

15-minute cities and the denial(s) of auto-freedom

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Personal liberty and private cars

“Not TV or illegal drugs but the automobile has been the chief destroyer of... communities” (Jane Jacobs, *Dark Age Ahead*, 2007: 37)

For over 60 years, the way we think about, plan and experience cities has been organised around the private car. The result has been the production, among many people, of what in his recent book *Affluence and Freedom* Pierre Charbonnier calls “a sense of self” with “psychosocial attachments to automobile autonomy”, which has come to be seen as synonymous with personal liberty.¹

Today, there is mounting evidence and recognition of the costs of that liberty – for the safety of other road users, the vibrancy and cohesion of urban communities, and the future of our climate-changed planet. The mood appears to be shifting, and with it the policy agenda. The devolved governments in Scotland² and Wales³ have committed to introducing a default 20mph speed limit in towns and cities. Many English councils are following suit. Local authorities across England are experimenting with congestion-charging, low-emission zones and low traffic neighbourhoods. In many cities, land once allocated to car use is being re-purposed as cycling infrastructure.

Are ‘15-minute cities’ the latest example of this policy shift? And does this seemingly innocuous urban planning innovation represent a threat to individual freedom, as is angrily proclaimed by the populist right?

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‘15-minute cities’ is the idea that day-to-day amenities should be available within a short radius of people’s homes, meaning basic essentials can be accessed on foot or by bike without reliance on the car. It involves creating neighbourhoods where cars drive around rather than across cities, making them places of dwelling rather than ‘rat runs’ for through traffic. It means neighbourhoods in which cars are guests not colonisers. It is this idea that has turned Ghent in Belgium and Groningen in the Netherlands into cities whose neighbourhoods have been reclaimed from car dominance and where walking and cycling has replaced once hegemonic automobility. Mayor Anne Hidalgo is currently pioneering a cognate series of measures (such as replacing on-street parking with cycling infrastructure, creating neighbourhood parks and new local services, and expanding active use of ground-level buildings) which aim to transform Paris into a ‘city of proximities’.⁴

1 Charbonnier P (2021) *Affluence and Freedom: An Environmental History of Political Ideas*, Polity Press

2 See: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-government-and-scottish-green-party-shared-policy-programme/pages/responding-to-the-climate-emergency/>

3 See: <https://www.gov.wales/introducing-default-20mph-speed-limits>

4 See: <https://www.citiesforum.org/news/15-minute-city/>

The 15-minute city idea underpins Oxford's current – and controversial – plans to cut traffic congestion. In addition to implementing several Low Traffic Neighbourhoods, Oxfordshire City Council plans from 2024 to trial six traffic filters which aim to reduce traffic in Oxford by 20 per cent. According to Andrew Gant, the cabinet member for Highways Management: “our roads are gridlocked with traffic, and this traffic is damaging our economy and our environment. Oxford needs a more sustainable, reliable and inclusive transport system for everyone”. Traffic filters, he says, are designed “to deliver a safer, cleaner and more prosperous place to live, work and visit”.⁵

Oxford's proposals – and the general idea of 15-minute cities – have sparked outrage among right-wing populists, and been mobilised as their latest cause *célèbre*. The activist group *Not Our Future* leafleted the city claiming Oxford's ‘guinea pig’ residents were being duped into thinking this ‘coercive’ scheme was necessary to tackle climate change. On 9th February, Conservative MP Nick Fletcher used the floor of the House of Commons to rail against the ‘international socialist concept of so-called 15-minute cities’, claiming the schemes “take away our personal freedom”. Low traffic neighbourhoods have become a standard prompt for fury on *GB News* and among online conspiracy theorists, convinced that they form part of a “war on motorists”. Even Jordan Peterson got in on the act, warning his 3.8 million Twitter followers: “The idea that neighborhoods should be walkable is lovely. The idea that idiot tyrannical bureaucrats can decide by fiat where you're ‘allowed’ to drive is perhaps the worst imaginable perversion of that idea – and, make no mistake, it's part of a well-documented plan”.⁶ Back in February, a couple of thousand protestors converged on Oxford, protesting again the plan to turn the city – in the words of several placards – into an “open prison”.

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Let's not dwell here on the ‘global conspiracy’ animus that fuels these protests. Instead, I want to focus on the objection that 15-minute cities are an assault on personal freedom because they ‘trap’ or ‘silo’ residents in discrete neighbourhoods; restrict people's ability to drive where and when they see fit, or stipulate that a journey by car now takes longer than might previously have been the case. The assault on freedom, it seems, is the attack on people's liberty to drive. How, against the backdrop of that claim, are we to think about the relation between car use and personal freedom?

It is clear that drivers have become habituated to automobility and equate the car with a certain kind of liberty, or at least convenience. In auto-dependent cities, the car has for many become essential to their lives and livelihoods – these are people who would benefit from less traffic on the roads. The car is also experienced as supplying the freedom to travel where one wishes, when one wants, on a route of one's own choosing, without being at the mercy of timetables set by authorities. The car is a cocoon – a form of personal mobility that is dry, warm and guarantees a comfortable seat. It offers valuable ‘me time’ to be enjoyed in silence or with music, conversation and companions of one's choice. It permits travel without the presence and discomfort of strangers. Cars are, in short, a kind of a mobile living room. These are the felt freedoms and comforts that people seem reluctant to give up or compromise, and which are seemingly threatened by the 15-minute city.

What though has to be forgotten, disregarded, or denied in order for this conception of the car-freedom relation to be sustained? Drivers have, most significantly, to free their minds of the impact that car-dominant mobility has on the safety and quality of the urban environment. These

5 See: <https://news.oxfordshire.gov.uk/six-traffic-filters-to-be-trialled-in-oxford/>

6 See: <https://twitter.com/jordanbpeterson/status/1609255646993457153?lang=en>

externalities fall on pedestrians and cyclists confronted with restricted infrastructure and daily risks of serious injury. The costs are born by residents living in neighbourhoods whose streets have (without their consent) become spill-over zones in futile efforts to relieve traffic congestion, with all that entails in terms of diminished sociality. The burdens are felt by children whose play space has disappeared and who grow up on constant alert to road danger. The public health costs of driving are born by all of us (drivers included) having to breathe traffic-polluted air. These are the social costs of auto-dominant mobility. Enjoyment of its comforts and freedoms requires drivers to normalise the fact that every car journey contributes to making someone else's life worse.

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But let's set these costs of freedom aside and remain inside the social world of driving. What is effaced for this to be enjoyed as freedom? First, the mundane reality of delays, congestion and traffic jams – the daily reminders that auto-freedoms are compromised the moment other drivers seek to take advantage of them. These costs are often simply ‘priced’ into people's routines – treated as an inescapable fact of modern existence rather than a public problem that people can imagine being effectively addressed. If such solutions are imagined, they typically involve creating more road space (in face of evidence that more roads attract more traffic),⁷ or opposition to low traffic neighbourhoods and cognate schemes. Such opposition treats existing road/urban infrastructure as if it were ‘natural’ and hence untouchable, rather than the product of policy decisions taken during the heyday of automobility. It exposes the fact that freedom to drive is dependent on political choices about how best to allocate and use scarce urban space. It also entails motorists treating a feature of car-congested cities (too many cars making too many journeys) as if it were a bug that can be fixed by making more land available for car use.

One further paradoxical aspect of the equation of driving with personal freedom is that to drive is to exist in, and submit to, a hyper-regulated environment. Let's consider its various dimensions. Cars are required to meet safety and emissions standards. Once they are three years old, vehicles must pass an annual inspection by state-authorised garages. If a car fails the test, its owner is prohibited by law from using their personal property. Drivers must be trained, licensed and insured, and their behaviour is subject to ongoing oversight by government and insurance companies. This suggests that the ‘freedom’ to drive is not so much a freedom but, rather, permission to operate dangerous machinery. Licence to operate that machinery is conditional on drivers continuing to demonstrate they can do so safely, with proper attention to the needs of others.

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When they take to the road, drivers enter a transportation network that is permeated by instructions and prohibitions. They and their passengers must wear a seat belt. Drivers cannot consume alcohol or use a mobile phone. Motorists are told where, in what direction, and at what speed they can drive. Rules govern when they can stop and go. The modern car has itself become an active agent in the governance of its users – alerting occupants who fail to belt-up, warning against or even preventing certain forms of (bad) driver behaviour. When it comes to parking, an extensive range of micro-controls and sanctions instruct drivers as to where, when and for how long they are allowed to appropriate portions of public space with their property. For the motoring lobby, the car is a vehicle of personal freedom. But the mundane reality of car use is subjection to state surveillance: a far greater range of control than most drivers would be prepared to accept in any other domain of everyday life.

⁷ Garcia-Lopez M A, Pasidis I and Viladecans-Marsal E (2022) ‘Congestion in highways when tolls and railroads matter: Evidence from European cities’, *Journal of Economic Geography*, 22(5): 931–960

The contest prompted by Oxford's traffic filter plans is the latest signal of a reckoning with the motor age, a reckoning that challenges the normalised dominance that the car has assumed over the city, and comes to terms with its damaging impact on the safety and quality of urban life. This will mean thinking radically and afresh about the appropriate balance between different forms of urban mobility; the design and affordances of urban infrastructure, and the competing claims of moving through and dwelling in the city. That debate is urgent and necessary, and is underway. We will be better able to engage in it if we abandon the at best partial, and in many respects illusory, idea that driving is a (threatened) realm of personal freedom and instead treat car-use for what it has always been: a hyper-regulated system of socially injurious convenience.

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