

CHANGING YOU, LIKE THE AUTOMOBILE

BY

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The lever, wheel, printing press, steam engine, flight, fidget spinner, and a host of other technologies were great developments in human history. But for my money, the car has had as much or more effect on us, our society, and our evolution as anything else you can point to except maybe the light bulb.

The car is so much a part of our lives that we take it for granted, overlooking its subversive impact on us as individuals and as a society.

People got around before the car. Animals were, however, considerably slower and had a shorter range. Trains did extend our reach across continents. But only the car's impact snowballed to affect us physically and mentally.

Industrialization pushed people into cities from off the farm, turning many of us into employees. The car ensured those who remained rural were not left in an unreachable solitude. Later, as a rebound, the car predominantly allowed urban employees to travel farther for work. Suburban sprawl and hollowed out cities cores, let alone bedroom communities, would likely not exist without the car.

Unlike in Europe, North American city streets are straighter and car friendly width, making them pedestrian unfriendly. Not only are they less interesting, our cities discourage walking. So we don't.

Without autos, why would we need a (high-speed) highway system? Without it, we would all be local consumers. Live in North Dakota? Forget oranges.

It changed tourism. The car and highway system gave everyone the everyone freedom to go anywhere. And the driving vacation was the gateway drug to explorations farther afield. The car enabled our wanderlust. Fly-over country? For sure the result of airplanes, interstate highways made vast parts of America disappear. The car also set us on the path to valuing the destination not the journey.

When young, today's very senior citizens hung out at the drive-in. A drive-in is nothing without a car window on which to hang a tray. Or to hang a speaker while you watched Frankie and Annette. Drive-ins, notably McDonald's, spawned not only fast food as we know it, they're the precursor of drive-through *everything*.

You can now bank, shop, dry clean, and do pretty much anything else without unbuckling your seat belt. Since it's so easy to just stay in our cars, we do—from and to enclosed garages—even to get our high-calorie coffee milkshakes (aka, *Machiatto*) and fast food. So, we're genuinely interacting with fewer people, like neighbours, and getting fatter. The State of Obesity (Trust for America's Health) says that since the 1980s, American obesity rates doubled in adults and tripled for children. Hello diabetes. At the very least, cars are enablers of our changing health.

Lest we forget, our cars are direct, large contributors to atmospheric pollution and climate change. If that's is a bridge too far for your belief system, then at least acknowledge that your car is a likely place to die or kill. (Dying in a motor vehicle or

because of a car are all in the top 15 most probable according to the National Safety Council.)

Our cities and living conditions, our social engagement, our broad geography of interest, our planet's health, our waistlines, our mortality, government spending, and much more is directly attributable to the automobile. So many effects are second or third-order, we tend not to realize that (a) the car is near the root cause, and (b) maybe it didn't have to be that way. A convenience that slowly, invasively and pervasively changes who you/we are, is more important than we tend to comprehend.

The car has my vote for most important technology of recent history. Next time: your digital devices.

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