

Europe – their puttering Ladas, their tin-box Trabants – are enduring testimony to that.

Most resources work best when they aren’t pooled. Competition encourages diversification as well as innovation. A business like Google can draw on sufficient resources to experiment successfully with a self-driving car. But these resources are not sufficient to stifle all rival experiments. However large Google looms over Silicon Valley, a hive of independent activity still takes place in its shadow. The creation of a steady stream of transformative, life-enhancing products depends on competitive markets in which a balance has been struck between scale and diversity. Market competition produces lots of useful things that make people’s lives better. States shouldn’t even try to compete: they’ll just mess it up.

There are limits to what markets can do, however. Champions of the free market have a tendency to extrapolate from its creative power an unjustified faith in its ability to solve any problem. Yes, private enterprise has given us the self-driving car, which may one day have the power to change the way we live. (Sit in the back, read a book, sleep, work out, make out and suddenly your daily commute becomes the best part of the day.) But that car still needs roads to drive on and rules to govern what happens there. What about the people who don’t want a self-driving car, or can’t afford one, or simply enjoy being behind the wheel? Who is going to manage the transition from a driven to a driverless world? Google won’t do it. Government will have to.

If the self-driving car is going to become the industry norm, it will take time and it will be messy. The transport network will have to adapt, the insurance industry will have to adapt and the legal system will have to adapt (not least to decide what to do with all those people who still insist on their right to have crashes). The market may be able to take care of some of these things over time, but it won’t be able to take care of all of them, certainly not all at the same time. Change on that scale is too fractious: as Hobbes said, people have an inbuilt tendency to collide. Government needs Google to build a car that really works. Google needs government if its car is ever really going to work.