



Philipp Rode

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Philipp Rode: Driving is not an unquestioned right

*Most young Londoners experience freedom when using the city's public transportation system, which means that freedom doesn't necessarily come from driving. **Philipp Rode** envisions a time when cars could become part of shared or public fleets, allowing us to move away from private car ownership. He discussed mobility, public transport and self-driving cars in this Q&A with **Michael Wilkerson** for LSE's IQ Podcast.*

Why do people in cities learn to drive less than those in rural areas?

Well, fundamentally, the car was designed to help us overcome physical distance. In earlier times, cities were built around walkable neighbourhoods. By the turn of the last century, we increasingly travelled via a mix of underground systems, horse-drawn carriages, buses and trams. This system still relied on proximity but was later complemented and, to some extent, challenged by the car, which allowed for greater accessibility in more remote areas.

If you look at car advertisements from the 1920s and 30s, it's clear that they were initially marketed for rural use. They were a solution to the lack of local amenities, when the shop isn't next door, the workplace isn't across the street or just a few tube stops away, but instead requires a 10 or 20-minute drive.

It's no coincidence that even today, some politicians refer to cars as a solution for rural communities and a problem in urban ones. There's a fundamental contradiction here: cities thrive on accessibility based on proximity, density, mixed uses and shared public spaces. Yet cars, with their enormous space requirements, threaten that urban equation.

So, we're still grappling with these fundamental spatial questions. Modes of transport are closely linked to the structure of our settlements, our housing typologies, such as detached homes, semi-detached or flats. These things significantly shape the type of mobility people need to pursue.

Do you think driving in cities is a privilege?

It certainly used to be a privilege when automobiles first appeared. At that time, cars were accessible only to the very wealthy or the truly committed. Today, especially in mature economies, the car is often taken for granted, much like the television.

In the early days, you might compare it to the use of helicopters today, offering freedom to a select few. While helicopters remain an elite mode of travel, driving has become far more common. Still, driving in cities, where space is at a premium, should not be seen as an unquestioned right.

We must acknowledge that driving in inner-city areas means making an exception for one's own needs and choices, in environments where it's simply not feasible for everyone to drive. That doesn't make these needs or desires illegitimate, but it does mean recognising that not everyone can be accommodated equally.

We don't always want to frame it in terms of "privilege" or "freedom", but being able to drive is, in many ways, a freedom. For instance, getting your driving licence at 17 or 18 can open up your world, especially in the countryside. In cities, however, that freedom for some is being scaled back, understandably to advance freedoms of the population at large, through schemes like congestion charging, LTNs (low-traffic neighbourhoods), and the growing emphasis on public transport.



What do you think about the loss of driving freedom in cities?

That's a very interesting point. I live with two teenagers, and in London their sense of freedom is already well established before they're legally able to drive. For most young Londoners, that freedom comes from Transport for London (TfL), which has a surprisingly positive reputation among youths. Buses are free for under-18s, and train fares are heavily subsidised.

So their early experiences of freedom come from public transport. Then you have cycling infrastructure, which has improved considerably thanks to lessons learned from continental Europe. This extends individual mobility without reliance on the car.

There's still a significant difference to public transport, of course: when you're in a car, you can leave at any moment and go wherever you like. With buses and trains, especially if they come only every 30 minutes, you need to plan. That compromises your spontaneity.

But today, if you're in a part of London that is not necessarily central and you want to be somewhere in 30 minutes, you can just check your phone. It shows various travel options, times and costs. This digitally supported mobility gives young people a potentially greater sense of freedom than driving.

When you consider everything required for driving, such as concentration, preparation, maintenance, insurance, road tax, a driving licence, it quickly becomes clear that public transport may offer a better, more accessible alternative. The romanticised sense of driving freedom fades over time.

Driving fast through beautiful landscapes with music on, there are real pleasures to that. Public transport doesn't offer that thrill of controlling a machine. But in cities, driving shouldn't offer that kind of thrill either, because it puts others at risk. There's a real moral question: to what extent should we let young people engage in risky behaviour, just because it feels exciting?

What should Transport for London do next to reduce car dependency?

If you live in inner London, you're extremely fortunate in terms of public transport. Very few global cities offer this level of accessibility. But outer London is a different story, and a real opportunity.

This brings us back to the relationship between land use, housing and transport. Outer London has lower densities, more dispersed housing and fewer mixed-use urban centres. Distances are longer, and historically, transport has focused on connecting people to central London. However, many journeys now take place entirely within outer boroughs, which are often poorly served by public transport.

The new Superloop bus network is a promising development, offering orbital connections. Some cities are also looking at orbital rail. The London Overground was a key step in inner London, but outer areas haven't seen the same investment. For high-capacity public transport to succeed, you

need urban density and activity hubs. Boroughs willing to develop more urban rather than suburban environments will see the benefits of more public transport infrastructure and service.

Alternatively, better cycling infrastructure, particularly for e-bikes, can make a big difference. Many outer-London trips are short enough for cycling, but safety concerns still put people off. Investment is needed to bridge the gap between potential demand and existing infrastructure.

We also see emerging opportunities in digital van and taxi services. Think of these as Uber-like systems for multiple passengers. Instead of fixed routes, smart algorithms match people going in similar directions. The vans could hold 8 to 20 people, and you might walk to a nearby pickup point.

This is especially useful in suburban and rural areas, and it's being trialled across Europe and North America. When combined with micromobility like e-scooters and bikes, it can reduce car dependency without needing to change the built environment entirely.

When you say “digital vans”, do you mean driverless vehicles?

Eventually, yes. But for now, “digital” refers mainly to how you book the service via a mobile app. An algorithm then adjusts the route in real time. Trials of autonomous versions of these services are already planned in places like Oslo and Hamburg. We'll need to watch how those experiments unfold over the next few years.

Are there other technologies helping us move beyond car dependency?

Yes. One major area is vehicle design, especially safety features in cars. We're already seeing semi-autonomous features like assisted braking and steering. As we progress to levels 3, 4 and 5 of autonomous driving, drivers will become increasingly removed from the act of driving.

This opens up the possibility of moving away from private car ownership. Cars could become part of shared or public fleets, perhaps through membership clubs, offering premium or budget options. In the future, the mobility service you use might even say something about your social group or status.

This shift is important. Private vehicles are used only around five per cent of the time, and the rest of the time they take up space, particularly in public streets. As cities densify and demand for public space grows, tolerance for parked cars is dropping. In the 1970s and 80s, inner London had space to spare. That's no longer the case.

I expect that large cities will eventually restrict private, autonomous vehicles from entering altogether. Imagine empty cars cruising around, adding to congestion. Public and political appetite for that is likely to be very low.

How can we make cities more child-friendly?

There's growing concern about children spending too much time indoors and on screens. As a result, pressure to make public streets more child-friendly is increasing. We want children and teenagers to engage with the city as a space for social interaction and exploration.

There's also the ecological factor. With rising urban heat and more frequent heavy rain, greenery and unsealed surfaces are vital. More vegetation helps manage both heat and water, whereas road infrastructure does the opposite.

Cities are also becoming hubs for recreation and leisure. Outdoor dining, street cafés and other vibrant uses are in high demand. So, we're seeing more competition for street space, not just from cyclists and buses, but from those who want to use the street as a place to live and enjoy.

All of this leads to essential questions: How much space should be allocated to different uses? Who gets priority? How do we ensure fairness? This is a key focus of our work at LSE Cities including the development of a car use budgeting tool to assist deliberative approaches to fair transport policy. As urban populations grow and expectations evolve, these questions will become even more pressing.

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