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Address: Presentation of the Report on Mobility and the Urban Environment†

Carlo Ripa di Meana*

The reports published in this "Fiat Report on Mobility and the Urban Environment" provide a new and important contribution to the search for solutions that would permit the automobile to retain its status as a preferred consumer good and a symbol of individual liberty and autonomy, which are among the essential values of our industrialized societies. The statements of the Green Paper, which the Commission adopted last year on my proposal, must similarly be understood as an attempt to create a framework at the Community level, which would allow European cities to take the necessary measures to prevent the automobile from becoming the scapegoat of urban degradation.

You see, I am among those who believe that the automobile continues to be an object of desire in our societies. Everybody, these days, would prefer to own a safer, more comfortable, and less polluting automobile. But we must be careful that this "dream car" ideal does not increasingly turn into a veritable nightmare.

You must be well aware of the number of casualties on European roads every year, namely, 50,000 dead and 1.5 million injured. You yourself notice daily the anguish of cities paralyzed by traffic and suffocated by toxic emissions. It has been estimated that the average commuter spends one hour in his car each day driving to and from work. Worse yet is the risky adventure that leisure travel has become, especially during the height of the tourist season. The war stories grow more dramatic every year. Two weeks ago, several traffic jams that were over 100 kilometers...
long occurred in France and Germany, and tens and tens of thousands of people were forced to spend the night in their vehicles. In some regions of France, schools were reopened at night to shelter the unfortunate motorists, as if we had been faced with a natural catastrophe.

Who is responsible? Of course, one could always accuse citizens of using their cars irrationally . . . . Certainly, citizens need to be educated. Even manufacturers can make a useful contribution towards this end; I wish that their advertising campaigns would not be limited to merely bragging about the performance of their vehicles, but that they would also contain educational elements as well. This would also be in the manufacturers’ interest.

As for the public authorities, they have neglected this problem and the severity of its consequences far too long. They have neither been able to build an adequate infrastructure nor have they provided valid alternatives.

Finally, let us not forget that industry—even though it is true that it has made efforts, especially of late—must bear equal responsibility. With respect to automobile safety, for example, experts agree that the number of severe accidents could be reduced if the currently available technology were fully employed to improve automobile safety.

In any event, in this respect, as well as in the area of pollutant emissions, we lag behind the United States. This gap is even more disconcerting if we compare the United States’ population density of 26 inhabitants per square kilometer with that of the European Community’s 143 inhabitants per square kilometer, and if we further consider that 80 percent of the population of the EEC lives in metropolitan areas. In addition, the automobile density in Europe, which is already 4 cars per 10 inhabitants, is destined to increase by a third by the end of the century. And though we trail behind our friends from across the Atlantic by several years, it is my hope that the new Community directives regarding the emissions of toxic gas and noise will allow us to eliminate this gap.

In light of these problems, which concern the safety of and our respect for the environment, industry must abandon its traditionally defensive strategy, which seeks, with all available means, to completely prevent any new legislation.

In an increasingly international market, this policy appears short-sighted because the short-term advantages are outweighed in the medium and long term by the loss of competitiveness vis-à-vis foreign competitors.
What seems even more serious to me is that the previous neglect of certain European manufacturers, and their current lag in the areas of green technology and safety exacerbates their difficulties and compels them to ask for transitional periods. It is no surprise, therefore, that the manufacturers who were able to develop these technologies more quickly, increasingly impose their standards on everybody else.

The Fiat group seems eager, at least as far as the environment is concerned, to meet the challenge. I can only congratulate myself for that and hope that the public authorities in Italy, just as the governments of other member states in the Community are already doing, will know how to facilitate this process with a policy of fiscal incentives.

The ardent apprehensions, which the industry has expressed frequently and vociferously for fear of not being able to keep up with Community initiatives, now appear groundless. But rest assured, the Commission does not intend to make the automobile industry the culprit. As a matter of fact, we are aware that over the last few years this industry has made far greater efforts than other industrial sectors.

Some critics tell us that, in some situations, the automobile is becoming the object of persecution. I respond to this observation with a firm "no." As a matter of fact, the Commission seeks to establish a balanced policy that requires contributions from everybody and distributes the burden equitably. In light of this perspective, I can presently announce that we will ask the oil industry—which can still do a great deal to contribute to the fight against pollution—to make a special effort.

On a more general level, I would like to direct your attention to a proposal that I will launch this year, and which will require enterprises to subject themselves to an environmental audit in order to ensure that production processes are managed in close with an eye toward environmental restrictions. I am convinced that the resulting costs that the industry will have to bear will be offset by the benefits it will realize in terms of reduced energy consumption and research for industrial solutions that will minimize the negative impact of production processes on the whole Community and the environment.

As I have already stressed, the [EC] administration bears a great deal of responsibility. There is no need for me to point out the shortcomings, delays, and gaps. They are well known, running the gamut from insufficient investments in public transportation to general shortcomings of environmental policy. Today, I
would particularly like to reproach the administration for its lack of courage to make decisions that are necessary but unpopular.

For example, the solutions to congested urban traffic that are actually discussed are merely partial remedies. Although useful in the short term, solutions such as more parking spots or intelligent traffic control do not address the real problem, which calls for limiting access of automobiles to downtown areas through methods ranging from a complete ban, to access during certain time periods only upon payment of a toll.

But we must be able to look even further ahead. The automobile is subject to a vicious cycle that perpetuates itself: the car degrades urban life, and so we flee to seek better locales: nevertheless, we come and go by car . . . which increases the degradation of the environment on an aggregate basis. And so the cycle begins anew.

One of the major messages of my Green Paper regarding the urban environment is that in light of the problem of mobility and the massive number of cars in the city—whether they are moving or parked—the only avenue to explore, the only policy worth pursuing, is the construction of a city according to its historical design. This happens in one and the same action, namely by restoring and developing that which actually has been at the heart of European culture: urbanity, this ethic which guides the coexistence of diverse groups in the city. It is urbanity, the manner of solving the conflicts that arise from the shared use of the public space, that is the basis of European culture. Reestablishing urbanity with all its rights, this is the foundation for a European body politic.

The Green Paper clearly tackles all the questions that are relevant for the necessary regulation of urban pollution and nuisances that are primarily caused by traffic. But above all, it seeks to promote an urban design that is characterized by bringing such activities as housing, work, culture, [and] social life closer together, and thus diminishes the need for excessive travel. This bringing together of diverse activities will guarantee that everybody has access to everything, at least in theory, as long as a certain population density economically justifies restricting activities to a certain area.

The economic rationale—which is true of commercial as well as cultural activities—postulates that an activity depends on a certain volume of customers. At the same time, proximity and density occasion concentrated, short-distance traffic. Thus, an
efficient infrastructure that includes public transportation has every likelihood of success. What the Green Paper proposes is the recovery of the historic continuity of the European city, characterized by proximity and density. This is sought not out of nostalgia, but out of a desire for efficiency in the fight against the nuisances caused by too much mobility.

I believe that this search for a new role for the public space, tailored to the human being and respectful of the quality of life of all citizens, is also apparent in the contributions to the Fiat Report that is presented to you today. That is why I extend a warm thank you to its promoters.