

The European Car Lobby

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The story of the European Union (EU) is often told as a tale of peace and economic prosperity. However, it can also be framed in terms of rapid growth in the transport sector, which is firmly in the grip of 'fossil capitalism'. The invention at the heart of this mobility model, which is causing widespread environmental destruction, is the internal combustion engine (Candeias et al. 2011; Balsmeyer/Knierim 2018; Haas 2018).

A glance at greenhouse gas balances makes this clear, as the transport sector was responsible for roughly 25% of EU-wide emissions in 2015. Although carmakers pledged to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions back in 1998, their voluntary commitment has had no effect on emissions. Consequently, the EU decided to impose a binding fleet target of 95 grams of CO₂ per kilometre by 2021. In late 2018, the EU agreed that emissions from new cars must fall by an average of 37.5% by 2030. This was a notable success for environmentalists. However, the decisions taken are still way behind the 2015 Paris climate agreement to restrict global warming to 1.5° Celsius.

Not only is growing traffic heating up the Earth's atmosphere, but the fine particulate matter and nitrogen oxide emitted by internal combustion engines is severely damaging human health. The diesel scandal showed that car companies manipulated the software in diesel vehicles to ensure that in laboratory tests their particulate and nitrogen emissions were a fraction of the levels found in actual road traffic. Whereas courts in the United States have made Volkswagen in particular pay out billions of dollars in compensation, so far politicians in the EU have handled the automotive industry with kid gloves.

Cars are continuing to emit huge quantities of toxic pollutants, and policymakers are taking no effective steps to stop them, largely because of carmakers' economic clout and powerful political lobbying. Volkswagen and other automotive manufacturers are among the most powerful businesses in the European Union.

For decades now, they have maintained very close links with the EU institutions, exerting substantial influence on their policy. So far, carmakers have successfully blocked effective climate-related and environmental protective measures in the European transport sector.

However, they risk missing a major turning point. For years now, the importance of alternative forms of propulsion, like the batteries used by electric vehicles, new mobility services such as car sharing and the interconnection of various modes of transport has been growing. Today, even autonomous cars are being tested (PwC 2017-2018; Daum 2018). Companies like Tesla, Apple, Google and China's BYD are pioneers in taking these developments forward. And the long-established car companies are now also pumping billions of euros into new technologies. At the same time, they are trying to defend their traditional business model, based on the internal combustion engine, for as long as possible – so far relatively successfully.

Regardless of whether the big carmakers succeed in leveraging their lobbying power to perpetuate the status quo in their industry or whether we end up seeing large numbers of driverless electric cars on our roads in the not-too-distant future, neither scenario will meet the need for a socio-environmental transport revolution.

This would require the replacement of the car by public transport, traffic avoidance measures and, last but not least, the transformation of residential areas and time regimes (Balsmeyer/Knierim 2018; MISEREOR/Brot für die Welt/Powershift 2018; Haas 2018). How can leftist political actors help to enforce ambitious limit values and hasten the demise of the internal combustion engine? Also, how can they prevent the transport revolution from being limited to smart and electric cars? The first prerequisite for achieving these goals is to analyse the huge lobbying power of automotive capital in the EU and devise strategies for breaking it apart.

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