

PLATFORM

JAUME CURBET

Death on the roads: a calculated massacre

With over a million deaths every year, the rising number of road accidents makes it the first cause of accidental death all over the world. More people are killed by road accidents than by wars, natural disasters, murders, on-the-job accidents and sport related incidents. In short, it is the most common form of violent death in the world today and the highest risk factor in modern society, especially for the 16 to 35 age group.

If that were not enough, a recent study has calculated the annual global cost of road accidents to be 500,000 million dollars. In developing countries road accidents produce a loss in resources that far outstrips the amount received in development aid. Forecasts indicate that by the year 2020, attending to road accident victims will swallow a quarter of the world's health resources, undermining the financial viability of public health systems worldwide.

If one takes a broad view of the situation, it is impossible to go on regarding this "calculated massacre" as a transitory side-effect of modern society that time and continued progress will eventually eliminate. Rather, it increasingly seems to be an intrinsic element of progress and consequently an essential feature in the 20th century development of the automobile industry. The extraordinary accumulation of wealth brought on by the success of this industry would have been unthinkable had there been precise regulations that drastically limited the uncontrolled increase



in the number of vehicles, as well as their size and speed — all of which are vital ingredients for the danger created by the huge volume of vehicles in circulation.

In fact, the prosperity of the automotive industry (which includes not only the manufacturers of vehicles, but also the road builders, those that manage the motorways, insurance companies and the oil industry) entirely depends on the simultaneous growth of the

previously mentioned risk factors. In other words, the industry needs to sell more and more cars that become bigger and more powerful over time.

Seen from this perspective, the limitations of traditional road safety policies become obvious: some 30 million dead and hundreds of thousands injured, and for the most part disabled for life, is the road safety balance of the 20th century. It is all due to not addressing the

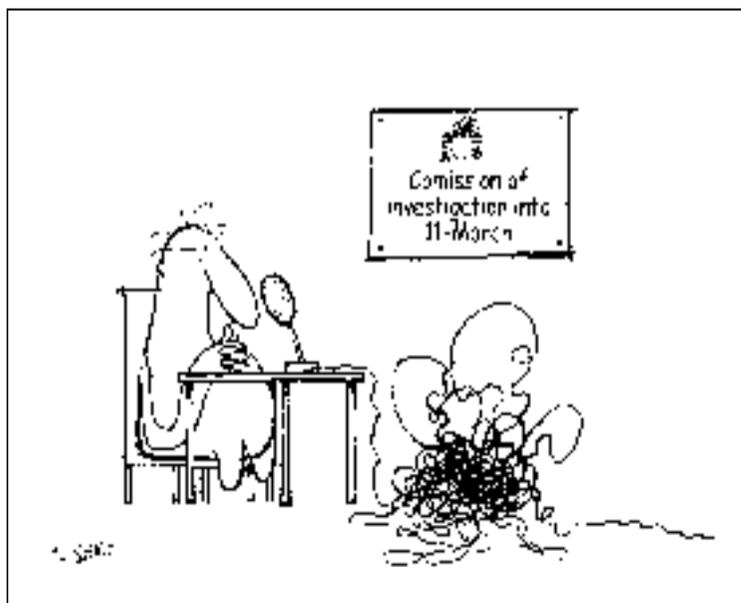
real root causes of danger on the roads, which are the wanton growth in the number of vehicles, their size and their performance.

What's more, even the capacity to effectively reduce risks to realistic achievable limits has been lacking. For example, no one has come up with unavoidable obstacles for limiting speed. So, instead of focusing on eliminating the dangers produced by vehicles, road safety policy has merely tried to make the risk generated by the mass use of vehicles more tolerable. In a way, these policies contain the possibility of politically questioning the unsustainable cost for society (not only in dead and disabled, but also in the degradation of the environment and the abuse of public spaces) due to the limitless, incessant development of the automotive industry.

This is how it will be until such a point that, as one expert says: "in the hypothetical scenario of a transparent and democratic political process, without interference from advertising or corporations, it would not be possible to rule out the establishment of certain legal restrictions on the use of the automobile, as has happened with firearms in culturally developed countries, or what has happened more recently with tobacco.

Any movement in this direction would mean enormous reductions in the volume of business in the various markets and services of the automotive industry." As long as this is not the case, the responsibility for this "calculated massacre" depends exclusively on the discretion of drivers.

THE STING BY JAP



VIEWPOINT

MANUEL CASTAÑO

The predictability of democracy

Bush will defeat Kerry in the November presidential election with between 53% and 58% of the vote, according to the mathematical predictions of a group of social science researchers. It's worth it for us to bear their predictions in mind, albeit with a grain of salt.

In 1996 they accurately predicted Clinton's win and in 1998 they got it right again when they forecast that Bush senior would confound the negative polls. On the other hand, four years ago they put Gore

above Bush, saying he would get 60% of the vote. This was so off the mark that it's impossible to use the unexpected and inconclusive Florida factor as an excuse.

Using elaborate mathematical models that combine macroeconomic data with political factors, the researchers also manage to factor in the fatigue of being in power. Just for the record, the wear and tear on government is not so important when it comes to re-election following a first term; the difficulty arises after a second term when the major-

ity of the electorate want to see new faces and so favour the alternative.

In any event, applying such calculations here is highly unlikely in that they are derived from political models that assume candidates will run competent election campaigns; a far cry from the thoughtless improvisation seen in March. Equally, the methodology would require clear electoral rules, making situations like Maragall's *a posteriori* victory an impossibility. Lucky them, those that live in countries that hold mathematics in such high esteem.



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