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Banning Cars from Manhattan

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The Anarchist Library

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We propose banning private cars from Manhattan Island. Permitted motor vehicles would be buses, small taxis, vehicles for essential services (doctor, police, sanitation, vans, etc.), and the trucking used in light industry.

Present congestion and parking are unworkable, and other proposed solutions are uneconomic, disruptive, unhealthy, nonurban, or impractical.

It is hardly necessary to prove that the actual situation is intolerable. "Motor trucks average less than six miles per hour in traffic, as against eleven miles per hour for horse drawn vehicles in 1911." "During the ban on nonessential vehicles during the heavy snowstorm of February 1961, air pollution dropped 66 per cent." (*New York Times,* March 13, 1961.) The street widths of Manhattan were designed, in 1811, for buildings of one to four stories.

By banning private cars and reducing traffic, we can, in most areas, close off nearly nine out of ten cross-town streets and every second north-south avenue. These closed roads plus the space now used for off-street parking will give us a handsome fund of land for neighborhood relocation. At present over 35 percent of the area of Manhattan is occupied by roads. Instead of the present grid, we can aim at various kinds of enclosed neighborhoods, in approximately 1200-foot to 1600-foot superblocks. It would be convenient, however, to leave the existing street pattern in the main midtown shopping and business areas, in the financial district, and wherever the access for trucks and service cars is imperative. Our aim is to enhance the quality of our city life with the minimum of disruption of the existing pattern.

The disadvantages of this radical proposal are small. The private cars are simply not worth the nuisance they cause. Less than 15 percent of the people daily entering Manhattan below Sixty-first Street come by private car. Traffic is congested, speed is slow, parking is difficult or impossible and increasingly expensive. It is estimated that the cost of building new garaging is $20,000 per car; parking lots are a poor use of land in the heart of a metropolis, and also break the urban style of the cityscape.

The advantages of our proposal are very great. Important and immediate are the relief of tension, noise, and anxiety; purifying the air of fumes and smog; alleviating the crowding of pedestrians; providing safety for children. Subsequently, and not less importantly, we gain the opportunity of diversifying the gridiron, beautifying the city, and designing a more integrated community life.

The problem and our solution to it are probably unique to Manhattan Island, though the experiment would provide valuable lessons elsewhere. Manhattan is a world center of business, buying, style, entertainment, publishing, politics, and light manufacture. It is daily visited in throngs by commuters to work, seekers of pleasure, shoppers, tourists, and visitors on business. We have, and need, a dense population; and the area is small and strictly limited. Manhattan does not sprawl. It can easily be a place as leisurely as Venice, a lovely pedestrian city. But the cars must then go.

In the first appendix to *Communitas* we developed a scheme for Manhattan, paying especial attention to improving the rivers and developing riverside neighborhoods — routing traffic up through the center, and even sacrificing Central Park for the overall improvement; but we now believe that a much simpler first step toward achieving that livable city would be the elimination of a large part of the traffic altogether.

Manhattan has been losing population to the suburbs and near countryside,

with a vast increase of daily commutation. A more desirable center would reduce and perhaps eliminate this trend. Indeed, within the city itself, it is possible to decrease commutation. The ILGWU housing near the garment district points the way. It would be useful, also, to establish a municipal agency to facilitate people's living near their work if they so choose, by arranging exchanges of residence advantageous to all parties. This should be possible in many thousands of cases and is certainly worth trying.

(The neglect of this kind of simple expedient in our society is the result of lack of attention to community. There is no agency in our city to attend to the multi-purpose problems of community, the integration of the functions of life. Cf. *Communitas,* Appendix C.)

Peripheral Parking

The banned private cars can be accommodated by various kinds of peripheral parking, as studied by Louis Kahn, Victor Gruen, the present authors, and others.

At present many thousands of commuters' cars are left at suburban railway stops and at more or less convenient subway stations in Queens, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. This is because of the obvious undesirability, from the motorists' point of view, of driving them into Manhattan. We propose simply to generalize this commonsense decision in order to use it as a basis for important further advantages.

In addition, we propose the construction of multi-purpose parking piers in the Hudson and East Rivers for cars entering by the main bridges and tunnels. These piers could be developed for promenade, recreational, and even residential use, and might be treated as part of the river development recommended in Appendix A of *Communitas.*

The piers would be served by bus and taxi. Consider a particular case. A large emporium, e.g. Macy's, could provide pier-limousines for commuting shoppers, including the service of delivering packages to the parked cars.

Roads

We keep the broad commercial cross streets — Greenwich Avenue, Fourteenth Street, Twenty-third, Forty-second, Fifty-seventh, Fifty-ninth, etc. — as two-way bus and taxi arteries; and also First, Third, Fifth, Seventh, Broadway, Ninth, and Eleventh Avenues. These should provide adequate circulation for the residual traffic (but this would have to be experimented). As indicated above, we would keep the existent street pattern in midtown — from Twenty-third to Fifty-ninth Streets — to serve the shops, theaters, etc.; and also wherever there is a special case. (Every street would have to be studied individually.)

All other streets become pedestrian walks broad enough to serve as one-way roads for servicing: fire, garbage, mail, and so forth.

The proposed grid of through arteries is such that the maximum walk to the nearest bus stop would always be less than one-fifth of a mile. Subway entrances exist as at present. In general, bus service throughout Manhattan is expanded, and the two-deck buses are brought back. We must bear in mind that

with the ending of congestion and the immense diminishing of pedestrian crossovers, the speed limit for taxis and express buses could be raised to twenty-five or even thirty miles an hour. Since there is less need to cross, it is possible to eliminate jaywalking, and perhaps provide pedestrian bridges and tunnels. By and large, *given the improvement of the bus service, most travel about town would be swifter and more convenient than it is at present with private cars.*

There would be more taxis. We conceive of these as small, half the present length. They might well be electrics. It is absurd for taxis in a limited-speed metropolis to be the same cars designed for family travel on superhighways.

If opened out and if its blocks are enlarged, the gridiron plan is practical and has a sort of grandeur. To avoid the boredom of endless vistas, however, we should recommend bridging certain streets with buildings and creating other spatial effects. Every street and avenue should be studied as an individual artistic problem. The ideal for New York or any other vast city is to become a large collection of integral neighborhoods sharing a metropolitan center and metropolitan amenities. The neighborhoods differ since they comprise a wide variety of inhabitants and community functions, which could be administered with relative independence by each neighborhood. There is no reason for them to look alike. A basically family-residential neighborhood, for instance, might have nearly autonomous control of its local school, with much of the school-tax administered by the local Parent-Teacher Association. The central Board of Education could dictate minimum standards and see to it that underprivileged neighborhoods get a fair share of the total revenue; but it need not stand in the way, as it does at present, of variation and experimentation. The hope is to diminish sharply the amount of "administration" — at present there are more school administrators in the New York City system than in all of France. Our idea, too, is that local exercise of political initiative on local problems like schooling, housing, and planning would educate the electorate and make real democracy possible. A neighborhood should be planned to increase mutual acquaintance of the neighbors and to increase their responsibility for school, market, playground, zoning, and so forth. Such a complex could well serve as the primary municipal electoral unit. Meantime, all the integral neighborhoods share in the great city of the big shops, theaters, hotels, museums, and national enterprises. *The aim of integral planning is to create a human-scale community, of manageable associations, intermediary between the individuals and families and the metropolis; it is to counteract the isolation of the individual in the mass society.* Naturally, in a vast region like New York there will be many thousands of persons who choose precisely to be isolated individuals — that might be why they came here — but these too form a distinctive and valuable element in the federal whole, and they can be provided for in the center, perhaps in apartment hotels, or in characteristic neighborhoods of their own. It is curious, on this point, that the "individualistic" persons who came to New York to escape conformist small-town mores found that precisely they themselves had much in common and formed a famous community, the intellectual and artistic stratum of Greenwich Village.

Toward the ideal of a city of federated communities, the simple device of banning the cars and replanning the gridiron is a major step. The new road-pattern allows for superblocks of from six to nine acres. (For comparison, Stuyvesant Town covers sixteen acres.) With plastic invention aiming at the maximum variety of landscaping, land use and building height, there is here an unexam-

pled opportunity for dozens of eventual solutions that could surpass in urbanity and amenity the squares and crescents of eighteenth-century London. There is space for recreation and play. E.g. the length of a tennis court fits across Ninth Avenue; an occasional corner is big enough for a softball field. Given the large fund of newly available land, now wasted on largely unnecessary and always inconvenient traffic and parking, it is possible to develop new neighborhoods in a leisurely fashion, with careful study and without problems of relocation, or dislocation of such neighborhood ties as exist. *We would especially recommend competitions and public referenda, in order to avoid bureaucratic imposition and to educate the community to concern for its proper business.*

Means, etc.

The legal execution of the proposed ban should not be difficult. Streets are at present closed off for play and other purposes. The Mayor banned all traffic in the emergency of snow clearance — though his right to do so has been disputed. We have had a vehicle tax; it could be so pegged as to be prohibitive. A prohibitive entry fee could be charged.

Such a ban should, of course, be leniently interpreted to allow for special cases and emergency use. E.g. a family starting on a trip could use its car to load. Likewise, there must be provision for cars to pass across Manhattan, east and west.

It is likely that the ban on cars could be lifted on weekends, when the truck and bus traffic is much diminished. Especially during the warm months this would be convenient for weekend trippers.

Conclusion

This proposal seems to us to be common sense. The cars have caused many and increasingly severe evils, and the situation is admittedly critical. The proposed solutions, however — new traffic regulations, new highways, multilevels, underground parking — all bear the typical earmark of American planning: to alleviate an evil by remedies that soon increase the evil. But in the special case of Manhattan, the elementary radical remedy, to get rid of the cars, would cause little hardship and have immense and beautiful advantages. (Naturally, in sprawling cities like Los Angeles or Cleveland, one cannot get rid of the cars. Correspondingly, such places lack center and urbanity.)

The chief advantage of this proposal is that it provides opportunity. It does not merely remedy an evil or provide a way to do the same things more efficiently, but it opens the possibility to think about ideal solutions, human values, and new ways to do basic things. Most big-scale planning, however, and most of what passes for Urban Renewal, are humanly indifferent. The quality of life in our cities will not be improved by such planning, but by some elementary social psychiatry and common sense.

Finally, conceive that one of our mayoral candidates were convinced of the advantages of this proposal and made it a part of his program in campaigning for office. This is hard to conceive, for it is just such concrete issues that are never offered to the voters — they are left to special "experts," and indeed to

special interests. The voters do not have real choices to think about, therefore they never learn to think. Instead, they vote for personalities and according to ethnic and party groupings. The rival programs are both vague and identical.

If such a plan as this, however, were offered as an important issue, our guess is that the candidate would lose on the first try, because he would be considered radical and irresponsibly adventurous; but he would win the next time around, when people had had the chance to think the matter through and see that it made sense.

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