



THE ARROGANCE OF MAN

Four essays by A. J. Carter

2. THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

"Technology is of considerable advantage to mankind and it would be retrograde to abandon it, but the application of technology . . . should be decentralized and democratized."

TECHNOLOGICAL projects forge ahead under their own momentum and are not easily deflected. Research discloses the possibility of a new model that is bigger than the old, and so it is produced with no assessment of its real worth in comparison with other uses of the same resources. Some of the most impressive triumphs of technology were the American excursions to the Moon, but to the inquiry "Why go to the Moon?" it is inadequate to reply "Because it is there." Concorde may be a fine if noisy aircraft, but how imperative is it to build supersonic aeroplanes? That it *can* be done is not a recommendation that it *should* be done.

When the men of prehistory fashioned tools, and their descendants installed machinery, the motive was utilitarian not artistic, but contemporary technology aspires after high performance for its own sake, neglecting the criterion of human well-being. It makes no sense to send a handful of astronauts to the Moon when millions of families are suffering from malnutrition on earth, or to increase the velocity of aircraft while reducing the number of trains. The technological thrust is accentuating inequality and should be urgently reappraised. This occurs not only in the richer nations. In most developing countries heavy industry takes precedence over agriculture because there is more glory in steelworks than in fertilizer.

Technology is of considerable advantage to mankind and it would be retrograde to abandon it, but the application of technology—the use to which it is put—should be decentralized and democratized. As technological projects become more specialized they also become more expensive. This can be surmounted by making the instruments of technology more accessible. Nuclear power calls for an abstruse technology which only a tiny minority can understand, but the operation of solar energy panels in the home can be readily understood.

Big technology is paralleled by big buildings and big towns, by big schools, big business, and big government. The individual is dwarfed by the magnitude of things. At the same time, the accelerating speed of change is outstripping the facility to adapt to it and must be arrested if the frenzy is not to drive people mad. The human context demands a smaller scale and a slower pace. Human beings are most content when their surroundings are in proportion to themselves. They yearn for stability and per-

manence. When they are overshadowed and confused, their lives lose depth, solidity, and meaning.

Comprehensive development and rapid change are together despoiling the everyday environment. A smooth flow of traffic is a favourite dream of planners, so motorways are cut through the countryside and houses are pulled down to make room for ring roads. Ugly buildings intrude on the harmony of towns and villages. Development schemes show scant concern for visual perspective and little discrimination between what ought to be swept away and what ought to be preserved. Redevelopment and renovation should be a gradual process through the centuries in which the new has time to blend with the old. The impetus to the fullest use of urban sites afforded by public collection of the rent of land would ensure that this was so, but when the rent of land is privately appropriated, and land has an exchange value, the pattern of development is distorted: central plots remain vacant while building encroaches on peripheral farmland; slums persist untouched while historic buildings are demolished; outer sprawl contrasts with inner decrepitude; and periods of stagnation are interspersed with spasms of wholesale destruction. The reconstitution of the urban environment now taking place is too abrupt and too swingeing to leave people's connexion with it intact. Men are becoming strangers in the places where they live.

In the first phase of urban evolution from about 5,000 BC to the fall of the Roman empire, towns thrived, reached a zenith, and declined, sometimes following this cycle more than once. In the present phase of urban evolution, uninterrupted expansion has altered not only the extent but also the configuration of the townscape. Continuous urban tracts have appeared in which towns have coalesced and ceased to have distinct centres and boundaries. In Britain, these conurbations—particularly London and the south-east of England and Birmingham and the west Midlands—are sucking population from the rest of the country and threatening to join up in a megalopolis like that on the north-eastern seaboard of the United States. Some people even see the London-Birmingham-Manchester axis as the northern tip of a belt of urban development winding through western Europe. The march of urbanization is swifter than the rise in world population, and the number of cities with over ten million inhabitants is expected to swell

from four in 1970 to seventeen in 1985, most of which will be in the developing countries. The denser the urban settlement the more insignificant the individual feels.

In transport, the last twenty-five years has seen a transformation, the pre-eminent feature of which has been the spread of the private motor car. The substitution of private transport for public transport does embody a decentralization of technology, but at the cost of congestion, dissipation of energy, and absorption of road and parking space. Moreover, the motor car has an appalling safety record, partly because driving a car is a skill at which most people are not as proficient as they like to suppose.

Superficially, private motoring might seem to epitomize individual mobility, but there are two reservations. The first is that there are substantial sections of the population who will always be without a car: the young, the elderly, those on the lower incomes, and others for whom the family car is not available. The second is that where private cars and public transport overlap they are incompatible, for the fewer the passengers using public transport the less economic it is, and when fares go up and services are pruned more people travel by car. The conjunction of these two facts should have prompted a review of transport policy long ago, yet the proliferation of the motor car has proceeded without question. The feasibility of coordinating public and private transport, and the design of vehicles appropriate to the electronic age, has barely been examined.

The principle of efficient transportation is that the capacity of the conveyance should be commensurate with the size and concentration of the population to be transported. Cars are a convenient mode of transport where population is sparse and identical journeys are rare, but they are an extravagant method of moving large numbers of people: a bus or coach can carry more passengers than numerous cars, and a train can carry more passengers than numerous buses or coaches. Superlative public transport that is fast, frequent, cheap, comfortable, punctual, reliable, and has ample coverage should be able to rival and vanquish the car in and between cities and towns. Properly evaluated, economically and socially, up-to-date railways are probably best at catering for travel over medium and long distances. For shorter journeys the most rational form of transport may also be tracked, perhaps a silent, automated electric tram. Experimentation should be intensified and motorway and urban road construction halted as a first step towards the reclamation of road and parking space for other uses. In rural areas, where regular public transport would not be viable, the car or some variant of it could flourish unchallenged, though it would not be essential for a car to be run by every household: an equivalent service could be provided by a fleet of taxis and self-drive cars on hire.

In countries where the population is scattered, public transport may have a more modest role to

play. This does not imply that priority should be given to prestigious highways for cars, which in developing countries are a luxury. Pathways between villages, and mechanical carts or trucks for those who till the soil, would confer a much broader benefit.

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