

Carism and Social Injustice

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Carism

During the past century in the West, the automobile has dominated all other forms of transportation. Despite the fact that the automobile does not serve all citizens equally, authorities protect the automobility system as a way of life. They support auto-oriented land use and transportation design, subsidize automobile and trucking industries, and enforce laws that favor cars over other forms of transportation. In a word, authorities and the institutions they represent engage in 'carism'.

This bias is no more evident than in the ways that political and legal systems turn a blind eye to carnage on the roads. Are there any other dangers that authorities view with such complacent indifference as traffic deaths and injuries? None spring to mind. Although private and commercial motor vehicles are the most injurious forms of transportation, authorities protect motor vehicle users and often target the non-motoring road user when assigning responsibility or blame.

Three recent traffic death cases - one in Marietta, US, a second in Foshan, China and a third in Toronto, Canada - help to illustrate carism and social injustice. These tragic events reveal how authorities support the domination of private cars and commercial trucks on public roads at the expense of pedestrians and cyclists. We need to understand how carism interacts with other forms of inequality in everyday life in order to overcome it.

Carism, racism, sexism and class inequality

On April 10, 2010, Raquel Nelson got off at a bus stop in Marietta, Georgia and tried to cross a four-lane highway with her three children to reach her apartment on the other side. To use a crosswalk, she would have had to walk three-tenths of a mile up the highway and another three-tenths of a mile back. As she crossed the highway, her four-year-old son broke away from her and ran into the road and was struck and killed.

The man driving the car, Jerry Guy, fled the scene after the collision though later admitted to being the driver. He had previously been convicted of two hit-and-runs in 1997 and served six months in prison and the remainder of his sentence on probation.

What happened to Raquel Nelson? A prosecutor charged her with vehicular homicide, even though

she was not driving a vehicle. As well she was charged with failing to cross at a crosswalk and reckless conduct. An all-white jury convicted Nelson (an African-American). Although the prosecution did not recommend jail time, each count carried a potential sentence of one year in jail — for a total of 36 months.

Nelson's case attracted national attention from parent associations, the NAACP and transportation advocates who argued that she was being unfairly charged for trying to cross the road as would any other pedestrian. In July 2011, Nelson obtained a victory of sorts. A judge sentenced her to 12 months of probation and 40 hours of community service and also said she could seek a new trial.

CNN's Erin Burnett Outfront program picked up the story on November 14, 2011, the day that Nelson's lawyer filed an appeal to drop all charges. Burnett referred to the story as tough because of the situation where crosswalks don't exist and busy roads run through poor neighbourhoods. The CNN legal contributor Paul Callan called the case brutal: "Here's this poor young mother who has lost her son, her 4-year-old son run over by a hit-and-run driver and they charged her with vehicular homicide because she wasn't crossing at the crosswalk". While Burnett wondered about racism being at work with a white jury convicting a black woman, Callan replied: "To me, it's more carism than racism" and explained, "The Georgia suburbs are built for the automobile. You know, they are big roads. They are fast roads. No crosswalks, minimal crosswalks. And she's someone who is poor. She relies on public transportation" [1].

This case suggests that something is terribly wrong with the automobility system. Municipalities continue to build roads with inadequate pedestrian crossings or sidewalks and governments vastly underfund pedestrian safety infrastructure. Yet the court pointed the finger at a mother, blaming her for the death of her son on a road that was designed with no regard for pedestrian safety. As a poor African-American woman held responsible for her child's safety, Nelson was caught in an unjust judicial and political-economic system, intertwined with sexism, racism, classism and carism.

Carism and generational inequality

Carism includes an adultist bias. It makes little provision for children as independently mobile actors. On October 13, 2011 in a local market street in Foshan, China, a driver of a delivery van struck a two-year-old, Yueyue, and escaped the scene. As she was lying on the road, another hit-and-run driver struck her. Eighteen people who passed by ignored her. Eventually a woman rescued the toddler and called to her parents who were working nearby in their shop. The child died a week later.

This incident, which was caught on video, was so shocking that it touched millions of people in China and reached the western media. The media asked what it reveals about the soul of China when so many passersby ignored the injured child. The media, however, did not address the question of what impact private motorized traffic has in endangering pedestrians and children as it takes over the public space of market streets.

Death and complacency

On November 7, 2011 in Toronto, cyclist Jenna Morrison and pregnant mother of a five-year-old collided with a truck turning right on a major street. The truck pulled Morrison underneath and crushed her beneath its back wheels.

According to the *Globe and Mail* newspaper, from 2004 to 2006, heavy vehicle collisions in Canada

resulted in 77 pedestrian and 24 cyclist deaths and 1,410 serious injuries. A 2010 Transport Canada commissioned report shows that after side guards were mandated in Europe in the late 1980s, cyclist and pedestrian deaths and serious injuries involving trucks declined, yet Canada does not require side guards.

Parents in Canada who have lost children in such collisions have been campaigning many years for mandatory safety guards. Olivia Chow, a Member of Parliament has tried three times to introduce a private member's bill urging the federal government to require side guards. In 2006, the City of Toronto requested that Transport Canada require truck side guards. A prominent Toronto neurosurgeon has called for the federal and provincial governments to look more closely at the issue. A just-published coroner's report, *Cycling Death Review*, recommends mandatory truck side guards. The provincial government will assess the recommendations

Even though truck side guards are not costly, Transport Canada and the Canadian Trucking Alliance have failed to act. One would imagine that if any evidence suggests that truck safety guards are effective, responsible politicians would insist they be made mandatory.

Carism and social injustice

Because of carism, pedestrians and cyclists are forced to accommodate the risks that private motorized vehicles pose. Parents have to be forever vigilant and keep their children off streets and inside contained areas. Children lose their independence and freedom to explore.

As a bias towards the automobile, carism helps to explain why authorities punish non-motoring, vulnerable victims, fail to accommodate children on the public space of roads, and are extraordinarily complacent in a politics of indifference that protects the private and commercial motor vehicle.

Carism undermines what it means to be a citizen and needs to be challenged as a form of social injustice. Alternative kinds of mobility, which are more egalitarian and accessible for all ages and walks of life, would help to build a more just society.

Arlene Mc Laren

P.S.

* From Carbusters, posted August 3, 2012 at 9:08 pm:
<http://carbusters.org/2012/08/03/carism-and-social-injustice/>

* The article appeared earlier as a blog on: <http://ditchyourfridge.blogspot.com/>

* Arlene Tigar McLaren is a sociologist, without a car, and co-editor of *Car Troubles: Critical Studies of Automobility and Auto-Mobility*

Footnotes

[1] <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1111/14/ebo.01.html>