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Appendix

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Mobility as a Product

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Faced with a crisis in the mass production of automobiles, the industry has responded with lean production, which has made possible a more personalized product free of defects and a shorter production cycle. These strategies – lean production, total quality and a minimum time to market – are, in fact, the main features of the Japanese
response to the Taylor/Ford model of manufacturing, which with its mythical Model-T has determined the development of manufacturing and of consumer patterns.

However, now that automobile producers are able to respond to the rapid market changes with unprecedented flexibility and speed, there is evidence of the emergence of a far deeper rift between the process of production and the way our society has developed.

Even the most defect-free Toyota with a three year warranty gets stuck in rush hour traffic jams and takes up valuable urban space in parking lots or on the street, contributing to the pollution of our cities. Product quality and personalization are not worth much more when, as J. Robert has shown, traffic in a city like Paris moves at an average speed of about 15 km/h for private vehicles and 10 km/h for public transport. At peak hours, the pace is further reduced depriving vehicles of their basic function: mobility.

We have, in fact, reached a situation of near paralysis in our cities, the result of the rate at which automobiles are produced and consumed. For this reason, it is necessary to reevaluate and renegotiate the very function for which automobiles have been designed, assembled, distributed, and acquired. We must question the functions that have been guaranteed at the time of sale — and which have no relationship with reality — and also the consumer mentality which sees the car as a product to use and dispose of. The sheer numbers involved — 28 million automobiles registered in Italy — ensure that the promised ‘speed’ and ‘freedom of movement’ will never be realized.

Automobiles and the City — A Reassessment

It is time for a general reassessment of the automobile’s relationship with the city and for a reevaluation of the entire system of relations which has been the basis of capitalist development for the last 100 years. Besides providing a model for consumerism and for the structuring of urban and extra-urban spaces, this system of relations has, in fact, been defined both as the micro-economic distribution of power within the manufacturing process and the geographical distribution of macro-economic power (petroleum cycle).

As noted earlier, the automobile industry led the way in the development of industrial organisation, first with the Taylor/Ford model and then with the Toyota model. At the same time, the duality automobile/mobility helped define the world order that emerged after World War II, a world order that was shaped by patterns of energy consumption and by the geological distribution of petroleum.

Thus, the critical situation we have now reached regarding mobility as a function of the automobile — or rather as non-function of the automobile — is a symptom of a much more far reaching crisis of our entire mode of development.

Quality in Relation to External Factors

When, along the zero defects, we also have zero mobility and a serious pollution problem, we must redefine the concept of product quality so as to include not simply