GREEN
EUROPEAN
JOURNAL

Why the Transport Visions of Tech Billionaires are a Dead End

Article by Konrad Bleyer-Simon
November 9, 2022

In recent years, numerous new ideas, platforms, and inventions have emerged from Silicon Valley, ostensibly with the aim of making transport greener, more efficient, and giving users greater freedom. Yet for all the rhetoric of an egalitarian mobility utopia, a new book reveals how these visions will entrench a two-tier transport system designed for the wealthy, at the expense of the general public. In this review, Konrad Bleyer-Simon explores how these ideas are already changing the face of mobility in our towns and cities, and how to pivot towards a transport system built for and around ordinary people.

Paris Marx: *Road to Nowhere. Silicon Valley and the Future of Mobility.* Verso Books. 2022. 272 pages.

Paris Marx is a “muskologist”; someone with a keen understanding of how the wealthiest person in the world shapes our understanding of the future. Building on the evolution of personal vehicles, he shows us how the so-called visionaries of past and present (often supported by public funds) create structures that are geared towards the needs of the rich, while completely neglecting the public good.

Cities must be built for people and technology needs to serve the people – these are the key messages of Paris Marx’s first book, *Road to Nowhere*. As obvious and commonplace as this may sound, the current practice is exactly the opposite. Marx, a tech writer, podcaster, and PhD student at the University of Auckland, draws a compelling picture of the evolution of the Western vision of mobility. The book explains how the automobile colonised public spaces, thereby creating numerous obstacles for those in society who cannot afford or do not wish to use the fastest and most individualistic means of transport.

In the last decade of transport history, Elon Musk – the villain of the recent Twitter saga – was seen as an apostle of a green transformation, worshipped, or at least respected, even by some progressives, who happily drove around in Tesla-produced electric vehicles. Marx, however, shows that his activities in the field of transportation reflect the same arrogance and elitism as his disastrous social media endeavour. And other high-tech visionaries are scarcely different.

The original sin

The book starts from the premise that the car is the source of most evil. In modern history,

the car was the first noticeable class difference in transportation, Marx argues, as bicycles, carriages, trains, or trams were just as fast for every passenger, no matter how rich or poor they were. With the emergence of the automobile, the richest segments of society gained access to a means of transport that enabled them to travel almost anywhere quickly and conveniently, without sharing the space with the poor they despised.

But the car was not only a means for the rich to escape the company of the poor, it also completely transformed life in the cities. While previously, streets were lively public places, where children played, parents chatted, vendors sold goods, and cyclists slalomed among people who were just out minding their business, it soon became a VIP territory dominated by those sitting in the motorised vehicle. Pedestrians suddenly became jaywalkers, if they ventured into areas of the public infrastructure that were now off-limits.

Early on, industrialists hoped to capitalise on this development by scaling up the production of motorised vehicles – public servants were keen to assist them, notably by expanding the privileges of those who owned or used cars. In the United States, the National City Lines company was created with the aim of buying up tram networks in the US and replacing them with buses – the big brother of the car. These buses, the motor vehicle of the poor, were in turn made the limited version of the motor vehicle, to be used by the less fortunate. In New York, the city planner Robert Moses, for example, made sure that overpass bridges were low enough to prevent buses, full of Black and poor passengers, from reaching fancy recreational areas, like Jones Beach. Dwight Eisenhower pushed for the idea of a national highway system and funded its construction, while a range of other public policies encouraged suburbanisation. Thus, by the late 1950s, motorcars became ubiquitous in the US – a crucial part of the American dream. The US has not been alone in its trajectory, throughout the world car producers have benefited from lax regulations, tax cuts, subsidies, and massive infrastructure investments.

The interest groups profiting from the motorised vehicle worked hard to build an ideology and a value system around the popular machine. “The car seemingly embodies our values, offering unparalleled speed and individual freedom,” writes Marx. Today, most cities are dominated by cars, while the public transport infrastructure of suburbs, small towns, and villages is incredibly poor – not just in the US, but most of Europe and increasingly the Global South as well. Given that this transformation has occurred in parallel to the spread of cars, one may feel inclined to be sceptical about such value propositions. As Marx explains: “Owning a vehicle is not a choice, it is a necessity, and to suggest otherwise would be silly.” By now, rich and poor (in more or less expensive and comfortable cars respectively) spend hours of their lives in traffic jams or driving long distances. People on lower incomes spend significant portions on their income on maintaining and fuelling the motorised vehicle, something often necessary for work or a range of other daily tasks, including shopping or taking children to school – fun road trips are rarely part of the equation.

Living the dream. But whose?

Against this background, it is no wonder that the solutions coming from Silicon Valley today are not a panacea. The stylish cars produced by the company associated with Elon Musk are status symbols rather than tools to save the planet. And not just because Tesla’s production relies on a dirty mineral supply chain. Its whole vision is built around the idea of

individualism and car ownership. As such, it does not offer a path towards reducing traffic or significantly altering the role of mobility in our lives. In Musk's vision, the Tesla is a token, and driving will remain an end in itself, an activity performed partly because of its feelgood value, like racing at the Formula 1. There is little discussion as to how more efficient transport can enable our societies to spend more time on what matters for a good quality of life.

The stylish cars produced by the company associated with Elon Musk are primarily effective as status symbols, rather than tools to save the planet.

And Tesla is just one of the problems. In the book, the author covers electric cars, ride-hailing services, self-driving and flying cars, Elon Musk's tunnels to avoid congestion, as well as delivery robots and the ubiquitous electric rollers that are piling up on pavements in almost every big city. Many of us will be familiar with the numerous disadvantages of these new amenities. The issues stem not only from the fact that Silicon Valley's (or any other high-tech hub's) visions often cannot be realised, the other problem is that the dreams of tech billionaires are not in line with the demands and interests of the people. A case in point: it is unlikely that anyone would seriously miss electric scooters and it is questionable whether "micromobility" really adds to a city's public transit infrastructure by allowing people to opt not to walk the few hundred meters from the metro to their destination.

Closer inspection reveals that Silicon Valley's mobility visions are riddled with major weaknesses. Musk's Boring Company promises to build tunnels, so that the rich can avoid being stuck in traffic. Uber is inflicting tremendous harm on professional drivers yet still losing money despite massive corruption and a complete disregard of rules and regulations. Self-driving cars are no solution to the monopolisation of public space by cars – not to mention that they are unaffordable for most of society. Even electric cars are inaccessible for the less well-off, an investigation of EU markets shows. The tech visionaries' egalitarian language used to justify almost all of these projects masks an attempt to provide extra privileges for wealthy people in a system that effectively stays the same. They can escape through tunnels, flying cars, and disposable scooters, while the rest continue to struggle to move around on a daily basis and bear the brunt of these inventions' adverse effects.

The dynamic driving this development can be explained by at least two components. First, Silicon Valley's tech visionaries usually come from a privileged background, believing that their concerns mirror those of society at large, thus they almost exclusively provide solutions that only benefit specific portions of the population. Second, the world of tech follows the "move fast and break things" model. As a result, it fails to understand what people might actually need to improve their livelihoods. Moreover, in order to be first and gain dominace in a given segment, it avoids, to the greatest extent possible, any kind of consultation with those who are affected by the service or even an understanding of what matters to its users. As with the 20th century conquest of automobiles, governments are accomplices in the spread of high-tech innovators' mobility vision. Elon Musk and his companies benefit from government contracts and tech subsidies, while others have gained

from the authorities turning a blind eye when rules are bent, or the system has been gamed. At the heart of the problem lies the fact that big tech's infallibility is taken for granted, as Marx frames it: "There is an assumption that whatever tech companies want is inevitable—it is the future—and that neither governments, traditional companies, nor even the public should stand in their way." But this is a fallacy that must be corrected as soon as possible.

The dreams of tech billionaires and visionaries are not in line with the demands or even interests of the people.

Fighting back

Some municipalities have realised how problematic Silicon Valley transport solutions can be and decided to step in – for instance by banning micromobility devices and Uber's ride-hailing services – but even more can be done to create an environment in which transport can serve the people. Instead of supporting even more of these egoistic services (and then backtracking, in light of their catastrophic impact), Paris Marx recommends improving community transport services, or even altering the physical environment, in a way that makes it worthwhile for people to use public transport or even walk, instead of jumping in their car.

To successfully deal with the problem, Marx recommends using a different approach to technology – one that does not fetishise digitisation. Drawing on the work of the novelist Ursula Le Guin, Marx recommends we look at technology as the totality of the ways in which "society copes with physical reality". This includes the ways people prepare food to nourish themselves or produce clothing to protect themselves from the cold. Many of these "mundane technologies" have stood the test of time and can be utilised without digitisation. Trains, for example, are a fast and effective means of transportation, with a carbon footprint well below that of buses and cars. It makes sense, therefore, to treat them as the "backbone" of our long-distance transportation system, while buses and planes could be used in situations where train travel is not feasible or lucrative.

Currently, it is not the technology that makes trains unfit for purpose, but the infrastructure built (or not built) around them. Last summer, for example, Germany introduced the so-called 9-euro ticket that allowed every ticket holder to use local public transport and regional trains all over the country. In terms of demand, the ticket was a success, and it also led to a slight decrease in car traffic in the country, but the heavy delays and the poor train connections still make Germany's train system unattractive for those who are commuting to work or have to arrive somewhere on time. In the 2010s, most of Europe's sleeper trains were discontinued despite all their benefits compared to inter-European flights, only to return to the EU agenda in recent years.

In order to create an environment that serves the people, there must be democratic accountability of public services – in such a way that transportation, housing, and other essential services are not completely controlled by market forces. Governments and public servants need to support creative ideas and invest the same energy in building sustainable

and equitable alternatives as they did in supporting the spread of automobiles. And crucially, they must not forget about consulting the people who are affected. As an example of a positive initiative, Marx mentions the 15-minute city, a plan that was popularised by Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo in her 2020 campaign: this would transform the metropolis into a set of walkable neighbourhoods where every essential service – from the kindergarten to the pharmacy – could be reached in a matter of minutes, even without using a billionaire's anti-traffic tunnel system.

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Finally, Marx points out that Silicon Valley tends to forget about the important social role of the people involved in mobility. They are seen as a cost to cut (in the same way as mobility guru Musk's takeover of Twitter led to massive layoffs), while we tend to forget that the bus driver is not just there to drive the vehicles and open the doors at every stop. These two tasks are of course part of the job, and they can be taken over by a robot. But, at the same time, a bus driver also keeps the riders and the neighbourhood safe, she can give directions to those who are lost, provide (or at least call for) help if someone is injured or collapses on the sidewalk or just wait a few extra moments, if someone requires additional time to board. A good public transport concept should not forget about the people – neither its users, nor the workers who make it a service with humanity.

The problems and trends described by Marx are of particular relevance today. In the last week of October, the EU announced a strategy to phase out new internal combustion engines. This is the first measure taken under the EU's "Fit for 55" package aimed at cutting greenhouse gas emissions by 55 per cent by 2030. Car producers would be required to reduce the emissions of new cars sold by 55 per cent by 2030, before reaching 100 per cent five years later. The announcement does not preclude the development and sale of electronic vehicles – be they products of Tesla or any other manufacturer. Nevertheless, civil society and progressive forces should seize the opportunities provided by "Fit for 55", the European Green Deal, and other environmental agendas to push for the structural changes that could move society beyond the current dominance of cars, in favour of community transport and smartly designed, walkable cities.

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Published November 9, 2022
Article in English
Published in the *Green European Journal*