand, develop and that there would be no challenge and no reversal of those processes.

There are many indicators of the decline of the car in the early years of this century. There's the spectacular collapse of some iconic American car firms that defined in a way the mobile 20th century. Certain US cities have experienced very rapid economic and population decline, and especially Detroit, in a way the world's greatest ever car city. The global supplies of oil are running down with one new barrel discovered for every four used. Interestingly, the US has recorded the first drops in car mileage in a generation or so, while new cohorts of young Americans, or indeed young Europeans, seem to desire the latest smart phone rather than a new car. One set of writers have described a plateau occurring in patterns of travel and this has been described as reaching "peak" travel in parts of North America and Western Europe.

A real desire for alternative forms of fast travel

And in a way, with the problems of oil supply and the effects of climate change, it looks like there's a real desire to find alternative forms of fast travel. There are a number of possibilities here.

In particular what we might think about is whether we could imagine a kind of post-car system, a system that we might think of as a mixture of new technologies and new ways of organising. So we could think of personal travel involving small, ultralite, smart, probably battery-based, vehicles that would be hired, a bit like the hiring of bikes now in Paris, London or Barcelona. Streets would be full of often speed-controlled micro-cars, minibuses, bikes, electric bikes, hybrid vehicles, possibly driverless rapid-transit systems, as well as pedestrians. Ideally these would be seamlessly integrated together with larger-scale public-transport systems. Smart phones, or the successors to smart phones, would control access and payment for multiple and interconnected forms of mobility, and we might imagine carbon allowances would be allocated, monitored and measured, perhaps through new apps on these smart phones or whatever takes the place of smart phones.

This would be a sort of more controlled system – less freedom to walk, to drive, to move without traces. As you move, traces would be left and some payment extracted. And this would also be a system – this kind of new socio-technico system – in which there's a kind of greater integration of the digital and the transportational. Software would intelligently work out the best means of doing tasks, whether this meant meeting up, or getting to some place, or simply staying put, or communicating in other kinds of ways. Some forms of meeting would be effectively simulated through virtual communications that are as good as meeting face to face.

Mobile lives partially replaced by digital lives?

So we might imagine in this kind of future a partial replacement of mobile lives with digital lives, to some degree reducing the need for travel, especially over longer distances. And we might think that there would be some kinds of technological transformations in which business, social and family life would not be face to face but it would be thought to be as good to meet virtually as it would be to meet face to face.

This kind of digital future is complicated to bring about. There are of course many indicators of it, such as the system of hiring electric vehicles in Paris, and there are many other inventions, discoveries, new kinds of computer systems, apps and so on. So we could think of it as a bit like the beginning of the 20th century, when what we call the car system was being assembled, and of course it never occurred as a fully fledged system, but it was made up of many different innovations, experiments, tinkering, and so on.

The question is, could the kinds of innovation currently occurring around the world possibly form a whole new socio-technical system, a post-car digital system emerging out of very many elements of technologies, materials, policies, payment systems, social practices, and so on?

From a system of ownership to a system of access

One of the interesting features, I think, that such a system would need to really

develop would be to shift from a system of ownership to a system of access. So what would happen would be the accessing of mobility and other services, a little bit like the way Jeremy Rifkin has described this over a number of years. And some of the experimentations with car clubs, new-car hire systems, pay-as-you-go schemes for electric vehicles and so on are experiments which are kind of moving along this sort of pathway. Central would be communications systems to enable the supply of interchangeable mobility systems to be accessed, paid for but not predominantly owned. So I think some of the possibilities of a post-car system presuppose a post-ownership set of arrangements.

By the middle of this century we might expect at least some features of a post-car system to have really taken off, probably in some place that is currently not the centre of the world's car industry. Some of the innovations that might be built into that would be electric-bike innovation in China, where there are 120 million electric bikes, the system of battery replacement in Israel being pioneered by Better Place, some of the public transport integrated systems in Brazil, the ambition of the Bay area to become the electric-vehicle capital of the United States, some of the innovations in China, and so on.

So there are what some writers have called "small cracks" appearing in the current automobility system, and an array of niche developments occurring. The question is, could, and how, might one or more of those niches become assembled together to realise an electric-vehicle, new socio-technical vehicle system. There are of course formidable barriers and problems in the development of such a system, and in a way what's necessary is that this socio-technical system, this new post-car system, over time would make obsolete the steel and petroleum car system that has dominated the 20th century.

Steel and petrol cars will be seen as 'dinosaurs'

It would also be very important to prevent what's often called the rebound effect, that is, of the new system simply being cheaper and more fun, and so all that people did was to make more journeys, or more longer journeys, and so on. Of course there's the problem that electric vehicle presuppose electricity, and most electricity is so far generated using fossil fuels. However electric vehicles can be at least four times as efficient as petrol-driven vehicles. So it is just possible that by the end of the century the steel and petroleum car system that we have come to know and love will be no more. If there are "cars" they will be mainly housed in museums, if museums still exist – maybe all museums will become virtual. Cars – those 1 to 2-tonne monsters powered by refined oil, built of steel, privately owned, seating at least 4 people, and with their own territory of car parks and roads – will be seen as dinosaurs, remnants of the 20th century. People will not be able to imagine how life was possible with these dinosaurs, and indeed they may come to gawp at them, a little like 1950s American cars are now gawped at on the streets of Havana.

So cars will be seen as "so 20th century", and it is just possible that the car will be seen as a dinosaur from the perspective of the late 21st century

be seen as a departure from the perspective of the late 19th century.

Mobility

Broadly, the word mobility can be defined as the intention to move and the realization of this movement in geographical space, implying a social change.

More

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