

Stuck Accelerators: Toyotas and the Fossil-Fuel Growth Economy

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
05 February 2010

The story of Toyota cars having accelerator-pedal and brake problems, causing out of control speed and possible crash death in a fireball, is a near perfect allegory for something far more serious: the burning of the planet with fossil fuels including gasoline for cars. The vehicle for the burning of the planet is none other than the fossil-fueled growth economy. The difference this has with the Toyota phenomenon is that we do have real brakes for the global vehicle of destruction, which Toyotas may not have ("News Alert: Toyota Says Prius Brakes Had Design Flaws" - New York Times, Feb. 4, 2010).

As a long-time car-free activist and defender of nature, I have had until now a reaction of boredom and disgust for what I see is a predictable, consumerist news story.

I hate to see anyone injured by a car, especially pedestrian and bicyclist victims. Fiery crashes are tragic and avoidable if people would not buy cars. The drivers and passengers of any vehicle are taking great risk and do damage their health even without crashing, by virtue of sitting in a car excessively, filling up the gas tank, and causing psychic harm to themselves by driving in an age of known global warming. The animals crushed on the roads -- a million a day in the U.S. -- are never considered in government policy or corporate agendas. Instead, the effect of a recall of cars on stock prices is more real in the news.

It is doubtful that people will learn what they should from the Toyota fiasco: that driving cars is the problem, and that technology fails. When Ford Motor Co. calculated that Pinto cars could be made with gasoline tanks prone to rupture and explosion, just to save a few dollars per manufactured car, the news of this crime did nothing to get people to question the dominance of transportation by corrupt executives and stockholders. Lately, the problem of cell-phone chattering and texting has become a big deal, with New York Times editorials punctuating the apparent crisis -- when it is really the driving that kills people. Take away cell phones: over 40,000 U.S. citizens are still slaughtered per year in crashes, and another 100,000 perhaps from diseases from exhaust each year.

So can we finally question driving? Is our society incapable of reform, so that car-sharing and a preference for bicycling and mass transit can prevail? Not only would people be saved from crashes and disease, but they would save money and get more exercise. The average speed of the U.S. motorist is but five miles per hour, when adjusted for the time spent in traffic gridlock, in earning money to buy and maintain a car, to earn money for the fuel and insurance, etc. Unfortunately, the capacity to reform the system of corporate profit of dominant industries over human and animal life, and to protect our precious climate, is about nil.

That is because the accelerator of the fossil-fueled growth economy is stuck, and we are speeding toward the wall of resource limits and ecological degradation. Peak oil and overshoot of nature's carrying capacity have visited us before we had a chance to change land-use and work patterns. It is too bad President Obama is not an agent of real change, when preserving the big automobile companies and wars over oil take precedence over the welfare of the American people and the planet we all live on. The White House is more concerned over the Toyota corporation's and Wall Street's reactions than the safety of drivers, when it wants Secretary of Transportation LaHood to never say again "Stop driving it." But let's not make the mistake of praising the Secretary, because his real policy is to keep four-wheeled global-warming coffins selling like hotcakes: he wants U.S. car companies to keep "getting their acts together."

To take our foot off the accelerator of the fossil-fueled growth economy is to support local economies, stop commuting long distances, maximize local food production, establish cooperatives, engage in bartering and mutual aid, and love nature far more than accumulating dollars for hyper-consumption. These changes all have to come, but why smash into the wall at full speed when we can at least slow down and possibly lessen the impact? Is all we can do to avoid petroleum pollution is just step over the oil slicks on the asphalt wastelands of parking lots?

What can the average person do to gain some safety and to support local, ecological economics? Do not buy a car. If you must, buy a used one in order to keep money in the community. Don't fool yourself that there's a "clean car" to "help

Mother Earth." And, as the Transportation Secretary told Congress regarding the unsafe Toyota -- but applying his advice also to the fossil-fueled growth economy -- "Stop driving it."

submitted to the New York Times by

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Note: I gave the New York Times first dibs on this article as an op-ed, but they said they were gridlocked by Toyota pieces. However, they did seem interested in Erik's cartoon, although it might go against the newspaper's openness to denying the urgent reality of peak oil.

- JL

The head of the U.N. beat me to it regarding the allegory. Abyss, wall, same.

"Our foot is stuck on the accelerator and we are heading towards an abyss," the UN Secretary General said in a speech to the World Climate Conference. Ban Ki-moon warned that climate change could spell widespread economic disaster. He noted that he had just visited the Arctic and was alarmed by what he saw.

This story was referenced in The Oil Drum, September 3, 2009 (bad link to original -- now use