

The Pace That Kills. The Modern Street Traffic Problem Discussed.

A philosophy in a Nutshell

"Hurry on, please!" is the catch phrase of the day. It expresses the salient characteristic—with or without the please of every modern industrial centre, just as "Get on or get out!" sums up its brutal philosophy. In the roaring traffic of the highway, indeed, we have a vivid yet typical example of this "non-stop" age.

Take modern road traffic, then, as a case in point. It illustrates the rapid yet enormous changes forced upon society by economic development, and it shows unmistakably how little the hireling worker profits by the wonderful mechanical progress his physical and mental labour has made possible.

The ubiquitous motor has made the dweller in the most distant hamlet familiar with its dust and dangers, but in London's streets the "motor peril" now reaches its apotheosis. Truly the motor is everywhere, but on the crowded roads of the metropolis its presence and speed have raised a problem for which the multitudinous highway authorities seek in vain a solution.

The streets are turned into slaughter yards, and it is no crime in the eyes of those who administer the law, for the motorist to slay the harmless passer-by. It is by far the cheapest form of murder, for it is scarcely too strong a statement to say that the motorist has practically been granted the right to slaughter any who dare to cross his path.

At inquests the motorist is almost always exonerated from blame—particularly if it is pointed out that he was sober. And even in those rare cases where this does not happen the penalty is a puerile censure, or a punishment ludicrously disproportionate to that which is inflicted when the murder is done other than with the aid of a motor.

Way for the Road Hog!

Above all the conflicting and hysterical statements anent the modern highways problem one thing is clear: that high speed is the chief bugbear. "It's the pace that kills." *Exceeding the speed that is safe in the particular circumstances* is the cause of most of the maiming and slaughter. Indeed, the law, ass though it is, nominally establishes a speed limit. Yet motorists habitually exceed that limit. In fact, travelling at the legal limit is stigmatised as a "mere crawl". Moreover, it is not for the safety of the public that corners are rounded and roads widened and strengthened, but simply to allow greater speeds to be attained—with the inevitable consequence of a longer casualty list.

It is, further, an understood thing that the police never prosecute for exceeding the speed limit unless it is exceeded by over five miles, and very rarely even then. The car owner's most frequent boast is of the speed at which his motor travels, and the rare fine is regarded as a certificate to the quality of his engine, and is a tribute to his childish vanity.

Despite the fact that most of those killed and maimed on the highways would still be safe and sound if a rational speed in the circumstances had been adhered to, representatives of motor associations fatuously assert that not high, but "low" speeds, are the concomitants of accident! And as though to support this risible doctrine, almost every motorist in the courts, contemptuous of the law relating to perjury, states his speed to have been at the time of the smash, between five and twelve miles an hour! That is the homage that vice pays to virtue!

Motoring magistrates are ever ready to condone the recklessness of the motorist, and sometimes even lecture pedestrians and cyclists on the nuisance and danger their existence on the road presents for the man behind the "petrol gun"! They reserve the vials of their wrath, however, for the urchin on a bicycle, whose crime was in enjoying an innocent "coast" down an incline at little more than half the legal speed limit for motors!

The Hog's Grunt Translated.

To such a pass have things come that the attitude of the average motorist is practically that the roads are his property, and that all others are trespassers, to be hooted off. "Get off the earth or I'll push you off!" is the sentiment expressed in the imperious howl of the motor syren.

Besides being the capitalist's instrument of profit, the motor is now his chief toy—or at least it runs his "blonde" or his "brune" very close for pride of place in this connection—and to the arrogance engendered by the possession of the most powerful and speedy thing on the road is added the arrogance of wealth and class. The result is a growing contempt and intolerance on the part of the motorist toward the weaker users of the road, mitigated only faintly by spasmodic reprisals and agitations on the part of the latter.

But why go on? It is neither necessary nor advisable to recount at length the manifold abuses of the motor vehicle—the simplest statement of fact suffices.

Yet the petrol engine is a marvellously efficient instrument, and in its further development its *possibilities* are great for humanity. The simple question to be emphasised then arises—why should an undoubted mechanical advance spell greater discomfort, toil, and danger to the workers?

It would be quixotic, or worse, to attempt to stop the development of motor traffic, and it would be equally futile to drag the red-herring of the individual "reckless driver" and the exceptional "road hog" across the trail. The trouble has deeper roots. The chauffeur, for example, must obey his master or be supplanted by a more obedient servant. The taxi-driver must keep up the earnings of his cab or lose his livelihood. The employee of the motor-bus trust must keep carefully to his schedule times and maintain the earnings of his vehicle—indeed his wage depends on the number of miles he can run. Thus it is that other road users suffer who are too weak to cope with the powerful motor.

Inciting to Murder.

Among the weakest of road users is the cyclist, and, it so happens that the cycle is, above all others, the workers' vehicle; and those who employ it as a means of getting

to and from their daily toil, know full well how the danger grows. But the bus driver, held by the trust to an inelastic time table, with his livelihood endangered if the takings of his vehicle and its daily mileage fall, is economically compelled to make unscrupulous use of the power his motor gives him, to the detriment of others. Self-preservation makes him regard the slowly moving cyclist and pedestrian as obstacles to his livelihood, hindrances to the keeping of his time schedule, impediments to his speed in getting first to paying points on the route.

The type of mind engendered by such an economic position may be gauged from the complaint of a motor bus-driver, at a South London inquest on a victim, with regard to cyclists, that "he *frequently had to give way to them*".

Not always, evidently. Indeed, when pedestrian or cyclist is killed, well, "accidents will happen", and there is an obstacle less on the road, while after all, coroners are indulgent. If a cyclist is scared off, he becomes a passenger the more for the bus, and another source of profit for the trust—a trust which, by the way, has the sublime effrontery to pose, in an official letter to the Press, as jealous of its "*reputation as the guardian of the public safety*". Gordelpus!

Of course, if every human being killed or injured by their agency was made to cause such a heavy monetary loss to the transport companies that it outweighed the profitableness of high speed and reckless driving, then the massacre would cease. But is anyone so simple as to believe this will be done? Can thugs be relied upon to prohibit murder? It is motor owners who legislate. What avails human life when put in the scales against dividends. Indeed, the attempt to make human life of more account than profits would be howled down as a dastardly, senseless, revolutionary attack upon the sacred rights of property.

A Profitable "Remedy".

No. Whatever "reforms" may be inaugurated will not diminish, but may increase, profits. A limitation of further bus licences is already semi-officially foreshadowed, and worked for. This would mean the granting of a permanent monopoly against the public to the existing trust, and the exclusion of fresh competition, without any guarantee for public safety or convenience.

But is this question of the killing and maiming by motors the only one, or even the most important? Obviously it is not; and it is only dealt with here because it is but a symptom. It is true that nearly 150 persons have been killed outright by the motor-bus trust in the metropolitan area alone during the past year. That is terrible enough; but have not equal numbers of workers being sacrificed at one fell swoop in preventable colliery disasters—not this year alone but every year? And should we have heard so much about the motor-bus slaughter had it not suited the purpose of a set of office-hunters to make political capital out of it, on behalf of that cheerless piece of humbug, "the people's trams"?

There is, however, no need to belittle in any way the facts relating to the motor peril. They are appalling. But the rest is more terrible still. The one is but the manifestation of the greater evil, for the sinister result of modern traffic conditions has a deeper meaning than is realised or expressed by commentators in the Press. It signifies the growing pace and intensity of industrial life, the universal acceleration of production,

and the decreasing value of the life of the worker when put in the balance against the pleasure or the profit of the class that owns the country. The huge and increasing size of industrial centres, and the greater distances between the workers' home and the factory, the need for more quickly transferring labour, the greed of the rack-renter of the central districts, the knowledge that the workers' "time is money" to the capitalist, the rush for profits of a transport trust, and the all-pervading atmosphere of hustle, recklessness, and speed that is engendered by capitalist greed and the ever-increasing world-wide competition—all these are symptoms of the deep-lying social malady.

It is not very long ago that miners were entombed in a burning mine by bricking up the mouth of the pit in order to save the property! No! the sacrifice of human life on the road is not an isolated phenomenon. The drowning of seamen for the sake of a few extra tons of cargo consequent on the raising of the load-line by a Liberal Board of Trade; the killing and maiming of an enormous and increasing number of workers in mine and factory for the sake of extra output and extra profit; and the toll of life taken on the highways for the sake of the profit or pleasure of accelerated transport, are all phases of the same fact. Men are the slaves of the machines they have created.

Modern machines, in their marvellous precision, complexity, and swiftness, bring with them the possibility, the material groundwork, of greater leisure, and the provision of the good things of life in ever-increasing abundance. Yet the only reward of those who toil is more intense labour, a less secure position, greater hardships and dangers, and a shortened life. Out of good cometh evil? Why? Because those who work are hirelings, while those who toil not own. The machine supplants the hireling, makes him redundant, and starves him instead of feeding him. The new machines and higher speeds only increase the wealth of the parasitic owner, enabling him to discharge more wage-labourers, reduce wages, and intensify toil. Thus it is that instruments capable of dispensing wealth and leisure to all, impoverish and overwork the many. Thus it is that the triumphant advance of technology has only carried our class on to ever more painful labours. We are victims of the machine only because we are the hirelings of the class that owns it. The evolution of industry leads us on, and we struggle painfully to adapt ourselves to its steps. Hitherto the workers have neglected the one needful step—the democratic ownership and control of all industrial machinery.

Speed and concentration are the order of the day. But the London transport trust, while it provides the example of the disease, hints at the only remedy. Industry after industry has developed to the trust stage, and has shown us plainly that since those who produce now run the machinery and organise industry—for absentee shareholders—they are demonstrably capable of running production for themselves! Surely the time when they will do so is near at hand! The need, the possibility, and the economic foundation of Socialism are manifestly present.

Industrial advance places the means of socialised production within the workers' reach, and their daily trials and difficulties must open their eyes to the supreme need of realising that possibility, and of wresting the power to control from those who now usurp it. Then they will resume control of their means of life, becoming the masters of the tool of production instead of remaining enslaved; and will for the first time be able to utilise technical progress humanly and intelligently, to provide more leisure and a completer life for all.

But so long as class ownership remains, for just so long will the long list of killed and maimed continue to grow, and all remediable measures fail to keep pace with the break-neck speeding up of our daily tasks. Already we are becoming inured to the motor murders as to the butchery in other spheres of industry. The sudden development of the road motor "within the memory of a schoolboy" has struck the popular imagination, leaving scarce heeded other and more deadly fields. But soon this too will pall, and the great problem as a whole will only press more surely for solution.

Hustle and worry, then, will continue to be the worker's lot; danger, suffering, and want dog his footsteps ever more closely, until, in the fullness of time, the scales shall fall from his eyes and he shall see how frail his fetters are. And when he feels his mighty strength, and at long last sees its obvious use, woe betide the parasites who have batted on his sweat and blood in the long night of his blindness and ignorance!

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