

The Lure of the Automobile

Based on

Ecology, Freedom and Automobility

by Justin Good



Freedom and Sustainable Transportation



*No social movement or cause in the United States can achieve popular support if it does not offer a compelling, convincing view of **freedom** that speaks to the hearts of individuals as citizens, as human beings, and as organisms inhabiting ecosystems.*

– J. Good

Making the Case for Sustainable Transportation

Given the profound impact of automobiles on our ecological situation, experience of freedom of automobility should be at the center of public debate on the true meaning of freedom.

– J. Good



Debating Automobility

What would that debate look like?

What are the countervailing intuitions and beliefs about freedom that clash in the interpretation of automobility?

What measures of freedom does the experience of automobility illustrate?

How does ecology undercut the viability of those measures?

How might we understand freedom in light of ecology?

– J. Good

Depending on the Automobile



If like me, you've lived in an environment where you need an automobile to get around efficiently, then you've undoubtedly felt a genuine sense of freedom attendant upon operating and owning an automobile.

– J. Good

Mobility as Freedom

Myth and Reality

The experience of driving is an experience of liberation most obviously because of the connection between being free and being mobile and self-directed. These connections are rooted deeply in our biology and our concept of freedom as autonomy, or self-rule.

– J. Good



**The Keys
To Your
Freedom**



Mobility as Freedom

Myth and Reality

At the most primal level, automobility answers to the same biological impulse that drives a crawling infant across the floor.

– J. Good



Mobility as Freedom

Myth and Reality

Any technology which satisfies a biologically-predisposed interest of ours is going to be felt as liberating.

The interest is related to the kinetic pleasure we feel in speeding down the highway, and the feeling of power and control that operating a car can give.

– J. Good



Mobility as Freedom

Myth and Reality

More importantly, the mobility which cars enhance illustrates our concept of freedom as autonomy due to the ways in which cars give us new choices and options for movement.

– J. Good



Automobiles Extends Us

According to one energy equivalence analysis, when speeding down the highway, a one hundred horsepower car does the work of two thousand people.

– J. Good



Automobiles Extend the Body

Like all technologies, an automobile serves to extend and enhance some basic human capacity.

If clothing extends our skin, while radio extends the voice, an automobile extends the whole body.

– J. Good



Automobiles Extend the Body

*Wheel extend feet in motion,
and the internal combustion
engine, like your furnace at
home, extends the stomach by
enhancing the process whereby
we as human beings gather
energy necessary for movement
from the sun*

*(from burning petroleum rather
than eating vegetable or animal
protein).*

— J. Good



In What Other Ways Does the Automobile Extends Us?

Prestige?

Sense of Invulnerability?

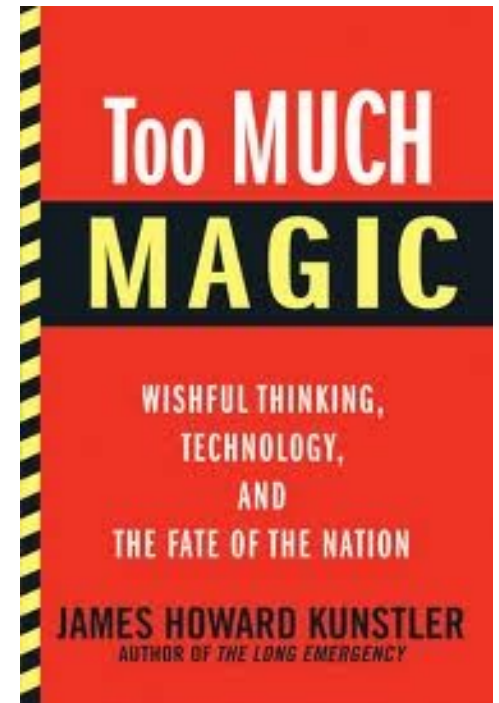
Power?

The Limitations of Technology

There are undeniable limits to how technology can make us freer, despite what we are invited to fantasize about technology in our high-tech economy.

In spite of our confidence in technology to empower us, we know that new technologies can often alter us, both mentally and socially, in ways that are as unpredictable as they are unconscious.

– J. Good



The Limitations of Technology

From an ecological perspective, there is nothing mysterious about this, since technological innovations upset ratios and have a holistic effects on relations.

As a consequence of the manifold readjustments that elements of the system make to reestablish equilibrium, the technological innovation can end up subverting freedom by subverting the ends that the innovation was intended to serve.

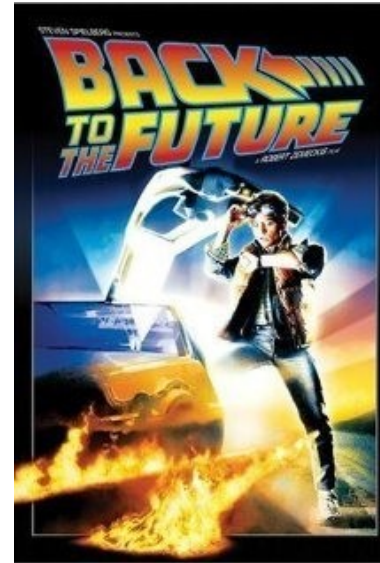
– J. Good



The Subversive Effects of Automobility

Automobiles were originally intended as horseless carriages, and from that perspective, they served as simply a faster way from point a to point b, and this is the basic idea behind automobility as a complement to autonomy.

– J. Good



The Subversive Effects of Automobility

*But the advent of the automobile has altered not simply the time it takes to get to point **b**, but where point **a** and point **b** are in the first place, our reasons for going there, what we see along the way and, ultimately, the structure of the society within which **a** and **b** become destinations.*

– J. Good



The Automobile Extends Us by Altering Us

Because all technologies are extensions of the human body and mind, such forms serve to give us a degree of control over our condition only by altering our nature in the process.

Focusing on the car as an extension of the human body, one is led to think about the ways that your extended 'body' is now implicated in a larger system over which you have no control, and whose interests you are now beholden to.

– J. Good

Automobility Alters Space and Time

The very flexibility that automobility makes possible can thus be seen as a constraint on one's movement.

For example, sociologist John Urry argues that automobility forces us to live in 'spatially-stretched and time-compressed ways.'

– J. Good

Automobility Alters Space and Time

Temporally, the very flexibility in scheduling that automobility with its 24 hour availability makes possible can easily necessitate that one make oneself more available, compelling one to expect, and be expected, to travel more often and more quickly.

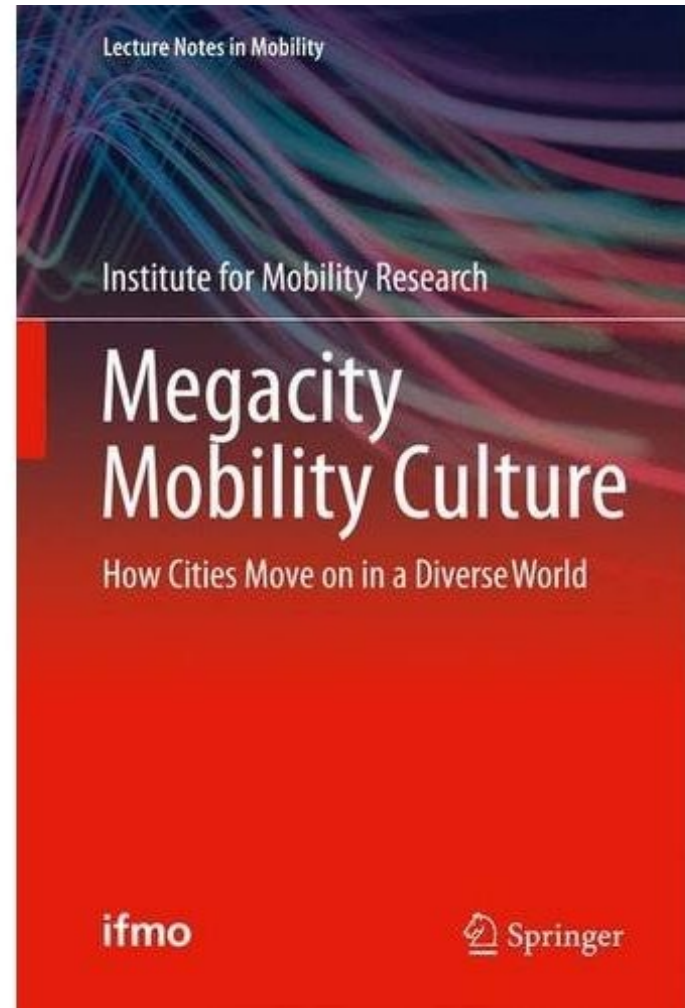
– J. Good

Automobiles Have Different Needs from Us

From the perspective of town and urban planning, automobility is an economic system with its own internal ‘interests’ in perpetuating and enhancing its functionality.

The architect and city planner Peter Calthorpe, for example, talks about conflicts in the kinds of landscapes that cars and pedestrians ‘want.’

– *J. Good*



Automobiles Have Different Needs from Us

The car wants lots of pavement and the low-density development that preserves plenty of space for more and more asphalt.

Pedestrians want close destinations: shops, schools, services, or recreation. They need direct links to these destinations free of cul-de-sacs, parking lots, or massive intersections. They want safe, interesting, and comfortable streets to walk on and human scale in the buildings which line it.

– J. Good



Needs of Automobiles versus the Needs of Humans

In China (*and much of the so-called developing world*), the competition between the needs of cars and of human beings is more basic and more urgent than either the aesthetics or civic life of our neighborhoods.

– *J. Good*

Needs of Automobiles versus the Needs of Humans

As the new century begins, the competition between cars and crops for land is intensifying. The addition of 12 million cars each year consumes, in new roads, highways, and parking lots, roughly 1 million hectares of land – enough to feed 9 million people if it were all cropland. Since the world's people are concentrated in the agriculturally productive regions, a disproportionate share of the land paved for cars is cropland.

– J. Good

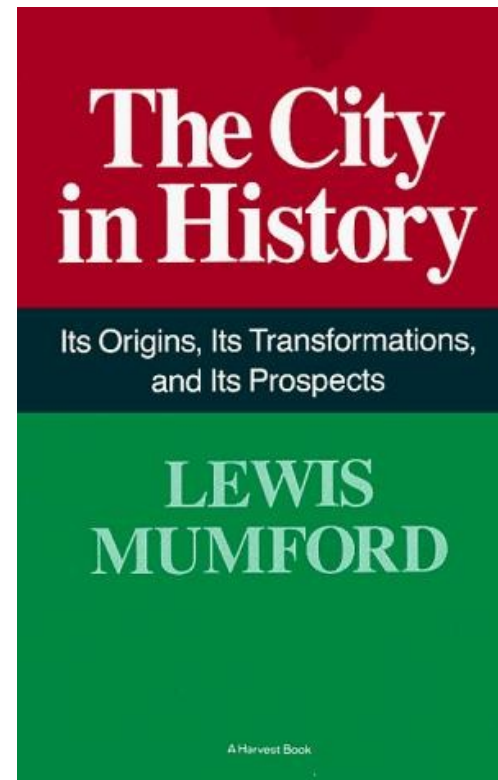
Automobility Should be a Means to an End

Not the End in Itself

To see technology as a means of liberation is to see freedom as a technical problem about *means*, as opposed to ends.

But the problem of freedom is in large measure about pursuing the right ends; to live towards goals which are naturally-proper to an individual, in the sense of allowing her to actualize her mental and physical and spiritual faculties.

– *J. Good*



The Limits of Hyper-Automobility

When end of cheap oil comes, the increasing dysfunctionality of the system of automobility will lead to what media ecologist Marshall McLuhan called the *reversal of the overheated medium*: a law of technological media which states that media reverse the enhancing function they originally had on the human mind/body when they are pushed to their limit.

– *J. Good*

When do we know that the limit has been reached?

For one, the traffic jam and the oil embargo have begun to reverse the speed and flexibility that the horseless carriage originally offered against its horsed competitor.

– *J. Good*

When do we know that the limit has been reached?

For another, while the carbon emissions from automobiles at first offered a fabulous alternative to the mountains of horse manure and rotting horse carcasses that were the ecological impact of the horse and buggy system, its contribution to global climate change infinitely overshadows the trivial problems we once had with horseshit.

— *J. Good*



Rapid Transit in 1877 - First Horse Car run in Manchester, N.H.



IN 1898, DELEGAT
gathered in New York
urban planning conference. O
not housing, land use, econo
delegates were driven to desp

Automobility and Privacy

Traveling in an automobile, especially if it is your own, extends one's private space, and this too must be an element in the experience of automobility.

– *J. Good*

Automobility, Privacy and Freedom

Private space is the first and most important objectification of human freedom. According to classical liberal political philosophy, political freedom begins with the ownership, or autonomy of our body and its work. When through our work, we gain property to create a house, we extend our autonomy, actualizing our original self-rule.

– *J. Good*



A Bus is Public Space

When we are on the bus, we are in a public space and our behavior must conform to socially-prescribed rules.

In contrast, the interiors of cars can be intensely personal contexts, for example, they can be strewn and cluttered, like a bedroom, with the most personal articles, arranged or not, according to one's whims; they can smell and sound and feel just like home.

– *J. Good*

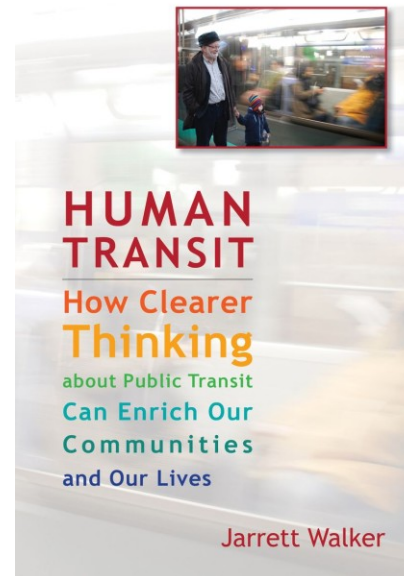


Automobility Extends all Aspect of Domestic Life

A car enhances our freedom by extending the range of our domestic autarchy, including to an extent, our domestic schedule. Our ability to come and go as we please allows us to privatize our movements so that personal times are desynchronized.

The objective clock-time of the modernist railway timetable is replaced by personalized, subjective temporalities, as people live their lives in and through their car, if they have one.

– J. Good

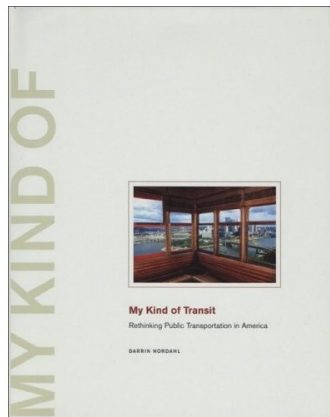


Automobility Extends all Aspect of Domestic Life

In turn, the experience of this privacy can make public transportation seem ‘impersonal’ and inflexible.

The sophisticated climate and mood controls of modern cars enhance this feeling of being protected from the ‘outside’ world, in particular, unsolicited interactions with other humans, by steel and glass and speed.

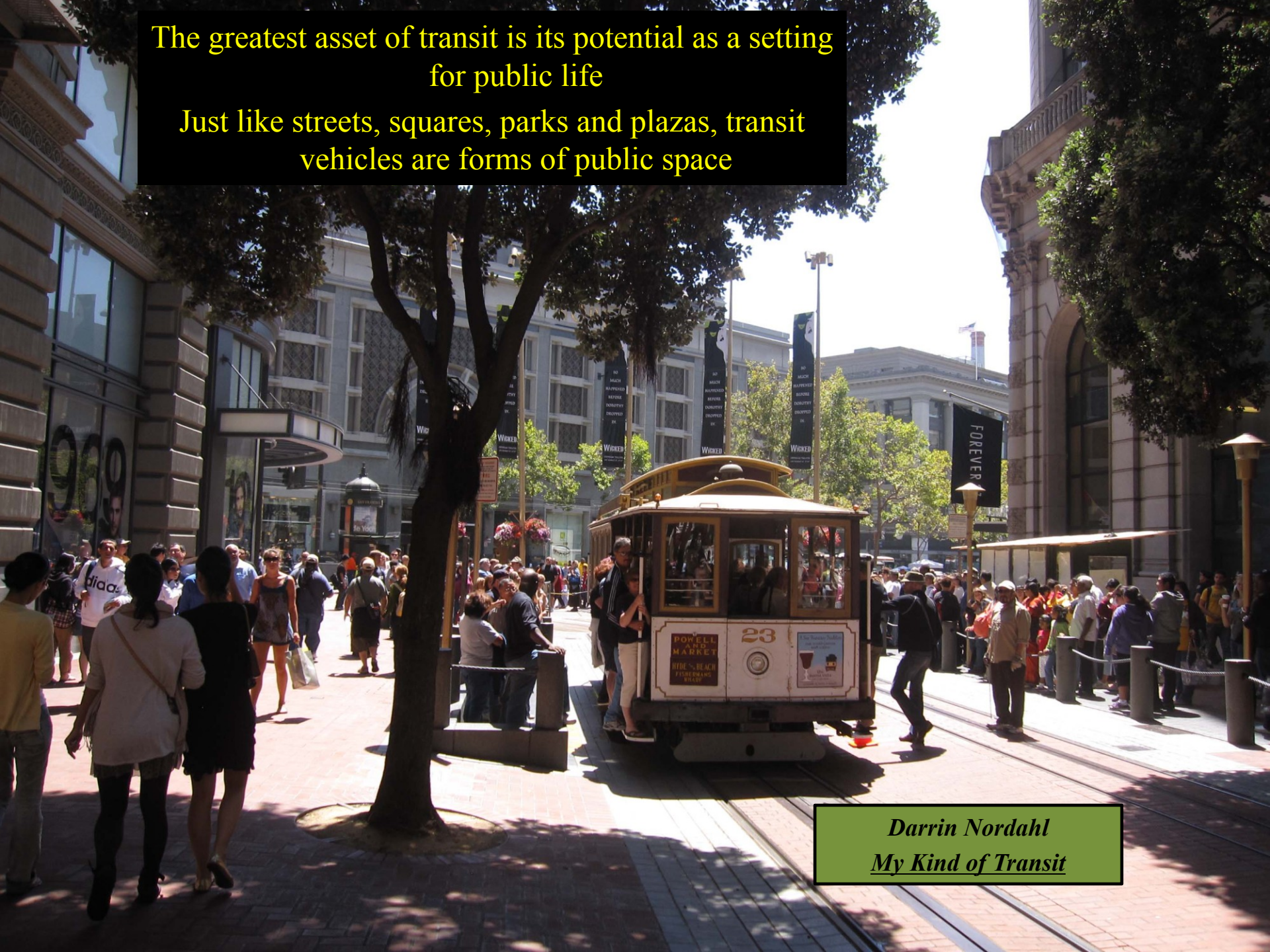
– *J. Good*



Nordahl does not see this lack of privacy as a always a negative for transit

The greatest asset of transit is its potential as a setting
for public life

Just like streets, squares, parks and plazas, transit
vehicles are forms of public space



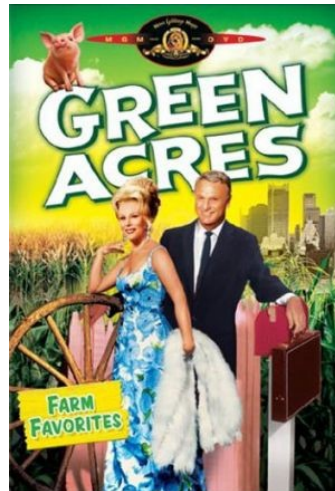
Darrin Nordahl
My Kind of Transit

Privacy or Isolation?

The privacy that automobility makes possible – spatial and temporal isolation – is closely related to the privacy that auto centric suburbia makes possible more generally.

Never before in human history have so many individuals had access to so much spatial and temporal distance from other people and from the ecosystems they inhabit, and never before have so many people lived in willful, intentional ignorance of the impacts that their way of life, especially their use of energy has on their larger ecological context.

– *J. Good*



When Does Privacy Becomes Isolation?

Automobility contributes to this corroding of republican autonomy by requiring the expansion of private over public space.

Minimally, the autonomy exercised and fostered by participatory democracy requires public spaces in which to meet and socialize and debate. Privacy becomes alienation when it displaces the physical structures needed to actualize our inherently social and political nature.

– *J. Good*



But Isn't This What People Want?

This kind of sociological critique of automobility runs square up against the epistemological assumptions of mainstream free-market advocates.

According to Sam Kazman at the Competitive Enterprise Institute, a free-market advocacy organization in Washington D.C., the very fact that people consistently choose suburbia over urban or rural life *entails logically* that those people are necessarily acting freely and towards greater objective autonomy.

Hence, to attack the suburban ideal of privacy is to attack someone's personal lifestyle preferences which have nothing to do with ethics.

– *J. Good*

Do People Have a Rational Choice?

When one considers the virtual monopoly that automobile transportation has in suburban America where one generally has no choice but to have a car, then the assumption that car drivers are acting freely in choosing automobility as a form of transit cannot be maintained.

– *J. Good*

Do People Have the Information to Make a Rational Choice?

Even advocates of free-markets acknowledge that prices allocate scarce resources in the most beneficial and least coercive way, only if they reflect the actual *costs* of the production, extraction, disposal, etc.

– *J. Good*

The Need to Document the True Cost of Automobility

When we talk about drawing down our solar energy bank account, or undermining the biosphere's capacity to provide the natural nutrient recycling services necessary for all life, it is obvious that prices are not reflecting costs.

In the case of fossil fuel energy, it means that prices are artificially low, with the effect that the resource will not be distributed in the way that is most beneficial to the larger community.

It will be wasted, just like in the former Soviet Union where artificially low prices led to horrible waste and inefficiency in industrial production.

— *J. Good*

