



## What happens “after the car”?

John Urry

**Ranging from regional warlordism to hypermobility the scenarios of life in a post-car era are vast and challenge the world as we know it. Innovation and a “digital-nexus” future can help us navigate this extraordinary transformation.**

By the end of this current century the car that we have come to know and love may be no more. If there are “cars” they will be mainly housed in museums, if museums still exist. Cars, one to two ton steel cages powered by refined oil, mainly privately owned, seating at least four people and operating on their own “territory”, may be seen as remnants of the twentieth century. People may look at them a little like those 1950s American cars are gawped at on the streets of Havana. Cars and especially the car system will be seen as “twentieth century”.

Even in the first decade of this century we bear witness to a number of indicators pointing to the decline of the car system. The US has just recorded the first drops in car mileage for a generation or so. There has been the spectacular decline of the iconic American car firms. Since around 2005 there has been a major shift in global science and economies towards the search for low-carbon energy and forms of transport, thus there are waves of experiments taking place across the world which seek to bring about a post-carbon future. The world’s supplies of oil are running down with one new barrel being discovered for every three or four being used. And the worldwide growth of population of some billions will make it impossible for the oil-based car system to serve people across the world.

So if the car system may decline what could replace it, given that the car system has significantly undermined public or collective transport in providing *most* machine-based movement? There are a number of very different post-car alternatives for the middle of this century.

First, the effects of the politics of climate change (especially), the peaking of oil supplies and periodic economic crises could generate “local sustainability”. Travel is substantially reduced and far more local. There may be some “cars” around but they will no longer monopolise the roads. Global population will be smaller as a result of a decline in health care standards, reduced food supplies and the fragmentation of urban centres. There would be a global shift towards lifestyles and forms of movement that are more local and smaller in scale. Friends would be chosen from neighbouring streets, families would not move away as they grow, work would be found nearby, education would be sought only in local schools and colleges, the seasons would determine which foodstuffs were

consumed and most goods and services would be simple and locally sourced. Global GDP would be smaller.

A second alternative is “regional warlordism”. In this “barbaric” future there are oil, gas and water shortages and intermittent wars. Many of the mobility, energy and communication connections that now straddle the world would breakdown. There would be a plummeting standard of living, a re-localising of movement, an increasing emphasis upon local “warlords” controlling recycled forms of mobility and weaponry, and relatively weak governments. Infrastructures would collapse and there would be increasing separation between different regions. Cars and trucks, and buses and trains, would rust away in the deserts or be washed away in floods. Often regions would be at war with their neighbours, especially for control of water, oil and gas, as prefigured in *Mad Max 2*.

A third alternative is “hypermobility”. Here current patterns of lifestyle mobility based around new communications and transportation develop on an extreme scale. The resource shortages and effects of climate change turn out to be less significant, at least for those in the rich north of the globe. Movement gets more extensive and frequent as new kinds of vehicles and fuel are developed which overcome the limits of space and time. Personalised air travel would be common maybe through the use of second (or third) generation biofuels. Cars would be unfashionably stuck on the ground as a Corbusier-inspired future beckons us to the skies, including regular flights into space with Virgin Galactica as the final frontier is indeed overcome.

Fourth, there is the development of a post-car system where digital and transportational economies get combined and integrated together. This is a “digital nexus” future. Here new software “intelligently” works out the best means of doing tasks, whether this involves meeting up or getting to some place or event or indeed staying put. Some effects of meeting up and “face-to-faceness” are simulated through radically different virtual communications. On the “streets” there would be small, ultra-light, smart, probably battery-based “vehicles” that would be hired, a bit like the hiring of bikes in Paris or Barcelona. Streets would thus contain speed-controlled micro-cars and demand responsive mini-buses, bikes and hybrid vehicles, seamlessly integrating pedestrians within larger-scale public transport networks, especially for longer distance travel. Smart “cards” would control access, information and payment for all forms of transport. Some of these vehicles would be driverless. Neighbourhoods would be redesigned to constrain sprawl. Carbon allowances would be the currency allocated, monitored and individually measured. Much physical movement would be rationed. This system is rather like that of an airport and would need to be subject to energetic democratic control in order to make it less Orwellian.

So there are four possible futures and all have their costs, dangers and injustices. In *After the Car* we detail the processes of innovation taking place around the world that could result in a post-car digital nexus system developing, as described in future number four. The beginning of this century is much like the beginning of the twentieth century when the car system was being “assembled” out of many inventions, small discoveries, false starts, tinkering and unexpected market niches. Something similar is taking place today and may result, by the middle of this century, in such a post-car personal vehicle system which could emerge off-centre, and probably not from a current centre of car production. The diagram below sets out the array of changes that would need to mobilise to shift from the car to a new digital personal vehicle system.

The twentieth century operated as though there was a free lunch to be enjoyed at the expense of those generations in the next century. Now we are in that century we find that the car and its high-carbon system constrains the future. To get to what I term the post-car system requires many

different kinds of innovation in multiple sites. It involves not only new fuel systems or new materials, but also new entities developing ways of thinking and designing futures, new kinds of local policies, many digital innovations some of which will seem to have little to do with transport, new ways of deprivatising movement, new ways of organising social life “at-a-distance”, and clear unambiguous commitments by governments to prevent this digital nexus developing into a digital state.

Buckminster Fuller the futurologist claimed: “You never change anything by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete”. I have briefly suggested how that might be done in relationship to developing a model that is *After the Car*.

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Launching the next phase of the politics of climate change initiative, John Urry will outline the central arguments and public policy recommendations of his new book at an interactive breakfast seminar on Tuesday 1 December. Click [here](#) if you are interested in attending.



