

“By the middle teens,” Longman writes, “the financial condition of many major systems . . . had become desperate.” After America entered World War I, in 1917, the nation’s rail system was overwhelmed, with soaring volume and plummeting net profits. The government soon took over the system.

“Though railroads reverted back to private ownership after the war,” Longman writes, “the pattern of meddlesome and inefficient rate-regulation continued for

another 60 years.” Air freight and trucking bit deeply into the railroads’ markets; service deteriorated. Finally, in 1980, “alarmed by a series of huge railroad bankruptcies in the Northeast and Midwest,” Congress stripped the ICC of its power to set freight rates. “The dramatic resurgence of the [freight] rail industry since then,” Longman concludes, “underscores just how costly the ICC regulation of this industry had been.”

## Screening Out Sex Bias

“Orchestrating Impartiality: The Impact of ‘Blind’ Auditions on Female Musicians” by Claudia Goldin and Cecilia Rouse, in *Working Paper* 5903 (Jan. 1997), National Bureau of Economic Research, 1050 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge, Mass. 02138.

Discrimination against women in hiring is often alleged, but hard to prove. Goldin and Rouse, economists at Harvard and Princeton universities, respectively, examine one case that offers an unusual opportunity to gauge the extent of sex bias: symphony orchestras.

Orchestras traditionally have been largely male bastions. Many conductors looked upon female musicians as less talented than men or too temperamental. “I just don’t think that women should be in an orchestra,” Zubin Mehta, conductor of the Los Angeles Symphony (1964-78) and of the New York Philharmonic (1978-90), once said. Women seldom got the chance even to apply. Orchestra positions paid well and turnover was low, and when new musicians were to be hired, most who were invited to audition were “the (male) students of a select group of teachers,” the authors note. The “Big Five” orchestras (in Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, New York, and Philadelphia) were at least 95 percent male until the mid-1960s.

Since then, however, most major orchestras have opened up their hiring practices.

One change is unique: using “screens,” such as a room divider placed on the stage, to hide the sex of candidates from the judges. The result: the proportion of female members of the “Big Five” orchestras has dramatically increased, to 25 percent. The New York Philharmonic is 35 percent female. (Despite Mehta’s previously expressed opinion, 45 percent of the new hires during his tenure there were women.)

Hiring has increased partly because the pool of female applicants is larger. But screening out bias, Goldin and Rouse conclude from an analysis of audition records of eight major symphony orchestras, made it 50 percent more likely that a woman would be advanced from some of the preliminary rounds of an audition, and also significantly improved her chances of being selected in the final round. Overall, their study of the personnel rosters of a larger number of orchestras shows that the use of “screens” was responsible for at least one-fourth of the increase in female musicians since 1970.

## SOCIETY

### *Honk If You Love Your Car*

“Cars and Their Enemies” by James Q. Wilson, in *Commentary* (July 1997), 165 E. 56th St., New York, N.Y. 10022.

If there is one feature of American life that inspires near-universal revulsion in social critics, it is Americans’ love affair with the car. The latest blast comes from Jane Holtz Kay, the architecture critic for the *Nation*. In

*Asphalt Nation* (1997), she takes a sledgehammer to the hated shiny object, shouting “sprawl . . . pollution . . . congestion . . . commuting.” She wants mass transit, railroads, and more biking and walking. What Kay and

other auto haters don't seem to grasp, argues Wilson, a professor of management and public policy at the University of California, Los Angeles, is that Americans have very good reasons for preferring cars.

The debate between car lovers and car haters is really over "private benefits and public goods," he says. Virtually everyone is against pollution, energy inefficiency, excessive noise, fatal accidents, and the other social ills blamed on the automobile. But people choose their transportation based on what's good for them. It's an easy choice, says Wilson: "The automobile is more flexible, more punctual, supplies greater comfort, provides for carrying more parcels, creates more privacy, enables one to select fellow passengers, and, for distances over a mile or more, requires less travel time." The best studies, he adds, show that getting to work is quicker in cars than by mass transit.

As a practical matter, he notes, there is no real debate: Americans have voted. In 1960, 20 percent of U.S. households still didn't own a car; by 1990, only 10 percent were carless. That year, in 19 of the 20 largest metropolitan areas, at least 75 percent of trips to and from work were made by a lone person in an automobile. "The exception," Wilson says, "was the New York metropolitan region, but even there—with an elaborate mass-transit system and a residential concentration high enough to make it possible for some people to walk to work—solo car use made up over half of all trips to work."

America's car haters often hold up Europe

as a shining example of a superior, auto-snubbing way of life. But the fact is that the number of autos per capita grew three times faster in Western Europe than in the United States between 1965 and 1987, Wilson says. "Despite [government] policies that penalize car use, make travel very expensive, and restrict parking spaces, Europeans, once they can afford to do so, buy cars, and drive them."

Though critics minimize the effort, the United States "has tried to copy the European investment in mass transit," he points out. Transportation planners have struggled to get people out of their cars and into buses, trains, and subways (and car-pools). "Despite spending about \$100 billion, Washington has yet to figure out how to do it." During the 1980s, the Metrorail system in the nation's capital expanded from 30 to 73 miles of line and opened an additional 30 stations—yet the number of people driving to work increased by 414,000, and the transit share of all commutes declined.

The social costs of the car can be moderated, Wilson says. "Auto-exhaust pollution has been dramatically reduced in this country by redesigning engines, changing fuels (largely by removing lead), and imposing inspection requirements." More can be done, by raising gas taxes and building bike pathways, for example. Yet Wilson doubts that the critics will ever be satisfied, because so many of them dislike not just the car but all that it stands for: privacy, autonomy, speed, and "the joyous sensation of driving on beautiful country roads."

## *Abandon All Cars!*

It is time for Americans to get out of their cars, Jane Holtz Kay, author of *Asphalt Nation* (1997), declares in *Preservation* (May–June 1997).

*"If you build it, they will come," according to the cliché. If you build highways, more traffic will come, Americans stuck in traffic have begun to realize. We can look back at a 75-year history of traffic begetting roads begetting more traffic and hence more roads. . . .*

*We are learning that if you build it right, they will come and stay. If you reinforce cities and Main Streets with compact, transit-friendly neighborhoods, if you build and zone communities as pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly places, if you end subsidies for the car and invest in mass transit, and if you will run the automobile-proliferation reel in reverse, they will come. "They" will be walkers, transit riders, and bicyclists, a.k.a. people. It is human mobility, not automobility, that preserves our communities and their context. It is proximity, not car-bred sprawl, that holds our historic landscape intact.*