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On global counter-productivity. The critique of mobility and the coronavirus crisis



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Chapô

At the beginning of April 2020, more than half the world's population was on lockdown. It has therefore become more necessary than ever to question the role of our global mobility system. In view of this, the critiques of mobility that arose in the 1970s provide safe guidance. They offer both an insight on a particular factor in the expansion of this epidemic that has now become a pandemic - the transportation system - and avenues to plan for our transportation system after the crisis.

Présentation longue

We could view the spread of coronavirus as an inherent negative externality of intercontinental transport. As such, the pandemic would be considered as a cost to society, one that isn't accounted for in the cost of the airline or cruise tickets of passengers who transmitted the virus. The collateral damage caused by spreading the virus would then be viewed similarly to that of a driver whose car wakes a sleeping baby when driving by in the street or runs over a fox. However, it is something else that seems to be at work, a strange form of self-annihilation of the transport system, something Ivan Illich and his collaborators call "counter-productivity."^[1]

Direct counter-productivity and deferred counter-productivity: two sides of the same coin

Counter-productivity^[2] refers to a situation in which the use of a mode of transport by a large number of users makes the use of this mode of transport impossible. The classic example is a traffic jam: when a large number of motorists drive at the same time on one road, each one constitutes an insurmountable obstacle for the others. This is what we call congestion. And by a snowball effect, buses come to a halt and pedestrians are limited in their movements. This paradox leads to a socially constructed form of frustration, exemplified by the long queues seen recently in supermarkets and airports that offer a stark illustration of what direct counter-productivity is.

With the pandemic, we can hypothesize that transport's counter-productivity has actually doubled: it is not only a counter-productivity that is directly visible in the phenomenon of congestion, but also in the fact that now nothing is circulating.

Because too many travelers used certain fast modes of transport, they helped spread a virus and thus made the use of any mode of transport impossible, even the least problematic ones. Of course, in the case of this pandemic, decisions were required to prevent people from moving about, while in the case of a traffic jam, the process is more a matter of self-organization - but the results are more or less the same. We could here speak of a deferred counter-productivity, for a use that isn't prevented immediately but only later, once it has been performed en masse and its consequences are felt.

Burning oil for innumerable different purposes follows the same logic: excessive and uncontrolled use will make any future use of oil impossible. In the same vein, we traveled so much yesterday that we can't travel today. This isn't a negative externality, because the transportation system cannot defer the "cost." Similarly, with the pandemic, the blockage is internal to the transportation system.

This paralysis is not the result of a technical error or negligence, even though there probably was a lack of foresight that exacerbated the crisis, but it is managing to completely destroy all uses because of industrialization. The industrialization of transport refers to the transformation of a variety of modes of travel, that are engrained in local and meaningful contexts, into a small number of standard means

of transport that are seen as commodities. As local and traditional uses are abandoned in favor of modern uses, people increasingly depend on the industrial transport system, by devaluing local modes, losing sight of quality and self-production, and forgoing the skills and conditions that would enable autonomous production. What makes this crisis unprecedented is that its effects are global and that the limitation of movement is widespread. The industrial system ends up destroying not just the local and traditional uses, but the industrial uses themselves.[^3] The current industrial system first causes a direct counter-productivity that prevents the movement of cars and pedestrians, and then causes a deferred counter-productivity that prevents even those who have never taken a plane from going to the local market.

Congestion through acceleration: the absurdity of the industrial system

Accelerating rhythms cause congestion by amplifying the effects of density. To explain this phenomenon, we can borrow an analogy used by Leopold Kohr to describe traffic jams (here they are again) by using the example of theatres. Indeed, theatres have additional exit doors to use in case of emergency. Why aren't the usual doors enough? This is because a population that is evolving at a higher rate under the influence of panic acquires the properties of a larger population. Emergency exits must therefore be designed in such a way as to take into account the behavior of a panicked population.

This example showcases the madness of modernity, illustrating the central and flawed “law” at play: any mass use of a rapid mode of transport tends to make its own use, and then the use of all other modes of transport, impossible. Any accelerated increase in volume and use over a certain threshold tends to create paralysis. Yet, travel speeds have increased significantly, as has the use of long-distance means of transport such as air travel. Thus, our transport networks, that have achieved a sprawling level of development, have now become our nets, trapping us within them (just like in English, the French word for network is “réseau,” which comes from the Latin *retis*, meaning net).

Many people living in cities are confined and unable to get around. However, they require the continued movement of other people and goods, because for the most

part they are totally dependent on transportation networks to acquire the necessary goods for their daily lives. This need for commodities endangers not only those who transport and deliver them, but also ourselves, since there is a risk of transmission with each and every interaction. As a result, it is not only the mobility of individuals that is a problem, but also the transport of goods.

With this example, we come back to the “law” discussed above. As the industrial system casts its net even wider, individuals grow more dependent and powerless, constantly stuck in queues and traffic jams. Traveling has become dangerous or impossible, even though, alone or with their family, when deprived of the ability to travel they lack the means to support themselves. Total immobility, which could fight the pandemic, is therefore largely out of reach because of people’s inability - as individuals, friend groups, families or communities - to ensure sufficient self-production.

Making the choice to get out of the current industrial system

It should be noted that the question of immobility does not have the same value for everyone. The few individuals or groups who chose to self-confine before it was mandatory carried out an ethical act that was both prudent and responsible. The others obeyed a government order under threat of sanctions. Clearly, while both situations are identical in terms of current movement, they are very different in terms of their experienced sense of freedom.

The current situation thus refers to an image that stoics used to discuss the relationship between constraint and freedom. According to them, there is a big difference between the dog that voluntarily follows the cart to which it is attached and the dog that is being dragged behind it⁴. In both cases, confinement is mandatory, but for some it will be lived as a voluntary act, for others as an external constraint.

This brings us back to what Illich, Kohr, Schumacher, Jean-Pierre Dupuy and others suggested. Voluntary asceticism, the choice not to act, whether it is by refusing to drive a car or self-confining, is a form of liberty, while being reduced to impotence by the industrial system is closer to servitude.

How did the critics of mobility imagine alternatives to how the industrial system crushes the individual? First, they championed autonomous mobilities, based on individual efforts. Walking and cycling are two ways to develop one's own ability to get around. In today's context, these two means of displacement are those that most limit both possible infections and the counter-productivity inherent to fast modes. Given the risk of this current pandemic (or others) returning in the future, it seems even more obvious that public transport is not an ideal solution for commuting. Moreover, while public transport is less appreciated by users than more individual means of transport, what political authority will still have the resources for such luxury infrastructures given the gigantic debt that will come from the current pandemic? As for cars, everyone already knows that they are the symbol of counter-productivity, through congestion, oil consumption and the decrease in drivers' physical activity.

It also means that megacities are too big. They make individuals dependent on goods and services, reducing their capacity for self-production, increasing the distances between their various activities, making confinement less bearable by their lack of "breathing space." They are also the historic hotspots for traffic jams, as the story goes in ancient Rome where Julius Caesar was forced to ban vehicles between 6 am and 4 pm to avoid the city grinding to a halt.

"Medium" sized cities, such as Salzburg in the 1960s, praised by Kohr, represent another model. They have all the amenities of a big city, they can leverage the surrounding countryside for supplies and leisure - which therefore become more accessible both for the rich and for the poor - and they are big enough to offer a university or an opera house. These are the same cities where people are already emitting the least amount of carbon dioxide (see the National Survey on Mobility and Lifestyles). In a similar vein, anti-car activists called for a new urban utopia based on Illich's work, which they called Illichville - the car-free city.

Conclusion

In his publication *La perte des sens* (The loss of meanings), Illich writes that "the more refined and integrated the transportation system is, the more we live in a society of morning joggers who then spend the rest of the day stuck in one place." With this pandemic, we are unfortunately confirming the analyses made by the first environmental activists, who are also critics of modern mobility.

The current crisis is not the result of an accident or of an overly chaotic transport system with surprising and unpredictable effects. It is how quickly and widely it spreads that makes congestion and paralysis possible, depending on the traffic lanes and the high speeds of the means of transport. In the midst of the Cold War, the critics of mobility spotted that the transport crisis was affecting both “capitalist” and “communist” systems, both the poor and the rich, both the North and the South, with of course some dramatic differences, but differences which remain less surprising than the overriding homogenization of the world.

Humanity’s shared future is accelerated by the transport system and this global crisis makes us aware of it. It confirms the prophecies of some environmental activists and critics of mobility. We should have listened to them: unfortunately, for many it is already too late.

<!-- Notes -->

[^1]: On this website, [Tim Cresswell develops the concept of “turbulence”](#) that echoes the intrinsic nature of counter-productivity in the overall mobility system.

[^2]: While the concept of counter-productivity was developed when analyzing the transportation system, it was then applied to the health and educational systems.

[^3]: It should be noted, however, that not all the fruits of industrial production are rotten. The invention of bicycles and other effective tools which have very low counter-productivity, are alternatives for the future - see [the case of bicycle self-repair workshops](#) - insofar as these inventions are less likely to self-annihilate and they enable individuals to be self-sufficient.

[^4]: The example is cited notably by Hippolytus (3rd century AD), thus placing it in the teachings of the first Stoics.

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