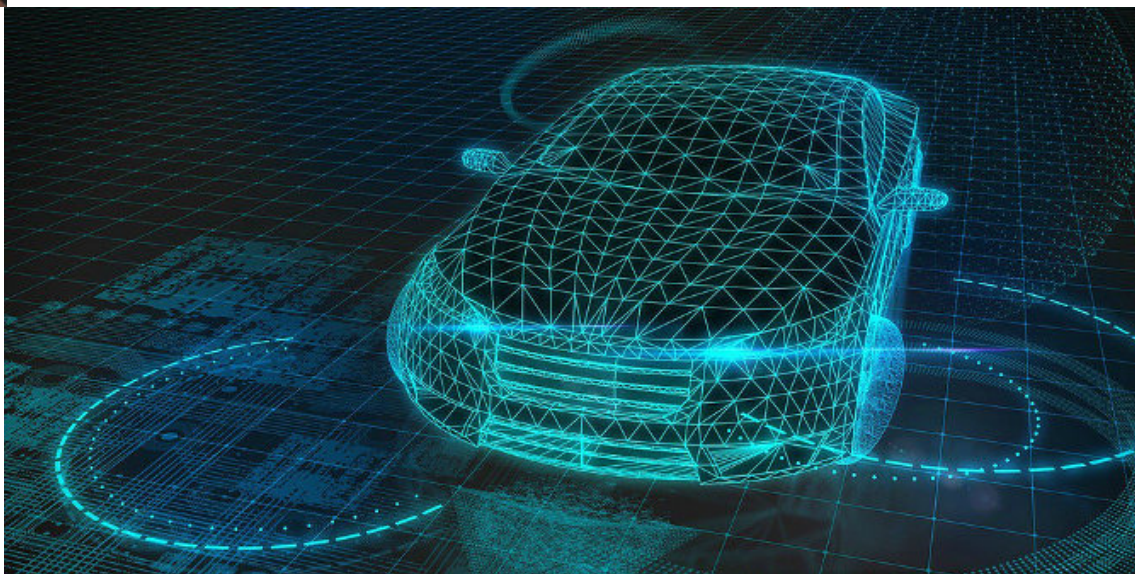


Instead of asking whether we need self-driving vehicles, why not ask whether we need cars at all?



*Self-driving cars are expected to provide a number of potential benefits, such as reducing road deaths, but the technology is still in its infancy and important questions remain over how policymakers should regulate their use. **Robert Braun** argues that when thinking about autonomous cars we should not ask questions simply about autonomous technology, but rather about the car itself. He suggests that the development of autonomous mobility hands us the opportunity to rethink our overall mobility strategies.*



Credit: [Automobile Italia](#) (CC BY 2.0)

A few weeks ago, a pedestrian was killed on the road while walking outside of a crosswalk with a bicycle. This, unfortunately, is not something papers usually report on: nearly 1.3 million people die on the road every year. Approximately one person killed every 25 seconds. This tragedy was, however, historic: the victim was hit by an Uber running in autonomous mode. The deadly collision made headline news.

Experts argued that autonomous technology is not 'ready' yet. Advocacy groups called for a national moratorium on autonomous car testing. Regulators advocated more oversight of testing autonomous technology. Politicians warned against allowing autonomous vehicles to run on our streets 'too soon'.

But it wasn't autonomous technology that killed Elaine Herzberg on the streets of Tempe, Arizona, it was a car: a Volvo SUV running at a speed of a little beyond 40 kilometres per hour, weighing approximately two tons, made up mostly of steel, glass and other heavy stuff. Cars are killing machines at the hands of humans and will, maybe to a lesser extent, still be when operated by algorithmic intelligence. They are also detrimental to our environment, and arrange and rearrange our societies in profound, often negative, ways. Cars take up one third of our urban environs, and are the worst investment one can make since they are idle 95% of the time and lose their value quickly in their first year after purchase. Based on evidence, no one in their right mind would use, own or operate one of them. Except that most of us around the globe do.

Around 120 years after the first car killed someone on the road, Ms. May Diskoll in the UK in 1896, automobility is still the dominant form of mobility today: passenger cars account for approximately 83% of inland passenger transport in the EU-28, with motor coaches, buses and trolley buses and trains both accounting for less than a tenth of all traffic (as measured by the number of inland passenger-kilometres travelled by each mode).

The “system of automobility” (as theorists of mobilities call the car created universe from Fordism to Uber) created our modern world of commuting, family and work life as well as our sense of communities, both imagined and real. Automobility became a universalistic and hegemonic project supported by car manufacturers, marketers and politicians (and many others) suggesting that the car is essential to our feeling of modernity, freedom and status. As Margaret Thatcher was said to have opined, “a man who, beyond the age of 26, finds himself on a bus can count himself a failure.” She did not mean success is to be found in walking.

Cars are also claimed to be paramount to our competitiveness. Car manufacturers, other industrialists and politicians work hand in hand to convince us that our cars are key to future affluence. European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker claimed in his recent [State of the Union](#) address that our industry makes “the world-class products that give us our edge, like our cars. I am proud of our car industry.” But cars are decidedly 20th century technology.

The advent of autonomous mobility hands us the opportunity to rethink our mobility strategies. We may reclaim our urban space and populate it with more pleasurable artefacts or vegetation. Our hard-earned cash could be better invested; our mobility made more sustainable, our approach to success reversed. Instead of thinking about a ‘car’ we could think about wellbeing. But for this to happen we need to move beyond a focus on technology as offering fixes to social challenges.

Autonomous and electric cars offer, so proponents claim, solutions to two of the most important trivial hitches of automobility: road death and air pollution. Other externalities like access related inequality, wasteful spatial utilisation and many others stay as they are or may even get worse. With the inevitable redesign of the inland mobility universe, we may ask our engineers and economists to get out of the driver seat. Instead of letting an emerging new technology recreate our socialities, we could address the way we would like to live: perhaps in a cleaner, slower and more communal way. Ethical, social and political questions loom over algorithmic intelligence taking control of our cars. But when thinking about autonomous cars we should not ask questions simply about autonomous technology, but rather about the car itself.

In 1894, during the ‘Great Horse Manure Crisis’, The Times newspaper predicted that “In 50 years, every street in London will be buried under nine feet of manure.” If horse breeders and cowboys were as powerful at the end of the last century as car manufacturers and engineers are today, we would have excellent horse manure and urine dispatch technologies, coupled with forage development that results in rose smelling and self-destructing manure. Then Frederick Winslow Taylor invented Fordism. Out went the horse, in came the T-Model and automobility was born.

Our urban mobilities may be slowed, alleviated and made more versatile. Mobility designs could do away with a one size fits all approach. Cars are like horses: once functionally great, today socially outdated. We could reinvent the wheel: instead of talking about technology readiness we could address the problem head on. Ask the billion dollar question first. Who killed Elaine Herzberg: the autonomous driver or the car?

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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