

In Praise of Home Delivery Culture

Writing at *Reason* magazine, Liz Wolfe lauds home delivery culture — the increasing tendency of Americans to Netflix and chill while relying on Amazon Prime, Instacart, Grubhub, and other services to drop the goods we consume off on our front porches.

Wolfe nails some of the individual benefits, and beneficiaries, of this “late-stage capitalism” phenomenon. It allows working people to spend more of their limited “free” time with their families instead of trudging up and down store aisles. It eases the shopping problems and increases the options of the elderly and disabled.

But Wolfe doesn’t mention a couple of the biggest SOCIAL benefits: Delivery culture is also a huge potential boon for the environment and in terms of reduced infrastructure costs.

Fewer individual shoppers means fewer cars clogging the roads and filling store parking lots (in fact, given Wolfe’s inclusion of ride-sharing services like Uber, it may mean fewer cars, period).

Fewer individual shoppers also means less retail space to heat, cool, and light.

And those two things translate into three other things: Fewer greenhouse emissions, less money spent building and maintaining roads, and more land potentially left as “green space.”

One Amazon or Instacart delivery van bringing groceries to 20 households reduces the number of vehicles out on the road for that purpose, during that time frame, by 95%, and the number of total miles driven for those shopping needs by some smaller factor.

One Uber vehicle transporting ten individuals or parties per day means at least five fewer cars taking up parking spaces for hours at a time at the non-home ends of round trips.

And because those services are operated with an eye toward maximizing profit, the vehicles used are likely to be more fuel-efficient and better maintained than your jalopy, and the drivers are likely to choose the most efficient routes, reducing miles driven, wear and tear on roads, and overall emissions.

Much of the focus on home delivery culture, both positive and negative, is on lots and lots of stuff becoming more and more accessible. That’s true, and relevant, whether you’re a fan of consumer culture or bemoan it.

But home delivery culture also incentivizes businesses to do things that are good for all of us. And it does so through market mechanisms rather than through political haggling.

The iron laws of profit and loss are more reliable motivators of business behavior than public scolding or government regulation.