



Forum

Public transport to the aid of the automobile industry?

The current period of economic crisis is forcing governments to seek ways to boost industrial activity and safeguard jobs. It was the American administration who, under pressure from car manufacturers, was the first to announce unprecedented backing for the sector. In France, the government chose to introduce the scrap bonus in a bid to support the automobile industry and encourage the replacement of old polluting cars with new, more environmentally-friendly ones.

But even whilst this measure will help boost car sales and thus sustain production and jobs in France in the immediate future, its effects are no doubt going to tail off in a few months, as was the case with similar measures taken by previous governments.

The other much-vaunted objective of the scrap bonus is to get progressively cleaner cars on the roads, in line with the Grenelle environment forum objectives¹. Yet if the scrap bonus is really meant to be a pro-environment tool, why should it not apply to any person who wished to give up their car and become a definitive public transport user?

The aim of making cars cleaner may very well be justifiable in itself, but this will not happen for 20 or 30 years - the time it takes for the new cleaner cars to come into widespread use. Meanwhile, urban sprawl will have extended, mobility increased and traffic congestion with it, wiping out the effects of short-term measures such as the scrap bonus.

So, how are we to find solutions to the crisis in the car industry while still fostering sustainable mobility? Quite simply by addressing questions of mobility as a whole without focusing on one particular aspect, however important environmental pollution may be. The latter is only one of the consequences of traffic congestion, just like loss of time, driver stress or the over-consumption of fuel. Even if all the cars on the roads were clean, traffic jams would remain, along with their negative impact on the economy. We must therefore tackle the source of the problems (optimum sharing of road space) and not restrict ourselves to dealing with the consequence (environmental pollution). The only way to achieve this (while waiting for vertical vehicles that take up less ground space!) is to encourage modal shift towards collective modes: public transport, and also car-pooling, car sharing, collective taxis, etc. For this, long-term initiatives are needed (controlling urban sprawl) as well as shorter-term initiatives (integrated mobility policy, promotion and development of public transport, and restriction of car traffic). Numerous examples can be found in the many cities that have made commitments in this regard: from London to Seoul and from Bogota to Melbourne, Madrid, Singapore or Shanghai. Others, like Dubai, Johannesburg and Istanbul, are following suit. Awareness is widespread, but, more often than not, this is down to the individual initiative of a handful of bold local political leaders with thorough knowledge of the issues at stake, rather than to a global movement started by

dialogue at the highest level – on a par with the reaction to the worldwide financial crisis or to global warming. How long until a G8 or a G15 on urban mobility or a Marshall Plan for public transport?

Restricting car use without offering car drivers a sustainable alternative would doom any mobility policy to failure. The alternative clearly lies in collective transport, which is less space- and energy-consuming. But one of the problems faced by local authorities and operators when deciding to extend the transport network and services is the time needed to order and receive buses or trains. It takes around nine months for a manufacturer to meet an order for a bus for urban transport. And much longer for trams or metro cars. Which is not the case for anybody wanting to buy a car – which is, in some cases, instantly available. So, faced with the need to limit car journeys while at the same time supporting the automotive industry, why not convert the automobile assembly lines into factories producing buses? This will safeguard jobs and industrial activity whilst contributing to the sustainable development of our cities.

¹ Initiative launched by the French government in a bid to create conditions promoting environmentally-friendly mobility

Translated from the French original version



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