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## Freeways: The Egalitarian Transportation

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In the past month or so, we've seen the destruction or defacement of statues of Confederate generals, the Father of our Country who was also a slaveowner, the Great Emancipationist, the Great Reconstructionist, and an Abolitionist. So it's not exactly surprising that someone has proposed to bulldoze urban freeways because of the myth that they were located by racists through black neighborhoods.

There are a lot of institutions associated with American racism that I would abolish long before worrying about freeways. Start with public schools, many of which used to be segregated by law and many of which are still segregated, even in (perhaps especially in) the North.

Second would be public transit. Remember Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott? Many state laws used to require that people of color sit only in the back of the bus and give up their seats if a white person wanted them. Many transit systems, including those in Atlanta, Dallas, Los Angeles, and San Francisco-Oakland, are still semi-segregated today, with rail lines built to serve white neighborhoods while buses serving black and Hispanic neighborhoods are cut back to pay for the trains.

Of course, there are good reasons to get rid of public schools and public transit anyway, which are that they are heavy burdens on taxpayers that are failing to accomplish the goals set out for them. These reasons don't apply to freeways, which mostly pay for themselves and which do a good, if not great, job of moving large numbers of people.

To deconstruct the myth that freeways have a racist heritage, we have to go back to 1890, when most urban jobs were in factories, most factories were downtown, and most factory workers weren't paid enough for them to afford to take streetcars to work every day. As a result, they had to live within walking distance to work.

Since a single downtown block could hold thousands of factory jobs, residential blocks also had to hold thousands of people within walking distance of the factories. In big cities such as New York, Chicago, and Boston, developers built five- and six-story walk-up apartments that often housed entire families in a single room. In smaller cities, the apartments were typically two- to three-stories, but often just as crowded. These buildings were called *tenements* and even in 1890 they were considered a disgrace.

After 1913, Henry Ford's moving assembly lines increased worker productivities and pay enough that they could afford to buy cars and move to the suburbs. The factories also moved to the suburbs because moving assembly lines were more land-intensive than the previous factors. The tenements emptied out, but the buildings remained, occupied at lower densities and earning less rents for their owners.

After World War II, urban planners developed the theory that neighborhoods filled with such tenements were "blighted," meaning no single landowner would spend money replacing or rehabilitating the buildings because no one would pay enough rent to justify the cost if they had to live next to other buildings that were slums. Only the government, the planners reasoned, could clear the slums.

So, in 1949, planners convinced Congress to create a federal slum clearance and urban renewal program. Properties were taken from landowners through eminent domain, residents were evicted, the tenements were bulldozed, and something else — sometimes low-income housing, sometimes luxury apartment buildings, sometimes civic monuments such as theaters and public buildings — would be built to replace them.

In 1955, the Bureau of Public Roads, with President Eisenhower's blessing, presented its proposal for an Interstate Highway System to Congress. The engineers proposed to build highways between states but around most cities. People still had a conception of the different roles of federal and state governments in those days, and the engineers figured the federal government would build the interstate roads and if the states or cities wanted urban roads, they would build such roads themselves.

Urban mayors were having none of it, however. They wanted their "fair share" of federal spending, so they convinced Congress to kill the bill. The engineers went back to the drawing boards and added 3,000 miles of urban freeways to their plans. This satisfied the mayors, and Congress approved the bill in 1956.

The urban planners saw this as a great opportunity to expand their slum clearance programs. It was the planners, not the engineers, who routed the freeways through tenement neighborhoods. The mayors strongly supported this as they figured that buildings along the freeways would have their values enhanced by the roads and end up paying more taxes than the tenements had been paying.

Many of the residents of the tenements were blacks, but many others were recent immigrants: Italians, Eastern European Jews, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, and other Hispanics. The blacks were victims of systematic racism that has kept black per capita incomes between 55 and 60 percent of white per capita incomes to this day. The immigrants simply hadn't yet earned enough money to move to the suburbs. In my former hometown of Portland, a black neighborhood was bulldozed to build Interstate 5, while an Italian-Jewish neighborhood was bulldozed to build Interstate 405.

Time has disproven the theory that blighted neighborhoods couldn't recover on their own. The urban planners were heavy-handed meddlers, but they weren't racists; they weren't even really classists (discriminating against lower classes).

Instead, they were *architecturalists*, discriminating against a type of architecture that most Americans didn't want to live in, no doubt including most of the people who did live in them. After all, who wants to carry groceries up four or five flights of stairs? Ironically, today's

planners have come full circle and now discriminate in favor of four- and five-story housing projects, but that's another story.

In any case, the freeways themselves are the epitome of anti-racism. Unlike public schools, the best of which are often open only to those who maintain promising scholastic records (which usually means whites and Asians), freeways are open to everyone. The freeways don't care if you are driving a Rolls-Royce or a Yugo; you have the same right of access to them.

Even tollways don't really discriminate. Most non-tolled freeways are paid for out of gas taxes, which means everyone is paying for them as they use them. The same is true for tollways, which have the advantage that the tolls can be varied to prevent them from becoming congested. Even poor people sometimes have to get to certain places on time, so they benefit from variable-priced tollways as much as anyone else.

Before the automobile was the golden age of urban transit and intercity passenger trains. While many anti-auto people speak of this era with fondness, the reality is that it was only a golden age for the upper classes. As noted above, most factory workers couldn't afford streetcars. Most people couldn't afford intercity passenger trains. Until automobiles became popular, it is likely that more than half of all Americans never traveled more than 50 miles from where they were born, or did so only once or twice in their lives.

In 1920, at the height of urban transit and passenger trains, the average American traveled well under 1,500 miles a year by these modes. Today, 92 percent of America households own an automobile and the average American travels 15,000 miles a year in such automobiles, making them the most egalitarian form of transportation in history.

So let's keep the freeways and save our wrath for institutions that truly deserve it: institutions whose history of racism continues to this day.

This piece first appeared on The Antiplanner.

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