Lies Of Our Times

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Cars Kill
Death in the Streets

Charles Komanoff

Each year in New York City, motor vehicles run over and kill some 300 pedestrians and 20 bicyclists. Injuries to pedestrians and cyclists number around 15,000, many of them crippling. In these brutal encounters, human bodies are crushed and lives are shattered.

Using the calculus of economics, which values a lost human life at several million dollars, and disabling injuries at half-a-million or more, the financial measure of this human toll exceeds $2 billion a year. Beyond calculation are the social costs of motor vehicle intimidation, as street life and community are forced to yield to the tyranny of auto traffic.

Statistics on pedestrian casualties are readily available from city police and transportation officials, and have been compiled for years by Transportation Alternatives, a New York City-based advocacy group. Yet they only made their debut in the New York Times recently (Matthew L. Wald, “Traffic Deaths in New York Say a Lot About New Yorkers,” May 9, 1993, p. 1). For the first time, readers of the Times could see that pedestrian deaths in the city average almost one a day.

Only Extreme Cases Interest the Times

Now and then the Times does report pedestrian fatalities, but only extreme cases, which are cast as isolated occurrences. Either several people must be killed, as when three members of a family died crossing Queens Boulevard last New Year’s Day, or when five people were mowed down by a car that crashed into Washington Square Park in April 1992. Or the circumstances must be particularly outrageous: A 2-year-old run over in his stroller and the car mounted the sidewalk and the driver was unlicensed with more than 25 outstanding traffic violations and two other small children died that week in similar crashes in the same part of Brooklyn.

The Times’s national coverage also sidesteps pedestrian fatalities. Its January 17, 1993, story, “Driving Is Safer than Ever,” trumpeted the declining rate of roadway fatalities per vehicle mile traveled—a salutary statistic for motorists but not to non-

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H.L. Delgado / Impact Visuals

Take to the streets! Show your muscle! Show them you’ve had enough! These doughty bicyclists (and unicyclists) are on their way to the Clean Air Now or Never Rally at City Hall Park In New York City, 1988.

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motorized travelers, who do not benefit from advances in vehicle safety (sect. 4, p. 6). The story ignored pedestrian and cyclist fatalities, which are not diminishing—do those air bags encourage drivers to go faster?—and now total one-sixth of U.S. crash deaths (7,000 and 1,000 respectively).

Missed Opportunities

When a car in a religious motorcade struck and killed little Gavin Cato in 1991, the racial disturbances that engulfed Brooklyn’s Crown Heights became the sole focus of the Times’s coverage. To be sure, a week of clashes between African Americans and Hasidic Jews was big news. But despite repeated references to the accident, in which the car climbed the curb, crushing Gavin and severely injuring his sister, the Times never ventured past the individual tragedy to consider that pedestrians and cyclists in New York City are constantly in harm’s way. The underlying cultural norms, traffic engineering rules, and political relations that value motorists’ time and convenience above the safety of others, remained unexamined.

Yet with each new grisly accident, the Times could have prob ed the circumstances that have allowed death under the wheels to become routine. Consider the following:

- The majority of speeding summonses in New York City are issued to highway drivers; police ticket fewer than 100 speeders a day on city streets (NYPD, Statistical Report VCAR950, 1989-91).
- New research confirms that the severity of pedestrian injury rises exponentially with vehicle speed at impact; whereas only 5 percent of crashes at 20 mph are fatal, fully 85 percent of those at 40 mph are fatal (DoT, U.K.: January 1993, London).
- City transportation chief Lucius Riccio took office pledging to be a “safety commissioner.” His safety initiatives consist largely of posting signs warning pedestrians to watch for speeding cars.
- In 1987 the office of Manhattan Borough President David Dinkins issued a report on pedestrian safety urging a “shift in the balance in favor of the pedestrian,” and calling for automatic felony charges when a motorist injures or kills a lawful pedestrian. As mayor, Mr. Dinkins has been silent on pedestrian safety (Manhattan Borough President’s Pedestrian Safety in Manhattan Report, October 1987).
- Following the death of Gavin Cato in 1991, Brooklyn District Attorney Charles Hynes promised to end his office’s adherence to the informal “Rule of Two,” under which a motorist must violate two laws to be indicted in a pedestrian crash (1991 press conference). Two years later, the rule was still in force.
- Motor vehicles cost New Yorkers $20 billion annually in ruined health and productivity from accidents, gridlock, pollution, and lost street space. All told, cars and trucks harm the city to the tune of $3,000 per person per year (KEA report, 1993).
- Half of midtown office workers told a City DoT survey they would try commuting by bicycle up to 10 miles if they had safe bike lanes. The commissioner of transportation says he will install lanes only after bicycle traffic grows to 500 per avenue per hour (NYC DoT report, September 1990).
- “Traffic-calming”—re-engineering streets to slow traffic and put other road users on a more equal footing with motorists—is being implemented widely in northern European countries such as Germany and the Netherlands.

Why Doesn’t the Times Care?

Out of all these developments, the only item covered by the Times has been the last. “Amsterdam Plans Wide Limits on Cars,” read a January 28, 1993, headline, on plans to widen sidewalks and add bicycle lanes to “squeeze cars off the streets” (Marise Simons, p. A10). In “Britain Puzzles Over a Peril: Crossing the Street,” the Times noted that “nearly one of every three traffic deaths in Britain involves a pedestrian run over by a car, …a situation officials attribute to urban drivers who drive too fast and with too little care.” (William E. Schmidt, November 25, 1991, p. A4).

Welcome coverage indeed; hard-hitting, too, but limited to Europe. In contrast, the Times’s May 9, 1993, piece on New York pedestrian deaths cast the blame all over the lot—from decriminalization of traffic violations to drunk pedestrians—so much so that nothing was seen to be at fault.

Meanwhile, a struggle was being waged in New York over a plan to bar daytime traffic from a block adjacent to Washington Square Park, the same block where the “killer car” had been launched the previous April. It was a classic New York civic battle, pitting car-using residents against an unlikely alliance of safety-conscious officials of New York University and “auto-free” advocates seeking to start a network of permanent street closings. The street was closed last December. No mention in the Times.

Children and Elderly at High Risk

The Times’s neglect of risks to pedestrians can be explained on several levels. The city beat has traditionally been under-reported, with coverage weighted toward the doings of officialdom. Transportation reporting in the Times particularly emphasizes the political over the experiential; high-stakes budget deals in Albany get more ink than the lethal imbalance of power on city streets. Moreover, with the brief exception of Sydney Schanberg, who was fired in 1985 for criticizing the Times’s editorial support for the Westway highway project, no Times columnist in decades has been attuned to the streets of the city.

In sharp contrast, New York Newsday’s Gail Collins writes repeatedly and eloquently on how “pedestrians are losing the battle.” Indeed, Newsday reporters consistently break stories that the Times overlooks. On May 7, Newsday reported ‘Transportation Alternatives’ finding that only a small fraction of speeding summonses are issued on local streets, where pedestrians and cyclists are at risk. Although the police couldn’t back up their claim to a higher rate of street summonses, the Times’s May 9 piece duly reported the overall rate of tickets citywide, letting the department off the hook. The following week, when the police commissioner had to turn to an aide to answer a city council member’s question on the street speed limit (30 mph), Newsday reported it, the Times did not.

But the reasons go deeper, to issues of victim identity and pedestrian status. Half of pedestrian fatalities in the city are children or seniors. While this may be partly because the very old and the very young can’t easily jump out of the path of speeding cars, it is also because they are literally “afoot” more
in the first place. Most people of working age take mass transit or drive cars, but the elderly walk around the neighborhood and kids play in the sidewalk and the street—far from the Times’s midtown venue where gridlock keeps vehicle speeds low.

Pedestrian Consciousness Is Minimal

Moreover, the nation’s greatest walking city has precious little pedestrian consciousness. Most everyone walks some of the time in New York, but those who call themselves walkers are passed over as eccentrics. City government excludes foot transportation from its statistical travel counts. In a culture that places a premium on speed, the disenfranchisement of pedestrians is accepted as the natural order. Motorists, transit riders, even bicyclists have constituency organizations, causes, and spokespersons. Pedestrians have only a fringe group from Manhattan’s East Side, Pedestrians First, which virtually ignores motor vehicle depredations and inveighs against bicycle riders.

Yet over the past half-dozen years, a social movement to take back city streets from automobiles has been taking root in New York City. This movement has powerful antecedents from three decades ago, ranging from campaigns that stopped expressways and kicked cars out of parks, to avowedly utopian proposals to ban private cars from Manhattan.

The earlier movement, though radical in retrospect, appeared less so at the time. It was led by respected writers and intellectuals, Paul Goodman, Lewis Mumford, and Jane Jacobs among them, and adhered to established rules of civic discourse—in which it benefited enormously from coverage in the Times. For example, between 1958 and 1963 the Times chronicled the campaign to ban cars from Washington Square in more than two dozen stories.

Bicyclists Lead Anti-Auto Movement

The new movement is more militant, employing direct action—traffic blockades, street-filling bicycle actions, even ticketing of motorists for “environmental violations.” It is spearheaded by bicyclists, an unpredictable and often unruly constituency that the Times disdains. And it is militantly anti-automobile, attacking motorized traffic not only for its appropriation of urban space but for sins ranging from deadly crashes to planet-wide pollution.

But while critics of cars have moved to the left, the Times’s environmental stance has drifted to the right. Today’s auto-free movement has no more in common with Times politics than any other contemporary radical tendency. If the people of New York City ever reclaim their streets, it will certainly be without the help of the New York Times.