

**“PUT THE FUN BETWEEN YOUR LEGS!”: THE POLITICS AND
COUNTERCULTURE OF THE BICYCLE**

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This project is a cultural study of bicycles and the politics that inform the everyday practice of cycling. Through a close examination of media, rhetoric, and protest, I focus my attention on groups of people who believe that bicycles are not merely forms of transportation, rather, they are instruments of communication, sources of identity, vehicles for pleasure, and tools for technological, cultural, and political critique. This ‘counterculture’ is comprised of feminists, socialists, punks, anti-globalization activists, writers, environmentalists, and others who have created and developed a politics of cycling through a dialectic of communication and action. Through this dialectical process, these cyclists have not only created an important body of knowledge that speaks to issues of gender, class, culture, technology, and ideology, they also demonstrate both how these issues are interrelated and how people can actively negotiate and contest their meanings. As such, they reveal the capacity for others to effectively utilize grassroots organization, alternative media production, and non-violent direct action as a means to initiate political mobilization and positive change in an era of corporatization, globalization, and widespread cynicism. More than anything, they remind us that revolution can, and must, begin in our everyday lives.

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This project is dedicated to the bike punx and to all of the cyclists, activists, writers, teachers, musicians, artists, zinesters, travelers, wingnuts, and freaks that make this world worth living in.



Figure 1-Dedication (photo by Jon Pratt)

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PREFACE

Like many children who grew up in the Midwest, I used a bike in order to ride to friends' houses, to commute to school and to get Slurpees at the 7-11 across town. Biking was an easy way to maneuver the suburban landscape and it was a something that I could do with my friends, whether we were building homemade jumps or riding around aimlessly. More than anything, biking was a great deal of fun. Years later, when I started graduate school in Pittsburgh, I was searching for that same sense of enjoyment that I experienced when I was a kid in Michigan. When I started to use a bicycle as my primary source of transportation in the city, there were a lot of issues to contend with such as huge potholes, slotted curbside drainage gates, harsh winters, big hills, traffic speeding by on my left-hand side, and the constant threat of being smacked by a driver's side-door that is swung open without warning ("getting doored"). The more I rode, the more I became attuned to the fact that biking was still a great deal of fun, and *also* to the fact that most car drivers seemed like they did not want me on the street. Throughout my first year of commuting, I was consistently honked at, given dirty looks through windshields, almost run off the road, and had people yell things like, "get off the street!", "get a car!", and my personal favorite, "nice bike, faggot!" Being a stubborn and opinionated polemicist with interests in punk rock and anarchism, these challenges fueled my desire to ride and to make myself visible as a cyclist. Still, I wondered why my presence on the street was seen as such a threat to the people around me. This project was propelled by that very question.

As my interest in biking blossomed, the initial question developed into a series of questions that no longer remained focused upon issues of conduct or civility. Rather, I began to understand how there are different dynamics at work when one considers the relationships between the technology and narratives of the bicycle, the act of cycling, and the cultural context in which bicycles are produced, popularized, politicized, and ultimately ridden. This project is a way for me to use the bicycle as a means to navigate the intellectual boundaries between scholarship on communication, technology, urban studies, and activism in order to more clearly understand the function of the bicycle and politics of cycling. Moreover, it ultimately provides some answers to the initial question that has lingered in my mind for over five years.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

“When someone becomes a daily bicyclist s/he makes an emphatic break with one of the basic assumptions and ‘truths’ of the dominant society: that you must have a car to get around.”¹

On July 25th 1896, thousands of cyclists in San Francisco took part in a massive event that was part celebration and part protest. Based upon years of tireless agitation against city officials, Folsom street—the main boulevard through the Mission—had finally been paved at the request of cycling clubs and individual cyclists who were part of the burgeoning “Good Roads” movement that had emerged in the United States since the 1880’s. July 25th was the day on which the newest paved section of Folsom was scheduled to open, and a rally had been planned. While cyclists were elated at their achievement, they had organized *en masse* in order to use the event as a way to draw much needed attention to the dangerous conditions that were still evident on their roads, which were largely unpaved, muddy, cobbled paths that were crosscut by streetcar tracks and cable slots.² Before the rally, a spokesman for the South Side Improvement Club stated that “the purpose for the event is three-fold; to show our strength, to celebrate the paving

¹ Chris Carlsson. “Cycling Under the Radar—Assertive Dissertion,” in *Critical Mass, Bicycling's Defiant Celebration*, ed. Chris Carlsson (Oakland: AK Press, 2002),78.

² Quoted in Hank Chapot. “The Great Bicycle Protest of 1896,” in *Critical Mass*, 177.

of Folsom Street and to protest against the conditions of San Francisco pavement in general and of Market Street in particular.”³

On that Saturday night, nearly one hundred thousand spectators watched as the enormous pack of cyclists rode through San Francisco’s streets on bicycles, old-fashioned “high-wheelers,” and homemade tandems that were designed to look like pirate ships and chariots.⁴ Many of the cyclists were dressed in costume, some men rode in drag, and hundreds of bikes were “adorned with ribbons and painted canvas with lanterns strung from the handlebars.”⁵ Processions of cyclists, including children, women, and cycling clubs from the surrounding regions, rode past the delighted crowd that showered the parade with cheers and fireworks as it proceeded down Folsom and made its way toward Market Street.⁶ Despite some of the mayhem that resulted within the crowd following the event, the demonstration was considered to be an overwhelming success and the next morning’s headline in the *San Francisco Call* read: “San Francisco Bicycle Riders as Disciples of Progress.”⁷

On July 25th 1997, exactly 101 years after the demonstration on Market Street, cyclists in San Francisco similarly participated in a massive event that was part celebration and part protest. Like previous “Critical Mass” rides that had taken place on the last Friday of every month since 1992, cyclists had converged in order to celebrate the act of cycling, demonstrate their collective strength, and send a clear message to the public: “We are not blocking traffic, we *are* traffic!” Critical Mass had originated in San Francisco and had grown in size and popularity due to the fact that cyclists felt marginalized and disenfranchised by the unwritten rule of 20th century transportation—streets are meant for cars, and for cars only. Conceived of as a mass commute

³ Chapot, 177.

⁴ Chapot, 179.

⁵ Chapot, 179.

⁶ Chapot, 179.

⁷ *The San Francisco Call* (San Francisco), 26 July 1896.

and celebration, Critical Mass had functioned for five years as a leaderless, non-dogmatic “organized coincidence”⁸ that ushered in a new wave of grassroots bike activism and served to politicize the act of cycling in the United States. In the years and months leading up to the July 25th ride in 1997, Critical Mass in San Francisco had been heavily scrutinized by Mayor Willie Brown, who had vowed to crack down on the rides following his election in 1995, likening the group to the notorious Hell’s Angels and referring to the rides as a “critical mess.”⁹ Much to the chagrin of the Mayor and numerous members of the city government, the rides had persisted.

On that Friday evening of July 25th 1997, roughly 5000 cyclists took to the streets of San Francisco in order to celebrate biking and assert their collective right to use the city’s roads safely and enjoyably. Like any Critical Mass ride, there were cyclists and bicycles that were adorned with costumes, others participants who carried literature that would be dispersed on the ride, and swarms of people who rode atop bicycles of every shape, size, color, make and model. The festive mood in the crowd must have surely echoed the sentiments of the cyclists who had amassed on that same day, in the same city, over a century ago.

However, the participants of Critical Mass were not cheered on by 100,000 strong or showered with fireworks, instead, they were abruptly met by the San Francisco police department. Without warning, police officers surrounded 100 of the cyclists and proceeded to handcuff and arrest each of them—many of whom were physically assaulted without provocation or resistance.¹⁰ These individuals were taken to jail, had their bicycles seized, and were each charged with failure to disperse, unlawful assembly, disobeying a peace officer, and blocking

⁸ Chris Carlsson. “The Hidden Class Politics of Bicycling,” *Critical Mass essays, flyers, images from San Francisco 1992-1998*, <http://www.scorcher.org/cmhistory>.

⁹ Paul Dorn. “Pedaling to Save the City,” *The Quarterly*, (San Francisco: San Francisco State University, 1998), <http://userwww.sfsu.edu/~pdorn/urban.html>.

¹⁰ Images of police assault at Critical Mass events are available through the Brass Check website at: <http://www.brasscheck.com/cm>.

traffic.¹¹ The next morning, the newspapers had a markedly different tone than the same editions in 1896; the headline of the San Francisco Chronicle read “S.F. Bike Chaos—250 arrests”¹² What is even more ironic is that Critical Mass cyclists were essentially arrested for using the very roads that were built because of the pressure exerted by 1896 event.

Given the radical transformations that have taken place in the last 100 years with respect to technology, culture, and communication, it is interesting that bicycles and cycling could serve a similar political function in both the 1890’s and 1990’s. Aside from the obvious similarities that exist with respect to the place and date of these events, the relationships between the two are incredible, to say the least. Both events were organized by the grassroots efforts of cyclists, both events seamlessly combined pleasure and protest, and both events were used to demonstrate a collective desire to improve the everyday lives of cyclists. While each of these events sought to critique the city’s policies, they were also a means to critique the socioeconomic structures that allowed such policies to exist. Much like the cyclists of 1896 who were critical of the physical dangers and economic power wielded by the “tyrannical street railroad,”¹³ the participants of Critical Mass were/are critical of the physical dangers posed by cars, as well as the dangerous economic and ideological influence wielded by automobile and oil companies. In addition to these factors, both groups of cyclists had similar relationships to the general public in their respective eras. One might be tempted to ‘read’ the initial cycling movement as ‘positive’ and the latter movement as ‘negative,’ because one group was interested in ‘building up’ the city and the other group sought to metaphorically ‘tear it down.’ However, this would ignore the fact that both groups had a similarly notorious reputation with the public. In fact, cyclists in the late 19th

¹¹ Howard Besser, “Victorious Critical Mass Lawsuit,” *Critical Mass*, 219.

¹² *San Francisco Chronicle*, (San Francisco), July 26, 1997.

¹³ Quoted in Chapot, 176.

century probably had a more tenuous relationship with the public, given the fact that they were not only subject to scrutiny from pedestrians and the media (who referred to cyclists as “scorchers” because of their ‘reckless’ speed), they were also criticized by the church and large portions of the medical community.

The reason I bring up the events of July 25th is because despite the different political, social, and economic contexts in which these events took place, people in both situations used bicycles and the act of cycling as a means for solidarity, protest, civic expression, and political critique. Moreover, these events were not anomalies. Throughout the Western world there were hundreds of similar events that preceded the 1896 protest and there have been *thousands* of similar events that have ensued since the 1997 Critical Mass ride. In other words, the sentiments of the cyclists who participated in these protests are indicative of a wider disposition towards both the function of the bicycle and our relationship to that function. This disposition is certainly not shared by all cyclists, but it has been developed and embraced by groups of cyclists who understand that “there is something inherent in the bicycle that makes it amenable, or even predisposed, towards appropriation by small-scale, autonomous groups with objectives which aren’t part of the dominant transport or leisure cultures.”¹⁴ For lack of a better word, this “counterculture” of cycling transcends both space and time, as do their belief that bicycles are not merely forms of transportation, rather, they are vehicles for pleasure, instruments of communication, sources of identity, and tools for technological, cultural, and political critique. This ‘counterculture’ is comprised of feminists, socialists, punks, anti-globalization activists, writers, environmentalists and others who have created and developed a politics of cycling

¹⁴ Paul Rosen. “Up the Velorution,” *Appropriating Technology : Vernacular Science and Social Power*, ed. Ron Eglash (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 365-390, <http://www.york.ac.uk/org/satsu/OnLinePapers/PR/appropriating/appropriating.htm>.

through a dialectic of communication and action. Through this dialectical process, these cyclists have not only created an important body of knowledge that speaks to issues of gender, class, culture, technology, and ideology, they also demonstrate both how these issues are interrelated and how people can actively negotiate and contest their meanings. As such, they reveal the capacity for others to effectively utilize grassroots organization, alternative media production, and non-violent direct action as a means to initiate political mobilization and positive change in an era of corporatization, globalization, and widespread cynicism. More than anything, they remind us that revolution can, and must, begin in our everyday lives.

1.1 METHODOLOGY

Bicycles represent a number of different things to the people that use them. For some, bicycles are simply a convenient form of transportation that allows one to travel from points A to B. But for others, the bicycle is something more than just a utilitarian collection of metal tubes, wheels, chain links, pedals, and a saddle. To the legions of people who are immersed in various aspects of bicycle culture, the bicycle can be a tool for racing, a way to make a living, a means of self-empowerment, a pedagogical tool, a vehicle for enjoyment, an aesthetic object, a form of transportation, a basis for community, a source of inspiration, a symbol of resistance against the oil industry, and a lifestyle. Depending upon who you ask, the bicycle is any of one of these things, and all of these things at once. Given this situation, I am necessarily forced to limit the “types” of biking or bike-related subjects that I will address in this project. With that said, this project is not a comprehensive history of the bicycle, nor is it concerned with the sport of cycling. Rather, this project is a way for me to map out the different political uses of cycling as

they are articulated with respect to technology, urban space, capitalism, and Western culture. As such, this project is designed to show how it is that a particular technology (the bicycle) and a particular act (cycling) can be construed as being ‘political’ within a specific cultural context. In order to achieve these ends, I examine the specific issues and critiques that are raised by cyclists, the strategies and rhetorical tactics that they use in order to amplify their critiques, and the cultural conditions in which this praxis emerges.

While this project focuses upon certain subjects in European countries and Canada, the majority of my analysis is focused upon the politics of cycling in the United States. I made this decision for two reasons, the first being that the politics of cycling are largely based upon a critique of *car culture*, and with it, the ideological assumptions that inform our labor practices, consumption habits, uses of technology, and our relationship to our material world. The United States is the preeminent example of car culture in the world, and it arguably provides the best context in which one can study this culture and its critics. Along the same lines, the critical responses that have developed in response to American culture are important to analyze because globalization has resulted in the mass exportation of American culture and economics to other parts of the world.¹⁵ Therefore, the tactics and rhetorical strategies used by bike activists in the US could ultimately be beneficial to activists in countries where car culture has only recently developed. The second reason I choose to devote more analysis to subjects in the United States is because I am most familiar with the customs and norms of American culture, and as such I feel a responsibility to address both the prospects and problems that are implicit to its existence.

¹⁵ “Globalization is not homogenization; on the contrary, it is the extension of the hold of a small number of dominant nations over the whole set of national financial markets.” Quoted in Pierre Bordieu. “The ‘Globalization’ Myth and the Welfare State,” *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market*, trans. Richard Nice, (New York: New Press, 1999), 38.

In any work of this nature it is important to have a clear sense of one's terms and a basic idea of how one has situated themselves with respect to their materials. This is especially true in my case because although there have been a number of articles written about bicycles and cycling history there has been comparatively little scholarship devoted to the politics of cycling.¹⁶ Even in cases where scholars *have* written about these subjects, they are typically concerned with the social aspects of cycling and/or bicycle production in the late 19th century. While these works are vital and receive my full attention in chapter two, I am also interested in the discourses, media, and politics of bicycling in the late 20th century. However, with the exception of Paul Rosen's essay "Up the Velorution,"¹⁷ and Jeff Ferrell's analysis of Critical Mass,¹⁸ there is virtually no academic scholarship available that addresses these particular themes and other subjects with which this dissertation is concerned. Similarly, with the exception of Chris Carlsson's edited anthology, *Critical Mass*, the non-academic materials I use in my analysis may discuss contemporary subjects and themes with respect to cycling but they frequently neglect the kinds of theoretical and political issues which I will address in this work. Given this situation, the bulk of the scholarship that I utilize in this project is intended to supplement both the academic and non-academic materials that are devoted to my subjects. Even though many of these works are not directly engaged with bicycles or cycling, they provide

¹⁶ Patricia Marks, *Bicycles, Bangs, and Bloomers: The New Woman in the Popular Press* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990); Nicholas Oddy. "Bicycles," in *The Gendered Object*, ed. Pat Kirkham (Manchester and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 60-69; Carla Willard. "Conspicuous Whiteness: Early Brand Advertising," in *Turning the century: essays in media and cultural studies*, ed. Carol Stabile (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 187-216; Robert Smith, *A Social History of the Bicycle, Its Early Life and Times in America* (New York,: American Heritage Press, 1972); Lisa Strange and Robert Brown, "The Bicycle, Women's Rights, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton," *Women's Studies* 31 (2002): 609-626; Paul Rosen, *Framing Production: Technology, Culture, and Change in the British Bicycle Industry, Inside Technology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002); Wiebe E. Bijker, *Of Bicycles, Bakelites, and Bulbs: Toward a Theory of Sociotechnical Change, Inside Technology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995); Jeff Ferrell. "Maybe You Should Check the Statute," in *Critical Mass*, 122-127; Susan Blickstein and Susan Hanson, "Critical Mass: forging a politics of sustainable mobility in the information age," *Transportation* 28 (2001): 347-362; Rosen, *Velorution*.

¹⁷ Rosen, *Velorution*.

¹⁸ Jeff Ferrell, *Tearing Down the Streets: Adventures in Urban Anarchy* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 105-131.

important theoretical tools with which I can more effectively discuss issues related to technology, gender, social movement activism, urbanism, and media production.

In addition to the written materials that I reference in this dissertation I also make use of personal interviews that were recorded from face-to-face conversations and/or obtained through e-mail exchanges with people throughout the United States. All interviews were conducted as open-ended conversations about bike culture in the United States and they are used with full permission from the interviewees. Personal interviews and oral histories serve as invaluable sources of information about bike culture because they provide insights about these subjects that would otherwise reside below the critical radar.

1.2 CHAPTER PREVIEW

In order to discuss the relevant organizations, methods, and ideas implicit to cycling and *biketivism* (bike activism), I have organized this dissertation as a study of culture and communication that is also inclusive of several central themes; those being technology, critiques of urban space, alternative media production, and community activism. In the following chapter, I will more clearly map out these intellectual objectives in order to position myself with respect to the wide range of materials that I will use in this project. As a standard move in academic dissertations, this chapter will give the reader a clear sense of both how and why I use particular terms, theories, and ‘bodies’ of work in my analysis.

Earlier in this introduction, I alluded to the historical development of cycling and the politicization of the bicycle. In chapter two, I explore these themes in detail in order to discuss the relationship between the technology of the bicycle and the manner in which people

appropriated a seemingly neutral object as a means for political empowerment and critique. My examples in chapter two include working class socialist organizations, ‘first wave’ feminists, anarchists, and environmental activists that utilized bicycles in order to develop critiques of capitalism, gender production, and urbanism. While these examples span two continents, four countries, and nearly 100 years of history, I will demonstrate how they are connected by a common disposition towards both the technology and function of the bicycle. In short, the collective work of these individuals and groups comprises the history of contemporary biketivism.

In chapter three I turn my attention to one of the most influential and important bicycling ‘groups’ that exists today—Critical Mass. Critical Mass has almost single-handedly changed the way in which cyclists and activists both perceive and utilize the bicycle. In addition to their monthly presence in over 200 cities throughout the world, the participants of Critical Mass have created an extensive discourse about the politics of the bicycle that has been translated into a wave of “Do It Yourself” (DIY) bike activism and advocacy in recent decades. Like other anti-globalization and culture jamming groups such as Reclaim the Streets (RTS), Critical Mass cyclists use a combination of direct action and discourse in order to critique both the production and function of urban space. These critiques are not only invaluable to existing activist groups, they demonstrate the utility and foresight of earlier theoretical positions that were engaged with similar issues of urbanism and spatial politics. Therefore, my analysis in chapter three will show how the critiques of space developed by Guy Debord and the Situationist International (SI) in the 1950s and 60’s are essentially put into practice through Critical Mass.

In addition to the discourse and media circulated through Critical Mass, the politics of cycling are largely developed and articulated through the production of alternative media such as

zines, film documentaries, photography, and music.¹⁹ As a means of initiating ideological shifts about bicycles, car culture, and consumerism, these forms of media are both created by and help to form communities based upon participation and the free exchange of ideas. In chapter four, I will focus specifically upon three types of independent media that advocate cycling and foster a new political cycling identity—documentary films, zines and punk music. These types of media not only provide a space in which people can have a critical voice about issues of cycling and car culture, they also create necessary dialogues about the relationship between cycling and consumerism, gender, class privilege, and capitalism. Moreover, the prevalence of such media demonstrates the fact that ordinary people can effectively produce viable and creative alternatives to the oligarchy of corporate media.

While the development of urban protest strategies and independent media have been central to the creation of a political cycling movement, it is the creation of community programs and community spaces that demonstrate the cycling counterculture's desire to create substantial, lasting alternatives to car culture. In chapter five, I will look at numerous examples of community cycling centers and bicycle co-operatives that educate the public about cycling, encourage self-sufficiency, address issues of gender and class discrimination, and simultaneously create non-hierarchical institutions with non-traditional labor practices. Like alternative media production, these institutions actively encourage participation and simultaneously model the ethics that they advocate. As such, these institutions demonstrate the importance of creating a sense of 'place' in which community activism can arise. Following this chapter, I will draw

¹⁹ Chris Atton, *Alternative Media* (London: SAGE, 2002); Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from Underground : Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (London and New York: Verso, 1997); Roger Sabin and Teal Triggs, *Below Critical Radar: Fanzines and Alternative Comics from 1976 to Now* (New York: Codex, 2002).

conclusions from the material that I discussed in chapters one through five, and I will make suggestions for future research and analysis.

In the next chapter, I will clearly explain my use of the academic and non-academic works featured in this dissertation. To be as clear as possible, I have divided this chapter into sections that will allow me to explain my objects of study, the terms and perspectives that I will utilize throughout this dissertation, and the specific issues that I intend to address.

Enjoy the ride!

2.0 CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

“Transportation issues are critically embedded in everyday life. For this very reason, ways of addressing such issues are almost always highly contentious.”²⁰

When the League of American Wheelmen (LAW) was founded in 1880 in order to promote the development of “good roads” for cyclists who were challenged by unsafe riding conditions and antagonism from the public, they initiated a massive transformation in both the landscape and transportation climate of the United States. Based upon their ability to mobilize cyclists who were enamored by the bicycle ‘craze’ of the period, it successfully pressured public officials to meet their demands and they created a groundswell of support for cycling that fostered cycling clubs, recreational riding, and the development of paved streets²¹ in the United States. Cycling’s popularity waned throughout the first half of the 20th century, but the League of American Wheelmen—who later changed their name to the League of American Bicyclists (LAB)—created an organizational model that basically served as a template for other state, regional, and local cycling organizations that began to emerge during the 1970s. In other words, league activists set a precedent for bicycle organizations and essentially defined what it meant to be involved in the work of bicycle advocacy. This agenda largely emphasizes better riding

²⁰ Geoff Vigar, *The Politics of Mobility: Transport, Environmental Politics & Public Policy* (New York: Spon press, 2001), 1.

²¹ Robert Smith, *A Social History of the Bicycle, Its Early Life and Times in America* (New York,: American Heritage Press, 1972); James Flink, *The Car Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1975).

conditions for urban cyclists, the promotion of cyclists' rights, and the mobilization of cyclists who are involved in cycling clubs and/or smaller cycling organizations.

While the organizational and rhetorical model created by the LAB undoubtedly created the impetus for bike activism, contemporary bicycle advocacy largely developed in response to the oil crisis and a surge of environmental activity in the 1970's.²² Groups such as the San Francisco Bicycle Coalition (SFBC), formed in 1970, began to team up with environmental organizations, pedestrian rights groups, and neighborhood alliances in order to promote cycling as an environmentally sound, community-oriented method of transportation. In addition, a number of these new organizations began to advocate cycling as not only a mode of transport, but also as a lifestyle, a political choice, and a source of identity. This perspective was advocated most extensively by groups like Transportation Alternatives (TA), a New York City organization formed in 1973 that was revitalized in 1987 in response to Mayor Koch's proposal to ban weekday bicycling on three major avenues in New York City.²³ In addition to their work with local bike messengers, TA launched a series of city-wide campaigns that sought to improve conditions for cyclists and pedestrians, including a persistent series of protests that were organized in order to ban cars from Prospect Park and Central Park—urban oases that were intentionally designed as refuges from the motorized pace of NYC.²⁴

The promotion of cycling as both an environmentally-sound transportation technology and a lifestyle continued to blossom throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s due to the increased efforts of regional organizations such as the SFBC and TA, and the sustained campaigns fostered by national groups such as the LAB, the National Center for Bicycling and

²² See the history of the Thunderhead Alliance, <http://www.thunderheadalliance.org/history.htm/>.

²³ Charles Komanoff, interview by author, New York City, New York, October 17, 2004.

²⁴ Kenneth M. Coughlin, "Ban the Cars! A Historical Plea," *New York Times*, May 15, 1994.

Walking (which was founded in 1977 as the Bicycle Federation of America), and the Thunderhead Alliance; a national coalition that represents every major cycling and pedestrian organization in the United States. However, despite the increased funds allotted to bicycle projects and programs through the Intermodal Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991,²⁵ ideological and political divisions that emerged between cycling advocates in the 1980s became further exacerbated in the 1990s with the advent of the first Gulf War, the creation of Critical Mass rides in San Francisco, and the development of organizations that lodged radical critiques of suburban sprawl, automobility and ‘car culture’. While the tensions that arose were not always as pronounced as those that were prevalent within the both the environmental and animal rights movements,²⁶ there were tangible conflicts over tactics, goals, and strategies employed by cycling enthusiasts in cities throughout N. America. This is not to say that the different interests represented by particular cycling groups are diametrically opposed to one another, rather, these differences essentially boil down to two interrelated premises with which this dissertation is concerned—those of cultural identity and political enfranchisement. The struggles and conflicts over questions of identity, political efficacy, technology and culture resonate deeply with cycling advocates, but they are by no means exclusive to the realms of transportation advocacy. Rather, these issues speak to the problems and prospects faced by a wide variety of contemporary social movements that struggle to forge progressive and/or radical changes in the socioeconomic, political, and cultural geographies of Western society. In what follows, I will lay out these theoretical distinctions as a way of more accurately describing my objects of study and the issues that are raised through their advocacy and activism.

²⁵ Secretary of Transportation Samuel K. Skinner, “Intermodal Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 Summary.” *National Transportation Library*, <http://ntl.bts.gov/DOCS/ste.html>.

²⁶ See DeLuca, Kevin Michael. *Image Politics : The New Rhetoric of Environmental Activism, Revisioning Rhetoric*. New York: Guilford Press, 1999; Maxwell Dervin Schnurer, “Conscious Rebellion: A Rhetorical Analysis of Political Cross-Fertilization in the Animal Rights Movement,” Ph.D dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2002.

2.1 ON THE POLITICS AND CULTURE OF THE BICYCLE: RHETORICAL POSITIONS THAT FRAME ADVOCACY

There are two interrelated rhetorical tropes that have heavily influenced the ideological and political paradigms of bicycling advocacy throughout the last 25 years. The first of which I refer to as the *mantra of access*, which is a disposition embraced by nearly every organization that recognizes the need for citizens to exercise their right to utilize alternative forms of transportation and/or exercise their right to utilize public spaces efficiently and safely. For cycling groups, a great deal of emphasis is focused upon the creation of a cycling infrastructure, whether it is the adaptation of urban environments for cycling and/or the creation of bicycle lanes, off-road cycling paths, and commuter facilities. The basic ethos guiding these organizations is that education, advocacy and policy work is necessary in order to create support for urban projects that cater to the specific needs of cyclists and/or pedestrians. Ultimately, such support yields tangible changes in the material infrastructure of cities that not only improve conditions for existing cyclists, they also create environments in which people become more prone to utilize such routes and/or facilities. This approach is not only vital to the development of urban cycling, it is also supports local commerce and preserves cultural life by increasing access for the poor, the elderly, the disabled, children, and others who lack either the resources or requirements in order to effectively navigate their cities and participate in a robust civic life.²⁷ *Access* thus becomes the mantra of various cycling and pedestrian organizations that rely upon both quantitative and qualitative research in order to demonstrate the truth of Kevin Costner's vision in the movie *Field of Dreams*: "if you build it, they will come." Or to state this another

²⁷ See David Engwicht, *Street Reclaiming : Creating Livable Streets and Vibrant Communities*, (Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society Publishers, 1999); Jane Holtz Kay, *Asphalt Nation : How the Automobile Took over America, and How We Can Take It Back*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

way, if you develop and/or redevelop urban settings that accommodate the needs of cyclists and pedestrians, they will be effectively utilized.²⁸

While the narrative of access promoted by cycling advocacy organizations emphasizes the need for cycling-specific facilities and designs, there is a different position endorsed by cycling advocates that is based upon the ideas of John Forester, a renowned cycling advocate whose texts *Effective Cycling* and *Bicycle Transportation* have heavily influenced bicycle advocacy in the United States. Forester is a staunch proponent of the *vehicular-cycling principle*, which is the assumption that “cyclists fare best when they act and are treated as drivers of vehicles.”²⁹ His advocacy for the vehicular-cycling principle is based upon extensive data that debunk the myth of dangers posed to both cyclists and motorists in urban areas, specifically the myth that urban cycling leads to increased fatalities. He describes this condition as the *cyclist-inferiority superstition*, which is a set of assumptions that leads one to erroneously believe that “the roads are too dangerous for cyclists...they cannot operate safely as drivers of vehicles.”³⁰ Forester’s contention with the cyclist-inferiority paradigm is based on the idea that cyclists have internalized severe misconceptions about their safety within the city, thus resulting in a push towards what they perceive to be ‘safer’ conditions, such as the construction of facilities like off-road bikeways and bike lanes. In addition to the problem of ideological misperceptions amongst cyclists, Forester alleges that the cyclist-inferiority superstition creates major problems in terms of dynamics between engineers and policy makers, specifically local governments. His position assumes that the creation of ‘safe’ bike spaces ironically fuels policy

²⁸ This position is also endorsed by certain ‘progressive’ factions of urban planners including the Congress for New Urbanism. For more on their agenda, see: *Charter of The New Urbanism*, eds. Michael Leccese and Kathleen McCormick, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000).

²⁹ John Forester, *Bicycle Transportation: A handbook for cycling transportation engineers*, (Cambridge: MIT, 1994) 1.

³⁰ Forester, *Bicycle Transportation*, 1.

that ignores the needs of urban cyclists, or worse, seeks to remove cyclists from city streets altogether. In other words, policy makers assume that if cyclists have an alternative option for transportation routes (regardless of whether they are safe, adequate or accessible) then the cyclist “problem” is essentially solved, thereby creating a worse environment for cyclists who utilize city streets.

Through the endorsement of either one of these rhetorical schemes, bicycling advocates have undoubtedly influenced the popularity of cycling in recent years.³¹ However, with the rhetorical push for greater access—whether one is concerned with bike-specific facilities or general rights for ‘vehicular cyclists’—there are certain assumptions made about bicycling that have been highly problematic for people who use cycling as a way to address much larger ideological, political and cultural issues. The crux of the problem is that advocacy of any sort has the capacity to frame certain issues in a way that can either directly or indirectly marginalize interests that exist outside of an established rhetorical framework. Thus, problems that arise from the use of such rhetorics are not reducible to the mere selection of particular linguistic or visual topoi, rather, they are problems that result from a conceptualization of what something ‘is’ or ‘is not’. In the case of cycling advocacy, the rhetorical tropes utilized by particular organizations or individuals convey meanings about the function and ‘nature’ of the bicycle that are incapable of addressing certain positions with which this dissertation is concerned; namely, the incorporation of bicycling as part of a politicized and/or radical critique of technology, capitalism, and ‘car culture.’ In short, my goal is not to argue against the progress of cycling

³¹ John Pucher, Charles Komanoff, and Paul Schimek, “Bicycling Renaissance in North America? Recent trends and alternative policies to promote bicycling,” *Transportation Research* 33, no. 7/8 (1999): 625-654. One can also attribute part of cycling’s popularity to the success and popularity of American cyclist Lance Armstrong. This influence, dubbed by some as the “Lance Factor” has resulted in increased bicycle sales and products used by the world renowned cyclist. However, this ‘factor’ is not an adequate way of measuring the popularity of cycling outside of the sport.

advocacy organizations, because their agenda ultimately benefits *all* cyclists in a profound way. Rather, I will briefly discuss some of the potential limitations that arise from such modes of advocacy, and I do so in order to draw distinctions between these organizations and the ones that I discuss in this project.

2.1.1 Limitations to these rhetorical models

One of the most implicit assumptions about the bicycle is that it is *merely* a form of transportation. While this may seem like a benign point, it is, in fact, one of the major differences between the groups I described in the introduction and ones that work through ‘legitimate’ state, federal, and local political channels in order to secure rights and access for cyclists. For people that recognize how cycling is not merely a form of transportation, the rhetorical models utilized by cycling organizations and supporters of John Forester serve to create a standardized narrative of cycling that often lacks a critical and/or radical dimension that is implicit in many people’s engagement with bicycling. Such cyclists are not driven by issues of access alone, they are simultaneously engaged with a whole other set of issues that cannot simply be solved by a progressive team of urban planners or a politician that supports cycling as an easy public relations move.

Arguments about access clearly describe the benefits of bicycling and improved urban design, and they also describe how particular transportation and/or planning options are undesirable. In short, they are pragmatic and highly effective means by which organizations can create better conditions for cyclists, influence policy makers, and generally present cycling in a positive light. However, such appeals frequently ignore the reasons *why* present conditions are undesirable, or they address such issues within a narrow framework that obscures important

issues of race, class and gender that greatly determine what people will have access *to*, or access *from*. Arguments about access ignore what people do when they get ‘there’, or why people would want to get ‘there’ in the first place. Growing numbers of cyclists are thus concerned with access as a fundamental right but they also recognize how that right has been infringed by power dynamics and ideological assumptions that cannot be solved by structural planning alone. As a result, these people often feel detached from ‘legitimate’ organizations and institutions who do not represent their views, and in response they create their own forms of advocacy, their own political events, and their own public institutions. These cyclists do not necessarily assume that bicycling will fix all of the problems, or even make them go away—but they recognize the ways in which bicycling can be used as a way to understand the intersection of issues that have genuine political import.

Access is always assumed to be a ‘good thing’ with respect to urban planning and/or cycling advocacy, but what happens when young African-American men have access to areas that were once dominated by white yuppies? What happens when the predominantly gay neighborhood is linked up with the Italian, Catholic neighborhood? In these circumstances, access may be more complicated for people that ignore social and cultural issues that deeply affect the urban milieu. One point of reference when considering the problems of access is the period of racial desegregation that took place in the United States during the 1950’s and 1960’s. While there was a host of different intentions behind desegregation, one of the assumptions during this period was that African-Americans would be equal if they had equal access to White society. This was a situation in which governmental policies of access were undoubtedly necessary, but they were inadequate means by which to address much larger issues of racism that had/have deep ideological connections to religion, science, sexuality, and capitalism in this

country. Just as people wanted to pat themselves on the back for their support of equal access, they were also willing to ignore the roots of the problems that created segregation. My point here is not to equate the plight of cyclists with the plight of African-Americans in terms of the gravity of the issues, rather, I raise the point in order to describe the fundamentally limiting discourse of access.³² For transportation activists, access raises bigger questions about the types of relationships that people have to their transportation, including the values that particular forms of transportation support and the ideological norms that dictate such arrangements.

Although his position stands in direct opposition to the goals of certain cycling organizations, Forester's perspective on advocacy is similarly concerned with access, although his paradigm is based upon equal access to entire cities, rather than particular spaces that are unique to bicycles and/or pedestrians. Forester's points are valid and his worries are genuine, but his views are similarly limiting because he also has a blind spot for issues that do not fit neatly into his vehicular-cycling paradigm. Specifically, he does not want to address the relationship between cyclists and drivers as one that has any ideological significance. Rather, he attributes any problems with his paradigm to irrationality and fear. But such forms of vulgar psychoanalysis do not adequately explain why women are less prone to be bicycle commuters bike than men.³³ It does not explain why Whites are more prone to be in cycling clubs than Latinos. Moreover, it does not account for the reality of a situation in which cyclists are literally

³² Coincidentally, these same topics *were* discussed in conjunction with one another during the period of desegregation. Transportation issues have often overlapped with racial conflicts in America, and in some cases, as with Rosa Parks, transportation issues served as catalysts for certain direct actions in the civil rights movement. For more on issues of race and transportation, see: *Highway Robbery: Transportation Racism & New Routes To Equity*, eds. Robert D. Bullard, Glenn S. Johnson, and Angel O. Torres, (Cambridge: South End Press, 2004).

³³ John Anderson, "Where Are The Women?," *Bicycling Life*, <http://www.bicyclinglife.com/NewsAndViews/Gender.htm>; Nick Fynn, "Results of Intercept Survey among low-income San Francisco Women," prepared for David Binder Research on February 12, 2003, <http://www.sfbike.org/download/actions/WomenSurveyAnalysis.pdf>.

and metaphorically endangered through ideological norms of consumption, masculinity³⁴, and technological Darwinism³⁵ that are implicit in car culture. To put this another way, problems that arise between cyclists and drivers are not merely based upon the manner in which cyclists position themselves on the road or their level of internal confidence. Rather, there are other factors that come into play such as (certain) drivers' belief that bicyclists are inferior, pesky, or undeserving of space on 'their' roads. Similarly, there are also (certain) cyclists who are passionately and sometimes aggressively opposed to everything that they perceive the automobile to represent, such as sprawl, war (for oil), pollution, and consumption. Because of these types of factors, there are tensions that arise between cyclists and drivers that cannot easily be resolved by an 'effective cycling' course or a simple psychological shift.

Forester problematically views cycling as a politically neutral mode of transportation, and his especially hostile treatment of "political cyclists" in *Bicycle Transportation* is evidence of this disposition. In these sections, he not only grossly mischaracterizes large factions of activists, he creates a reductive binary where he positions reasonable, pragmatic cyclists on one side, and irrational, misinformed, misguided *political* cyclists on the other side.³⁶ This situation is especially problematic when compounded with his contention that political cycling groups are almost always "anti-motorist" and frequently preoccupied with issues that are ultimately counterproductive to the goals of bicycle advocacy:

The too typical bicycle political organization believes that its intent is to make cycling better for everybody. However, since such organizations base their policies on the cyclist-inferiority hypothesis, because that is the

³⁴ Dwight A. Hennessy and David L. Wiesenthal, "Aggression, Violence, and Vengeance Among Male and Female Drivers," *Transportation Quarterly* 56, no.4 (2002): 62-75.

³⁵ Brian Winston, "How are Media Born and Developed?," in *Questioning the Media: a critical introduction*, eds. John Downing, Ali Mohammadi and Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi (Newbury Park: Sage, 1990), 55-72.

³⁶ Forester, *Bicycle Transportation*, 154.

most popular belief, their actions often make cycling worse for cyclists, and are also intended to make motoring worse for motorists.³⁷

Although there are legitimate aspects to Forester's position, he ultimately promulgates a view that mischaracterizes political bicyclists as both subject to the cyclist-inferiority paradigm and as implicitly *anti-motorist*, rather than anti-automobile. In addition, he makes ludicrous assumptions about the cycling groups that reveal the reductive nature of his logic:

The first [difficulty] is that most of them don't really enjoy cycling, at least not urban cycling. If they enjoyed cycling they wouldn't be so strongly motivated to change the conditions under which it is done. They consider cycling to be more a duty than an enjoyable activity.³⁸

With these not-so-subtle jabs at fellow bicyclists, Forester clearly ignores the fact that many individuals who are part of political bicycling groups possess different types of knowledge about cycling, which produces different approaches to cycling issues that do not fit within his reductive binary. In other words, their conception of 'politics' is not exclusively based upon one's passive membership in a policy-oriented organization—it is based upon the politicization of everyday cycling through direct action, community-based initiatives, and independently produced forms of advocacy.

Forester's uncritical assumption that bicyclists should just act like automobile drivers dismisses other cyclists' perspectives about cycling and ignores any political and cultural differences that cyclists might have from automobile drivers. To carry through with the desegregation example I brought up earlier, Forester's notion that cyclists "fare best" when they act like drivers is the same rhetorical trope that was advocated by people in the 1960s who

³⁷ Forester, *Bicycle Transportation*, 156.

³⁸ Forester, *Bicycle Transportation*, 154.

believed that African-Americans would “fare best” if they acted like white people. Or similarly, gay people “fare best” when they conduct themselves like straight people. Once again, my point is not to equate the gravity of the issues, but to point out the rhetorical limits of a position that ignores the relevance of everyday practices that contribute to a groups’ politics or culture. Forester’s perspective is especially pertinent in this regard because the stark lines he draws between *real* cyclists, i.e. those who participate in bicycle clubs and national cycling organizations,³⁹ and *political* cyclists not only raise important issues about political and cultural differences within the bicycling community, they speak to the ability for people to appropriate everyday practices as a means for empowerment and political critique. What Forester fails to realize is that many cyclists are not only discontent with the idea of acting like a driver, they are discontent with both automobile and the culture in which it symbiotically thrives.

2.1.2 Korporate Kar Kulture

As the vehicles for both capitalist goods and labor, automobiles require an incredible infrastructure that includes highways, municipal roads, parking lots, parking spaces, gas stations, and maintenance facilities. In the United States alone, there are over 200 million motor vehicles, 80 million of which are vehicles used for regular commutes.⁴⁰ According to Jane Holtz Kay, author of *Asphalt Nation*, in the last two decades we have “doubled the mileage of the nation’s highways and promptly filled these new roads by traveling twice as many miles.”⁴¹ These trends of highway construction are particularly strong in the United States given our country’s long

³⁹ Forester, *Bicycle Transportation*, 156.

⁴⁰ Kay, *Asphalt Nation*, 67.

⁴¹ Kay, *Asphalt Nation*, 15.

pastoral tradition,⁴² our romance with the automobile,⁴³ and our penchant for suburbanization.⁴⁴ However, despite the strong influence of these social factors, the automotive-based development of America is not the product of a collective desire on behalf of the citizenry⁴⁵ or the result of ‘technological Darwinism.’⁴⁶ Rather, it is the direct result of corporations’ political, social, and economic dominance of the 20th century. Critical Mass co-founder Chris Carlsson makes this point in an essay about the class politics of bicycling:

Ford and the other auto makers, along with oil, rubber and steel companies, enjoyed booming sales and enormous profits as Americans embraced the car. Profits in these industries were siphoned off the top, with the ‘true’ costs of building and maintaining a huge infrastructure of roads and highways (not to mention medical and funeral costs from the increasing rate of fatal accidents associated with transportation) absorbed by the working public; meanwhile, individual workers privately accepted a huge cost burden of the transit system by embracing the private ownership (with its associated maintenance and fuel bills) of the vehicles by which they would get to work and do their shopping.⁴⁷

Through government subsidies and support, automobile and automobile-related corporations—such as those that produce oil, gas, and rubber—have not only shaped the network

⁴² Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden : Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁴³ See James Flink, *The Automobile Age*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988); Flink, *Car Culture*.

⁴⁴ See James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere : The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993).

⁴⁵ For more on this misguided position, see James A. Dunn, *Driving Forces: The Automobile, Its Enemies, and the Politics of Mobility* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1998).

⁴⁶ David Noble, *Forces of production: A social history of industrial automation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 144-146.

⁴⁷ Chris Carlsson, “The Hidden Class Politics of Bicycling,” *Critical Mass essays and flyers*, online.

of highways in the United States,⁴⁸ they have drastically shaped both the geography and social life of American cities.⁴⁹ A perfect example of this influence is documented in Bradford Snell's 1974 report for the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Anti-Trust and Monopoly. His report was part of a case that revisited the 1949 case of *U.S. v. National City Lines*, in which the government charged General Motors, Standard Oil, and Firestone Tire and Rubber with antitrust violations stemming from their formation of a holding company called National City Lines. Between 1932 and 1956 National City Lines purchased and subsequently dismantled over "100 electric surface rail systems in 45 cities including New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, St. Louis, Oakland, Salt Lake City and Los Angeles."⁵⁰ The acquisition and destruction of public rail systems allowed each participating corporation to profit immensely from the production and sales of vehicles that were required in order to fill the transportation void that they themselves had created. Despite Snell's corporate-sympathetic critics,⁵¹ his report clearly illuminated how this transformation "reshaped American ground transportation to serve corporate wants instead of social needs."⁵² Given the facts of the case, even the federal government recognized that very specific interests had a vital role in the formation of transportation options for American citizens, and all three companies were found *guilty* of anti-trust violations in federal court in Chicago. Unfortunately, the real tragedy of the case is that GM was fined a mere \$5000 dollars for their part in the systematic destruction of public facilities. Furthermore, the federal government revealed their

⁴⁸ See Flink, *Car Culture and The Automobile Age*; also see Catherine Gudis, *Buyways: Billboards, Automobiles, and the American Landscape* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁴⁹ Tim Hall, "Car-ceral Cities: Social Geographies of Everyday Urban Mobility," in *Urban Futures: Critical Commentaries on Shaping the City*, eds. Miles, Malcolm, and Tim Hall (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 92-107.

⁵⁰ Snell, Bradford C., and United States Congress. Senate. Committee on the Judiciary. Subcommittee on Antitrust and Monopoly. *American Ground Transport; a Proposal for Restructuring the Automobile, Truck, Bus, and Rail Industries*. Washington,: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1974. Accessed online through *CarBusters' Freesources*, <http://www.carbusters.org/resources/free.php>.

⁵¹ In the 1974 Senate Hearings UCLA economics professor George W. Hilton called Snell's thesis "so completely oversimplified that it is difficult to take seriously." Quoted in Dunn, *Driving Forces*, 9.

⁵² Dunn, 9.

passive acceptance of corporate irresponsibility by fining each of the people in charge a whopping \$1.

Given an apparent free reign in the realm of urban transportation, corporate influence has continued to systematically allocate more space for automobiles in cities, despite glaring evidence that more roads actually *increase* the problems of sprawl and traffic that they pretend to remedy through their tireless seizure of public space.⁵³ In addition to disproportionately limiting access for poor people, young people, and the elderly,⁵⁴ the push for automotive transportation in the United States and Europe has served to segregate urban communities and pollute urban environments at the expense of taxpayers. This ideology is compounded by a desire for automobiles that is largely created by automobile advertisers annual investment of 40 billion dollars,⁵⁵ and reinforced on a daily basis through television, radio, and print media.⁵⁶

Moreover, such trends have resulted in the literal disappearance of urban space that could otherwise be utilized for the public. In short, we have traded useable public space for pavement, which now covers anywhere between 30-50 percent of urban America.⁵⁷ Cities such as Los Angeles and Houston far exceed that range, with almost 2/3 of useable space devoted to pavement in L.A. and “30 car spaces per resident” of asphalt in Houston.⁵⁸ Even in cities like Barcelona, where cars are a relatively new phenomenon (historically speaking), the influence of

⁵³ Tim Hall, 92-107.

⁵⁴ According to Jane Holtz Kay approximately 1/4 of the population cannot afford to purchase vehicles and an additional 80 million young and elderly people are incapable of driving cars. In *Asphalt Nation*, 36, 53.

⁵⁵ Kay, 17.

⁵⁶ On the development of automobile advertising, see Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool : Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). For more on the media’s promulgation of consumer ideology, see Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Allen Lane, 1973), 120-167; Naomi Klein Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (New York: Picador, 2000); Thomas Frank and Matt Weiland, *Commodify Your Dissent : Salvos from the Baffler* (New York: Norton, 1997); Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976).

⁵⁷ Kay, 64.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

automobile and oil corporations have contributed to a situation where “any urban development plan devotes at least 40% of useful space to roads and car parks.”⁵⁹ James Howard Kunstler, best known for his book *The Geography of Nowhere* accurately reflects that “in general, our public realm is the street, and we’ve turned it into a national automobile slum.”⁶⁰

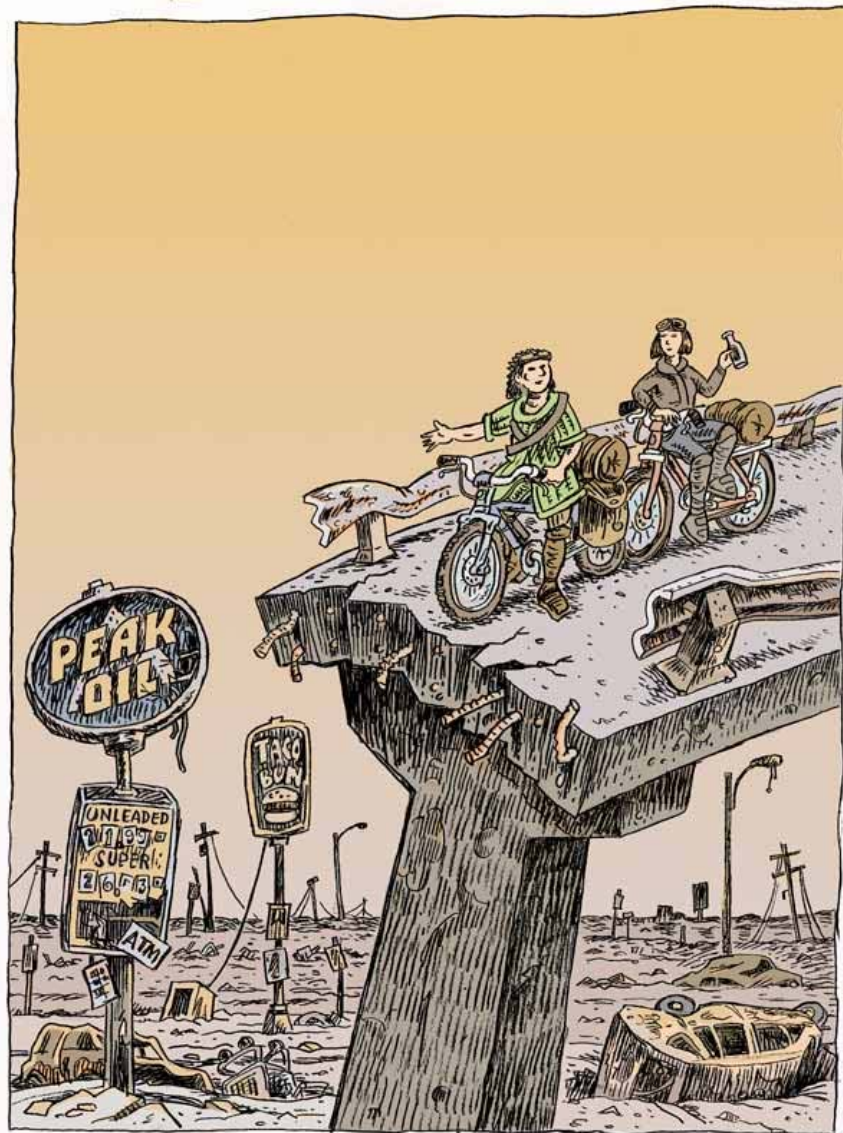


Figure 2-The Future? (artwork by Ken Avidor)

⁵⁹ Salvador Rueda, quoted in Engwicht, 76.

⁶⁰ James Howard Kunstler, “Fighting Words form the US of A,” *Urban Design Forum*, no.43 (1999): 1.

2.1.3 Driving Forces and Automotive Ideology

Arguably, the most difficult task facing critics of car culture is how such individuals or groups can change ideological perceptions about automobiles and automotive culture. Whether one is focused explicitly upon the technology of the automobile or the costs associated with its use, there is an incredible backlash that faces individuals or organizations who challenge the assumptions and ideological norms of car culture. As with any type of effective political dissent, the critics of car culture are labeled as reactionary, misguided, irrational, and typically subjected to character assassination if, and when, their claims cannot be adequately refuted. Worse yet, anti-automobile organizations such as Reclaim the Streets have recently been added to the federal government's suspected terrorist list, thereby giving government and police unprecedented abilities to disrupt such political protests under the Patriot Act.⁶¹

Against these odds, critics of car culture have become more numerous, more vocal, and even more passionate about the possibilities for societies that can be weaned away from "car addiction."⁶² But despite the efforts of individuals who rely upon both quantitative and qualitative critiques of car culture, there are still incredible taboos associated with critical discourse about automobiles and their relationship to mass culture. In the most basic sense, individuals in Western society, especially Americans, take personal offense when people begin to ask critical questions about the relationships between transportation, economics, the environment, and personal liberty. In the United States, the automobile is both the literal and symbolic centerpiece of a narrative of mobility and freedom. In many ways, this narrative is

⁶¹ Testimony of FBI Director Louis J. Freeh. "The Threat of Terrorism to the United States," United States Senate, Committees on Appropriations, Armed Services, and Select Committee on Intelligence, 10 May 2001.

⁶² Katharine T. Alvord, *Divorce Your Car! : Ending the Love Affair with the Automobile* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2000), 1.

deeply intertwined with Americans' sense of collective and individual identity, and as a result, there is widespread resentment against critics of car culture. While much of this resentment is subtle and unfocused, there are certain individuals such as James Dunn whose book *Driving Forces* illustrates the worst biases of auto culture, and reveals both the hostility and rhetorical naiveté of people who literally believe that cars=freedom. Deconstructing the fallacy of such positions is one of the fundamental projects for auto critics, particularly for individuals who advocate alternatives to existing conditions.

In *Driving Forces*, James Dunn provides a blistering critique of anti-automobile activists while he attempts to show how the “automobile is the *solution* to most Americans' transportation problems and has been for at least two generations.”⁶³ *Driving Forces* is based upon James Dunn's vision of a politically realistic, pragmatic approach to automobile policy and automobile infrastructure that is unfortunately situated within a scathing analysis of transportation activists. Dunn acknowledges the fact that cars are not without their problems, however he consistently frames these problems in a way that negates either the immediate or potential ability for people to criticize the larger infrastructure of the automobile. Rather, Dunn wants to “focus debate on policy proposals that acknowledge the benefits the auto provides.”⁶⁴ While Dunn clearly has a profound respect for both the automobile and its place in American culture, his position ironically reveals the fundamentally ignorant perspective of the pro-automobile, anti-activist, American driver. In short, Dunn's critique is the preeminent example of automotive ideology at work. His arguments are highly problematic and laced with both a clear disdain for the rights of car-less individuals and the opinions of people who focus on the positive aspects of car-free

⁶³ Dunn, 1.

⁶⁴ Dunn, 172.

transportation: “These ‘enemies’ of the automobile choose not see it as the most successful mode of transportation and the most popular means of personal mobility *ever* created.”⁶⁵

While driving a car can be useful and enjoyable, Dunn seems oblivious to the fact that most people do not choose to drive cars at the expense of other forms of transportation or possible social arrangements. Dunn wrongly assumes that Americans necessarily desire “new automobiles that will be able to meet their individual and collective needs”⁶⁶ as opposed to transportation systems that are convenient, inexpensive, and safe. This perspective ignores the *forced choice* that Americans are faced with, wherein they can only choose between the *type* of automobile that will accommodate their needs, as opposed to choosing between autos and other forms of transport. Because America’s geography has been largely designed to accommodate automobile transportation,⁶⁷ viable transportation options have largely disappeared from most places in the country, with the exception of bigger cities—a situation that Ivan Illich refers to as a “radical monopoly.”⁶⁸ However, even in places where there are viable alternatives to the automobile, which excludes almost *all* rural areas, this does not necessarily account for the lack of funding that makes bus, train, or trolley travel a potentially limited option. Dunn chooses to frame the issue of auto use in terms of empowerment or personal choice instead of critically examining the powerful historical influence of automobile and oil industries public transportation. As a result, the myth of personal choice and personal empowerment that Dunn ascribes to auto use⁶⁹ hides the political and economic realities that have shaped people’s ability to genuinely choose what sorts of transportation they can utilize. Furthermore, these narratives

⁶⁵ Dunn, 3. Emphasis is my own.

⁶⁶ Dunn, 193.

⁶⁷ See Kunstler, *Geography*.

⁶⁸ Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (New York,: Harper & Row, 1973).

⁶⁹ Pro-automobile polices allegedly allow “individuals and communities to choose freely from an expanded range of choices rather than seeking to impose regimented bureaucratic patterns of travel behavior.” Quoted in Dunn, 22.

hide the fact that such transportation choices ultimately shape the ways in which our communities are built and maintained. In short, such myths prevent people from realizing that there are viable, sustainable options such as public transit, biking, and the creation of walkable communities. In addition to Dunn's baseless claims regarding the empowering and equalizing effects of auto use, his position is supplemented by one of the oldest strategies used by conservatives against critical thinkers, that being the imposition of the "elitist" label. In order to avoid a serious engagement with texts that critique car culture or the automobile, Dunn instead lodges contrived character attacks against auto critics that have been widely embraced by mainstream media, politicians, and vast segments of the right-leaning American public. For example, in response to Jane Holtz Kay's calls for action in *Asphalt Nation*, Dunn suggests the following: "She is heartened because she sees anti-auto sentiments spreading from the Birkenstock and sneaker-wearing crowd who attend Greenwich Village conferences on auto-free cities and clamor for 'devehicularization' to the suit-and-tie clad engineers and traffic planners meeting in suburban Howard Johnsons' executive suites to discuss 'Implementing Regional Mobility Solutions'."⁷⁰ While Dunn's disdain for comfortable footwear, communication, and community building efforts are all too evident, his ultimate failure is based upon his inability to recognize the fact that cars are a prerequisite of the *elite class* within the United States. Instead of admitting the reality of a situation in which elitism is defined by economic power and policy influence, Dunn paints the picture of a 'vanguard' comprised of "an elite group of anti-auto activists whose progressive ideas and individual agenda complement and reinforce one another."⁷¹

⁷⁰ Dunn, 13.

⁷¹ Dunn, 15.

By examining the ‘vanguard’ agenda, Dunn ironically articulates the exact reasons why ‘anti-auto’ activists are anything but elite, given the fact that they engage a variety of communities, publics, and governments with their agenda. Dunn shows how there are “three key elements of the vanguard’s long-term strategy” that includes consciousness-raising among policymakers and the general public, effective lobbying of the legislature, and building bureaucratic momentum and conveying a sense of inevitability regarding the adoption of its program. What Dunn fails to realize is that the so-called vanguard is participating in the very aspects of American democracy that he is claiming to defend through his automobile advocacy. Whereas auto-advocates are able to defer their democratic participation to the economic and lobbying influence of multinational corporations, auto critics are forced to build communities that engage in dialogue about issues facing their environments, geographies, and public spaces. By engaging in consciousness raising actions (such as conference organizing and the production/publication of literature) and/or taking part in government, auto critics empower themselves, and in turn, help to empower their communities in productive and progressive ways.

I mention the problems with Dunn’s position because he articulates many of feelings and misconceptions that go unstated by the majority of the car-driving American public—a situation that leads to major communication gaps and unnecessary antagonism between automobile drivers, automobile supporters, and auto critics. Most specifically, his implicit acceptance of the narrative of automotive freedom and his mischaracterization of auto critics as the (sic) “elite vanguard” is symptomatic of a larger paradigm that marginalizes not only bicyclists but also social movement activists writ large.

2.2 THE CYCLING COUNTERCULTURE

The culture of bicycling is one comprised of several different groups, or types, of cyclists that each have their own communities, events, media, competitions, lifestyles, and perspectives on the bicycle. Included within this gamut are BMX riders, bicycle messengers, mountain bikers, road racers, touring enthusiasts, cycling club members, recreational riders, and everyday commuters. These categories are by no means exclusive, as there are people who enjoy all different types of cycling and have various levels of involvement in the sport, leisure, and everyday practice of cycling. However, within this wide spectrum of cyclists, there is a similarly porous category of people who are part of what technology scholar Paul Rosen refers to as the *counterculture* of cycling: “the mavericks on the sidelines of mainstream cycling culture” who challenge “not only the cycling establishment but also the wider car culture.”⁷² While the cycling counterculture could best be characterized by their commitment to commuter cycling as an alternative to motorized traffic,⁷³ their politicized engagement with bicycling is ultimately what sets them apart from other cyclists who have an apolitical view of bicycling and/or the bicycle. Moreover, their conceptualization of ‘the political’ is based less upon the model created by LAB than it is influenced by direct action strategies, anarchist organizational structures, and radical critique. In other words, the goals, ideals, and methods of the cycling counterculture are based upon a political paradigm in which cyclists “stake out positions on transit, energy, urban planning, ecology, and finally the economy itself.”⁷⁴ Before I explain some of these premises in more detail, it is important for me to briefly reflect upon my use of the term ‘counterculture’ in this work.

⁷² Rosen, *Velorution*.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

2.2.1 Reflections on the concept of counterculture

In a series of essays and books published throughout the last decade,⁷⁵ Thomas Frank has provided some of the most in-depth and scathing criticism of the notion of *counterculture* in American society. Most significantly, Frank suggests that the premise of a counterculture is directly based upon “an enduring commercial myth, the titanic symbolic clash of hip and square that recurs throughout post-sixties culture.”⁷⁶ Frank points to the idea that countercultural values posed a threat to the social and economic order of the 1960’s but the impetus for widespread change was stifled by the fact that the counterculture was more concerned with identity than political power—a situation that was propelled by the commodification of countercultural ethics by businesses and corporations that stood to directly benefit from the marketing of ‘rebellious’ consumption: “With leisure-time activities of consuming redefined as ‘rebellion,’ two of late-capitalism’s great problems could easily be met: obsolescence found a new and more convincing language, and citizens could symbolically resolve the contradiction between their role as consumers and their role as producers.”⁷⁷ While Frank’s astute analysis of co-optation reflects the cynicism found in Horkheimer and Adorno’s early analysis of the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,⁷⁸ he also realizes the potential strength of ‘genuine’ countercultures that transcend and/or confront the very mechanisms of capitalism that serve to dilute or co-opt their ethics and agenda: “the counterculture as envisioned by people like [Abbie] Hoffman and

⁷⁵ Thomas Frank and David Mulcahey, *Boob Jubilee : The Cultural Politics of the New Economy* (New York: Norton, 2003). Also see Frank, *Cool and Dissent*.

⁷⁶ Frank, *Cool*, 32.

⁷⁷ Frank, *Cool*, 31.

⁷⁸ “Anyone who resists can only survive by fitting in.” Quoted in Horkheimer and Adorno, 132.

[Alice] Embree grew from an instinctive revulsion toward the fundamental assumptions of consumerism.”⁷⁹

Unlike countercultural movements that passively embrace the rebellion-through-consumption model admonished by Thomas Frank, and Guy Debord before him,⁸⁰ the cycling counterculture is comprised of people who have developed detailed, radical critiques of both capitalism and consumerism—specifically with respect to the manner in which these forces have shaped both the cycling industry and car culture in N. America. Chris Carlsson, one of the co-founders of Critical Mass, describes the basis of this position:

Bicycling can be seen as a radical rejection of the capitalist transit deal. We Won't Pay! When you bicycle you are engaged in a brilliant act of self-reduction...by bicycling, the individual drastically reduces their personal cost of living, and the extent to which they continue to participate in the transit system, which steadily transfers wealth from the bottom to the few hands at the top.⁸¹

It is important to recognize that there is a heavily consumerist aspect of bicycling that is not only evident in the sheer number of products and identities that are marketed to cyclists, but also in the massive amounts of corporate sponsorships that are utilized by cyclists who participate in road racing, mountain racing, and BMX racing/freestyle. However, there are also groups of likeminded cyclists who reject these trends in favor of simplicity, pragmatism, recycled parts, homemade bikes, DIY maintenance, and an aesthetic based less upon spandex pants and \$60 jerseys than normal clothes and tight budgets. Part of this rejection is closely tied to a collective

⁷⁹ Frank, *Cool*, p 230.

⁸⁰ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, (Detroit: Red and Black Press, 1983).

⁸¹ Carlsson, “A serious pleasure, a partial revolt,” in *Critical Mass essays, flyers*, online.

response to the capitalist ethic of the transit system, in which bicycling is perceived to be a direct stance against the automobile and oil industries—two of the most dominant corporate matrices that create seemingly insurmountable problems for environmentalists,⁸² community activists, and alternative transportation advocates that cannot compete with their economic and political influence.

In addition to their implicit support for unsustainable energy initiatives, and the most dangerous transit system known to the Western world,⁸³ corporate entities that require and/or produce oil are perceived by the cycling counterculture to be directly responsible for atrocious humans rights violations in ‘third world’ countries⁸⁴ and unwavering support for U.S. military initiatives (war) in the Middle East.⁸⁵ As a result, growing numbers of bicyclists choose to boycott oil-based transportation whenever possible. Importantly, people within the cycling counterculture do not implicitly equate self-reduction with self-empowerment and political enfranchisement, despite the fact that such ethics are relevant. Rather, self-reduction and individual acts of resistance are part of a larger, collective response to car culture and mainstream bicycling culture that includes alternative media, bicycle production, direct action tactics, community-based initiatives, and other forms of advocacy/expression that exist independently of, and are frequently opposed to, the capitalist-based interests that shape our transportation and media geographies.

In short, the group that I refer to as the cycling counterculture is not an ‘enduring commercial myth’ based upon tenuous distinctions between hip and square, or youth and ‘the

⁸² See Aufheben, “The politics of anti-road struggle and the struggles of anti-road politics: the case of the No M11 Link Road campaign,” in *Diy Culture: Party & Protest in Nineties Britain* (London: and New York: Verso, 1998), 100-128.

⁸³ Alvord, 114-123.

⁸⁴ Klein, 379-387.

⁸⁵ Chris Carlsson, “A Quiet Statement Against Oil Wars,” in *Critical Mass*, 83-84.

establishment.’ The impetus for these cyclists is a paradigm shift wherein people develop critiques of dominant socioeconomic and cultural norms by “renovating and making ‘critical’ an already existing activity.”⁸⁶ Chris Carlsson further elaborates on this point in a recent anthology on Critical Mass:

Bicycling is not an end in itself, just like Critical Mass is really about a lot more than just bicycling. Our embrace of bicycling doesn’t eliminate an enormous social edifice dedicated to supporting the privately owned car and oil industries. Similarly, the infrastructural design of our cities and communities is slow to change in the face of our preferential choice of bicycling. Finally, we won’t see any real change if we continue to act as isolated consumer/commuters, and in part Critical Mass allows us to begin coming together...the space we’ve opened up in Critical Mass is a good beginning. Out of it must grow the organic communities that can envision and then fight for a radically different organization of life itself. *We will never shop our way to a liberated society.*⁸⁷

2.2.2 Do It Yourself (DIY) and Cultural Politics

The dominant paradigm of the cycling counterculture is based upon participatory, ‘Do It Yourself’ (DIY) ethics that emphasize self-empowerment, creativity, and above all else, participation: “The key in all of this culture is participation. If you don’t participate, it doesn’t

⁸⁶ Stephen Duncombe, “The Poverty of Theory: Anti-Intellectualism and the Value of Action,” *Radical Society* 30, no. 1 (2003): 17.

⁸⁷ Chris Carlsson, “Bicycling Over the Rainbow,” *Critical Mass*, 237. Emphasis is my own.

happen.”⁸⁸ DIY is a term that became popularized in the punk scene during the late 1970s and 1980s as young people in both Europe and the United States began to create their own record labels, zines (fanzines), and distribution networks in order to publish and circulate their own media products.⁸⁹ While the term “DIY” was largely associated with alternative modes of media production, the DIY ethic was also being advocated by radical activists and cultural workers (many of whom were involved with the punk community) who felt alienated from more traditional forms of protest and dissent.⁹⁰ Collectively, these responses to economic, social and political norms have produced a number of different subcultures and dozens of ‘alternative’ communities that may differ in terms of their respective interests, but share common critiques (of mass culture, globalization, and consumerism), dispositions (towards self-empowerment, economic independence and participation), and tactics (non-hierarchical organization, alternative media, and non-violent direct action). There is a distinctly cultural dimension of DIY ethics that resonates deeply with people who are either marginalized by, or discontent with the cultural norms of Western society: “DIY was an ethic born in reaction against a dominant society that considers culture primarily in terms of a profit-generating, commercial enterprise.”⁹¹ Put simply, DIY is a way of life and a guiding principle for people who have created their own cultures and identities.

In an analysis of what he calls “DIY Culture,” professor and activist George McKay states that “unlike other more straightforwardly *cultural* moments of resistance, such as, say,

⁸⁸ Stephen Duncombe, “Stepping off the sidewalk: Reclaim the Streets/NYC,” in *From Act up to the Wto: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization*, eds. Benjamin Heim Shepard and Ronald Hayduk (London: Verso, 2002), 19.

⁸⁹ Susan Douglas talks about the roots of DIY in the development of modern media. See *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899-1922* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination: From Amos 'N' Andy and Edward R. Murrow to Wolfman Jack and Howard Stern* (New York: Times Books, 1999).

⁹⁰ See George McKay, *Diy Culture : Party & Protest in Nineties Britain*, (London and New York: Verso, 1998); Shepard and Hayduk, *From Act Up*.

⁹¹ Duncombe, “Reclaim the Streets/NYC,” 219.

1970s punk and 1980s anarchopunk, there is a tremendous emphasis in DIY Culture laid on actually *doing something* in the social or political realm.”⁹² In this regard, the different protest strategies that have emerged through networks of anarchists, anti-globalization activists, and environmentalists in Western society have given a new impetus to supporters of creative radical dissent.⁹³ While the development of specific tactics for dissent are undoubtedly important, perhaps the most vital effect that DIY ethics have had on contemporary activism is the politicization and mobilization of younger people who are typically cynical about the prospects for social change. DIY approaches to media production and activism serve important pedagogical functions for activists and cultural workers to understand how there *are* alternatives to established cultural and political norms. Through this process, new waves of activists and cultural workers learn to recognize the power dynamics that Duncombe describes in his lengthy study of zines and underground culture:

The powers that be do not sustain their legitimacy by convincing people that the current system is The Answer. That fiction would be too difficult to sustain in the face of so much evidence to the contrary. What they must do, and what they have done very effectively, is convince the mass of people that *there is no alternative*.⁹⁴

As both a culture of politics and politics of culture, DIY bike activism shares many similar to other ‘new’ social movements that initiate “changes in public consciousness with regards to a key issue or issues”⁹⁵ in order to ultimately transform cultural norms.⁹⁶ While I am not

⁹² McKay, 4. Emphasis is original.

⁹³ See Klein, *No Logo*; Shepard and Hayduk, *From Act-Up.*; Eddie Yuen, Daniel Burton-Rose, and George N. Katsiaficas, *Confronting Capitalism: Dispatches from a Global Movement* (Brooklyn: Soft Skull Press, 2004).

⁹⁴ Duncombe, *Notes*, 6.

⁹⁵ Kevin Michael DeLuca, *Image Politics : The New Rhetoric of Environmental Activism, Revisioning Rhetoric* (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), 37.

particularly invested in the distinctions over what ‘is’ or ‘is not’ a social movement, I think Iris Young’s assessment of new social movements is useful in so far as she contextualizes the role of cultural politics within political activism: “cultural politics has primarily a critical function; to ask what practices, habits, attitudes, comportments, images, symbols, and so on contribute to social domination and group oppression, and to call for collective transformation of such practices.”⁹⁷ As part of the larger spectrum of social movement activism, cultural politics serve an important function because they emphasize the need to transform ideologies that transcend specific political issues. To put this within an historical context, cultural politics essentially reinterpret the classic Hegelian argument that changes in ideology precede changes in the material world. With respect to bike activism, cultural politics play a similarly integral role in the critique of automobility because even though the automobile is embedded in the material infrastructure of Western society, the culture of the automobile presents the most daunting challenge for bike activists—a position articulated by Paul Rosen:

This *social and cultural infrastructure* of transportation will have to be put alongside the engineering and architectural infrastructures prioritized by cycle activists as a part of a holistic analysis of the sociotechnology of transportation, or of bicycles more specifically. *The strength of cycling as a component of a possible future sociotechnology of sustainable mobility lies precisely in this cultural dimension.*⁹⁸

The danger inherent with cultural politics is that such dispositions can easily be reduced to individualized, egocentric views of the world that serve to negate, rather than reinforce,

⁹⁶ Schnurer, dissertation, 18.

⁹⁷ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 86.

⁹⁸ Rosen, *Framing Production*, 176-177. Emphasis is my own.

collective forms of social/political struggle—a problem that Murray Bookchin addresses through his condemnation of *lifestyle anarchism*: “Its [lifestyle anarchism] preoccupations with the ego and its uniqueness and its polymorphous concepts of resistance are steadily eroding the socialist character of the libertarian tradition.”⁹⁹ Because of the similarities and shared ideologies between the anarchist community and the cycling counterculture, debates about the function of cultural and/or lifestyle politics within the anarchist community are useful to examine because anarchists effectively problematize the efficacy of their own strategies. As a result, these internal acts of self-criticism and self-reflection provide a model from which to examine the meaning of political action that can be useful to other groups/movements who struggle with questions of individualized vs. collective modes of resistance. However, in contrast to the opinion held by Bookchin, the anarchist community also demonstrates how activism based upon the critique and transformation of cultural norms can have an impact without directly engaging the State.¹⁰⁰

Critics of cultural politics and/or new social movements frequently underestimate both the power of ideology and the influence wielded by corporations that profit from the culture industry and its symbolic power. Pierre Bourdieu states that “one of the weaknesses of all progressive movements lies in the fact that they have underestimated the importance of [the

⁹⁹ Murray Bookchin, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism : The Unbridgeable Chasm* (Edinburgh and San Francisco: AK Press, 1995), 9.

¹⁰⁰ One such example is Food Not Bombs (FNB), an anarchist organization that prepares free vegetarian meals for homeless people in hundreds of cities throughout the world. By exclusively using food that would otherwise be thrown away by stores and restaurants, FNB critiques the cultural norms that allow people to starve while perfectly edible food is wasted when it loses its value as a capitalist commodity. FNB additionally points to the fact that the United States’ government spends enough money, *each day*, on weapons that could otherwise feed every hungry person in the country—hence the namesake. On a related note, numerous anarchist squatter communities in both the United States and Europe embrace a similar paradigm with respect to housing, i.e. there are enough vacant/abandoned buildings available to house all of the homeless people at any given time. Yet, the use of such buildings is deemed illegal because there is no economic profit yielded from squatters and/or homeless people. For more on the culture and politics of squatting, see Anders Corr, *No Trespassing* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1999); ADILKNO, *Cracking the Movement*, trans. Laura Martz (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1994); William Upski Wimsatt, *Bomb the Suburbs* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2000).

symbolic] dimension and have not always forged appropriate weapons to fight on this front.”¹⁰¹ Similarly, proponents of cultural politics frequently underestimate both the power of the State and the need for activists to directly challenge such authority. What we need to recognize is that social movement activism is a continuum that requires confrontation against the State *and* forms of cultural/symbolic struggle that attempt to dismantle the ideological apparatus that perpetuate a climate of cynicism and hopelessness. In doing so, we must recognize how people have fragmented identities and personalities but they are still capable of communicating, organizing, and mobilizing with other people on the basis of shared ethical and political identities. Many thinkers use the notion of fragmentation as a convenient way to make cynical claims about the impossibility for collective struggle, however, I believe that this fragmentation actually allows activists to appeal to people on a number of different levels—it is just a matter of finding which issues, or combinations of issues, will provide the spark they need in order to make the connections between ideology and their reality.¹⁰² For example, a worker who struggles to make ends meet might not be able to identify the logic of exploitation through the discourse of Marxism, especially when capitalists do everything within their power to convince people that class is an ‘outdated’ or irrelevant means of identification. However, this same worker might be influenced to begin commuting by bicycle instead of driving 4 miles to and from work. At some point, this person makes the connection between the fact that they have to work an unfulfilling job in order to afford payments on their car, for the privilege of driving to their unfulfilling job. Suddenly, a seemingly insignificant change in this person’s daily routine is now a means by which she can recognize the relationship between ideology and reality. All of a sudden, there is

¹⁰¹ Bourdieu, 52.

¹⁰² For more on the compatibility between poststructuralism, anarchism and political action, see Todd May, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University, 1994).

a direct relationship established between the ideology of transportation (“I *need* to own a car”) and the ideology of labor (“I *can’t* quit, or work less, even though I hate my job”). This person then begins to realize that they have the capacity to either work less or look for a different, more meaningful job because they no longer have to spend 300-800 dollars a month on car payments, insurance, gasoline, and repairs.

While these circumstances may seem hypothetical, this type of ideological transformation happens within many people who begin to make a gradual shift away from automobile transportation to daily bicycle commuting and realize the intricate relationships between ideology, labor, time, and transportation needs:

Another great realization I’ve had about biking everywhere is that the costs of maintaining a bike are far cheaper than maintaining a car. This can affect one’s life in other positive ways. You’ll possibly have to buy few products, sink less money into insurance, and spend less money on the day to day up keep. This could mean you’ll have to work fewer hours to maintain the necessities of life and it could therefore give you more free time.¹⁰³

In addition to analogous sentiments featured in *Divorce Your Car!*,¹⁰⁴ a widely circulated image from cartoonist Andy Singer bluntly reveals the ideological connections between labor and transportation that I have just emphasized.

¹⁰³ Ian Ryan, insert to *Crucial Unit/RAMBO*, (Philadelphia: Ed Walters Records). Sound recording, 7 inch record.

¹⁰⁴ Alvord, 101-103.

NO EXIT

© Andy Singer

DRIVE TO WORK / WORK TO DRIVE



Figure 3: Drive to Work/Work to Drive (artwork by Andy Singer)

2.3 PERSPECTIVES ON TECHNOLOGY

A great deal of this project is obviously concerned with bicycles, but it is important to recognize the manner in which bicycles are part of “sociotechnical ensembles”¹⁰⁵ that include the technology itself, as well as the social, cultural, economic, and political factors that have both shaped the history of the bicycle and greatly influence the manner in which it will be used in the future. In this sense, I am endorsing Rosen’s perspective that he articulates in his book *Framing Production*, and his essay entitled “Up the Velorution.” His work is a useful reference point because he focuses upon the social construction of technology (SCOT), but he does so without rigid adherence to the SCOT position, thereby producing a somewhat eclectic take on cycling technology that is refreshing and useful. Rosen states his position as “a commitment to understanding technological change in a way which is neither technologically nor socially determined, which pays attention to the contingencies and uncertainties of change, and which treats critically both the relationship between technology and society and the rhetorics of those who promote change.”¹⁰⁶ Rosen is right to pay attention to the rhetorics of cyclists, and this project will look closely at the construction, use, and reception of such technological narratives.

According to Rosen, the critical responses developed by the cycling counterculture are the result of widespread dissatisfaction with both the corporatization of the cycling industry and the norms that dictate our transportation climate. Specifically, Rosen describes how the cycling counterculture’s conceptualization of technology has greatly influenced their cultural and political agenda. He rightly describes the disposition of these cyclists with reference to Lewis

¹⁰⁵ Wiebe E. Bijker and Trevor Pinch, *The Social Construction of Technological Systems: New Directions in the Sociology and History of Technology* (Cambridge: MIT, 1987); Wiebe E. Bijker and J. Law, *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change* (Cambridge: MIT, 1992); Bijker, *Of Bicycles*; Rosen, *Framing Production*.

¹⁰⁶ Rosen, *Framing Production*, 5.

Mumford's influential categorization of 'democratic technics,'¹⁰⁷ wherein technologies have the capacity to be utilized "within a broader context of questioning and challenging the politics of technology—and politics *per se*—with the expectation that, once appropriated, any particular artifact would become embedded within more democratic social structures."¹⁰⁸ In other words, cyclists argue that there are particular technologies that are part of a broader vision of democracy and social change, such as the bicycle, and there are other technologies that hinder the capacity for progressive social change, such as nuclear power and/or the automobile. This position not only emphasizes which types of technologies and technological systems are preferable, it also raises important questions about the lack of technological choices that are collectively available in Western culture.

Unlike the democratic governmental structures that we pride ourselves upon, our collective ability to make substantial decisions about which technologies we choose to utilize are explicitly determined by the profit incentives of select corporations and the tenets of the 'so called' free market. In the same way that media conglomerates create the illusion of choice by convincing audiences that they "vote with their remotes,"¹⁰⁹ corporations that specialize in transportation technologies, specifically automobiles, create the illusion of technological choice by creating a seemingly endless array of commodities that one can choose from. By focusing upon the needs of the individual through interrelated narratives of freedom (of choice), autonomy, and 'cool',¹¹⁰ automobile, oil, and advertising corporations disguise personal technological choices as collective choices. This paradigm not only confuses individual consumer choices with democratic decision making processes, it obscures the fact that

¹⁰⁷ Lewis Mumford, "Authoritarian and democratic technics." *Technology and Culture* 5 (1964): 1-8.

¹⁰⁸ Rosen, *Velourution*.

¹⁰⁹ Eileen Meehan, "Why We Don't Count: The Commodity Audience," in *Logics of Television*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990), 117-137.

¹¹⁰ Frank, *Cool*; Also see *Frontline. The Merchants of Cool*, VHS, directed by Barak Goodman, PBS, (2001).

individuals are incapable of making technological choices that cannot be supported by larger economic and technological infrastructures: “Our capitalist society doesn’t really care what we buy or which toys we like to play with, as long as we keep working within a system that systematically excludes us from decisions about the shape of our lives or the technologies we must choose.”¹¹¹

2.3.1 Making technologies communicate (symbols and semiotics)

Through a dialectical process of action (protest and everyday practice) and communication (media), the cycling counterculture calls the technological decision making process into question and it simultaneously creates new narratives about technology that emphasize both individual empowerment and collective struggle. Collectively, these processes are intended to “transform the cognitive structures that help people to interpret ideas/issues/arguments”¹¹² about bicycling and car culture. To put it another way, one goal of biketivism is to make the bicycle stand for something, to communicate messages through the technology. This is not to ascribe an independent agency to the technology, rather, it is a way of looking at how activists can attach specific meanings to particular technologies that communicate messages to the public—even in the absence of an accompanying discourse. This is essentially the inversion of the branding method of advertising that is well-documented by Naomi Klein, in which corporations ‘breathe life’ into commodities in order to make them communicate specific messages long after our televisions have been turned off and the magazine covers have been closed. Take for example the Hummer SUV, a technology that is tied to a narrative of adventure and excitement through

¹¹¹ Carlsson, “Bicycling Over the Rainbow,” *Critical Mass*, 238. Emphasis is my own.

¹¹² Maxwell Schnurer, “Towards a Semiotics of Freedom,” unpublished.

selective media representation and advertisements that feature images of Hummers climbing up steep hills, tearing through forests, and ultimately resting atop the summits of mountains. Because of the association that people have between the automobile and this particular narrative, the Hummer continues to communicate a message without the presence of an accompanying advertisement, sales pitch, or stunt driver:

A Hummer SUV no longer exists as a product of engineers' planning and workers' labor at General Motors, a complex machine made of metal, glass, and rubber, or even a vehicle to get the kids to soccer practice. Instead (coached a bit by Madison Avenue) the H2 takes on a personality of rugged individualism, a bit of military imperial invincibility, and a ready-made landscape of untrammelled, open, and distinctly non-suburban terrain.¹¹³

Over the last two decades, a practice of branding inversion known as *culture jamming* has emerged within various facets of the anti-corporate, anti-capitalist, and anti-globalization movements.¹¹⁴ As a series of tactics that attempt to invert and politicize both the products and function of mass culture, culture jamming can be seen as one way in which individuals have individually and collectively transcended Horkheimer and Adorno's ominous assertion that "anyone who resists can only survive by fitting in."¹¹⁵ Culture jammers critique capitalist and corporate institutions through direct action tactics such as billboard modification¹¹⁶ and street

¹¹³ Duncombe, *Poverty of Theory*, 14.

¹¹⁴ For a detailed examination of culture jammers, tactics, and theories, see *The Culture Jammer's Encyclopedia*, <http://www.sniggle.net>.

¹¹⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno, 132.

¹¹⁶ See Billboard Liberation Front, *The Art and Science of Billboard Improvement* (San Francisco: Los Cabrones Press, 2000); and Guerilla Girls, <http://www.guerrillagirls.com/>.

theatre,¹¹⁷ and also through the manipulation and re-circulation of advertisements,¹¹⁸ music,¹¹⁹ technologies,¹²⁰ and other mass produced commodities.¹²¹ Culture jammers are extremely diverse because there are a number of different intellectual influences that have shaped both the theoretical dispositions and practices of specific groups. Some of the predominant influence include, but are not limited to, the Frankfurt School, William Burroughs, the Yippies, Guy Debord and the Situationist International (SI), second wave feminism, activist guru Saul Alinsky, and punk rock. Mark Dery is correct in referring to culture jamming as an “elastic category, accomodating a multitude of subcultural practices”¹²² because different groups have wide ranging interpretations of who, or what, should be targeted (for disruption, satire, or critique), what media or objects should be utilized, which audiences should be targeted, and what criteria is used in order to evaluate success or failure. However, despite the variety of theories and tactics used by culture jammers there are common objectives that are collectively shared by the majority of culture jammers, including some the following: 1) to demystify corporate power, undermine consumer culture, and critique capitalism through “semiological guerrilla warfare”¹²³ and technological manipulation, 2) to politicize and publicize a host of issues that have been effectively masked by corporate dominance of the media environment such as public vs. private

¹¹⁷ See Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping, <http://www.revbilly.com/>.

¹¹⁸ Kalle Lasn, *Culture Jamming : The Uncooling of America* (New York: Eagle Brook, 1999). Also see Christine Harold, “Pranking Rhetoric: ‘Culture Jamming’ as Media Activism,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 21, no. 3 (2004): 189-211.

¹¹⁹ See Negativland, <http://www.negativland.com/>.

¹²⁰ See Critical Art Ensemble (with the Carbon Defense League), *The Child As Audience* (New York: Autonomedia, 2001), Enhanced CD and book.

¹²¹ For example, the Barbie Liberation Front gained notoriety by swapping the voice chips between ‘talking’ G.I. Joe figures and Barbie dolls and then re-circulated the doctored toys into stores in order to playfully critique the gendered nature of children’s toys. For more information about the Barbie Liberation Front see: <http://www.sniggle.net/barbie.php>.

¹²² Mark Dery, *Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing and Sniping in the Empire of Signs* (Westfield, NJ: Open Magazine Pamphlet Series) 1993, <http://www.levity.com/markdery/culturjam.html>.

¹²³ Umberto Eco, “Towards a Semiological Guerilla Warfare,” in *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. W. Weaver (London: Picador, 1987), 135-144. Quoted in Dery.

use of space, rampant advertising, citizens rights, sweatshop labor, intellectual property laws, and institutionalized discrimination, 3) to ultimately change people's communication habits, i.e. to teach them oppositional strategies for decoding messages in both the public and private spheres¹²⁴ and 4) to encourage, motivate, and educate other people on how to utilize 'Do It Yourself' (DIY) tactics in order to create their own cultural practices and products—as opposed to merely consuming those sold by corporations.

Culture jammers have shown how one can manipulate such images and narratives in order to tell an entirely different story about a particular commodity, whether it is a Hummer or a McDonald's cheeseburger.¹²⁵ Through techniques such as direct action, billboard modification, satire, and the subversive use of images/text, culture jammers demonstrate the idea that branding can be used in an entirely different manner than was intended. By changing the images and texts associated with a particular commodity, one can possibly change the way in which people learn to evaluate images/texts, and ultimately, change the way in which they perceive that commodity. Along the same lines, biketivists attempt to change public perceptions about the bicycle through creative forms of direct action, inventive use of cycling technologies, subversive images/texts, and the production of positive images/texts that are intended to teach people how to 'read' bicycles in a different way. Ultimately, the goal is to not only have people 'read' bicycle/cycling in a different way, bike activists also work towards cultural changes that result from changes in both consciousness and discourse: "groups, as well as individuals or institutions, through their rhetorical tactics and strategies create social movements, changes in public consciousness with regards to a key issue or issues, measurable through changes in the meanings of a cultures key

¹²⁴ Stuart Hall, "Encoding/decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies (1977-1979)*, eds. Hall, et. al. (London: Hutchinsons/CCCS, 1980), 128-138.

¹²⁵ See the "McLibel" case covered by Klein in *No Logo*, 387-390.

terms in public discourse.”¹²⁶ This focus on transformation and long-term social change is one of the important differences that separates politicized cyclists from most—but not all—culture jammers who are more focused on aesthetic rebellion and pranks than sustained political initiatives.

2.4 URBAN SPACE/MATERIAL SPACE

In the same way that anti-globalization groups have created a larger movement by challenging the global and local effects of multinational corporations and free market neoliberalism,¹²⁷ biketivists simultaneously attempt to address the national/global problems of car culture through an acute analysis of ‘the local’—a term used in reference to small town communities and cities. Not surprisingly, biketivists are thus concerned with the problems and prospects facing Western cities, and their responses are manifested in both discursive and performative contestations over the meaning and function of urban spaces. Biketivists intuitively engage in what Henri Lefebvre called the *right to the city*: “The right to participate in urbanity, the right to appropriate the city not merely as an economic unit, but as a home and as an expression of lived experience.”¹²⁸ Such expressions serve to redefine space through critique, performance, and most importantly, through the politicization of everyday experiences. While certain practices contribute to a different sense of what urban space can, or could be used for, they also reveal the possible ways in which people can actually *live* differently.

¹²⁶ Deluca, 37.

¹²⁷ See Bourdieu, *Tyranny of the Market*; Klein, *No Logo*; Michael Burawoy, *Global Ethnography: Forces, Connections, and Imaginations in a Postmodern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

¹²⁸ Quoted in Andy Merrifield, *Dialectical Urbanism: Social Struggles in the Capitalist City* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2002), 156.

As opposed to an ideology of tolerance based upon a dialectical understanding of urban life, the prevailing ideology of the city is one that emphasizes the rights of private ownership at the expense of other rights: A situation which ultimately positions dissenting voices of the public at odds with those in positions of power because their agendas are contextualized as being antithetical to the status quo. In his book, *Tearing Down the Streets*, criminologist Jeff Ferrell utilizes case studies and first-hand experiences in order to document the disappearance of public spaces and street cultures in the United States that have resulted from increased privatization, police-presence, and policy making: “The contemporary outlawing of open city space heralds an expansion of legal and cultural control into the farthest, most marginalized corners of public life, a widening of the net and tightening of the mesh such that the very existence of alternative street communities comes to be criminalized.”¹²⁹ Ferrell focuses explicitly upon the interconnected aspects of social struggle that are manifested around issues of spatial contestation, including such politicized DIY practices as graffiti writing, busking, pirate radio, Food Not Bombs, and Critical Mass. While Ferrell’s analysis is not without its problems, he rightly points to the fundamental problems facing urbanites living within a modern capitalist society, namely, the homogenization of city culture, the eradication of street life, and the promulgation of consumerist ideology within city spaces: “Cities today do indeed take on the character of corporate theme parks, selling idealized images of themselves and cartoonish echoes of their former identities to residents and visitors in the form of converted living spaces, corporate retail chains, and gentrified historic districts”¹³⁰ Most poignantly, Ferrell contextualizes different forms of spatial struggle as being fought not only for literal space, but for the cultural space that is interdependent upon the manner in which people both perceive and experience their physical environment. In short, Ferrell

¹²⁹ Ferrell, *Tearing Down the Streets*, 225.

¹³⁰ Ferrell, *Tearing Down the Streets*, 9.

reiterates the messages that permeate both the media and practices of biketivists, namely that cultural life, identity, and community are bound to the physical geographies of urban spaces; thus, the struggle over such terrain is simultaneously a struggle to both preserve and protect the rights, practices, and culture of people who refuse to submit to car culture and the “Disneyfication” of Western society.¹³¹

2.5 CONCLUSION

Despite the diversity of materials that I utilize in order to discuss both the bicycle and the act of bicycling in this project, there are a number of common themes that tie these perspectives together and thus create a cohesive framework for my analyses. In other words, I have brought together perspectives on technology, transportation, urban space, and social movements because the authors that I cite effectively contextualize their subject matter within a larger cultural and political framework that gives credence to the interconnected dynamics that exist between media, rhetoric/discourse, ideology, and action. More importantly, the ‘canon’ of critical authors I have brought together in this project are fundamentally concerned with the creation of a more participatory, sustainable, and just world. Through the use of these perspectives, I hope to similarly contextualize the discourses, media, and actions of bicyclists within a discussion of the cultural and political issues that shape their collective narratives of dissent, participation, and hope.

¹³¹ For more critical perspectives on urban space/geography see the following books from David Harvey: *Society, the City, and the Space-Economy of Urbanism* (Washington: Association of American Geographers, 1972); *The Urban Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (New York: Routledge, 2001). Also see Joel Kenneth Baker, “Landscapes: Nature, Culture and the Production of Space,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2003.

3.0 CHAPTER THREE: THE POLITICS OF BICYCLING—A HISTORY

“There are several reasons why a bike saddle makes a fine soapbox, protesters say.”¹³²

In order to show how one can politicize bicycle technology, it is not only important to examine the actions and media of contemporary bike activists, it is also imperative that one recognizes the historical relationships between cycling technologies and the appropriation of bicycles: This reveals the degree to which bicycles have never been an apolitical, or neutral, technology. There are a number of different ways in which the bike has been and continues to be politicized within the broader contexts of gender relations, class struggle, urban planning, and environmentalism. In this chapter, I will provide an historical context of the politicization of the bicycle; a history that acknowledges technological innovation without fetishizing the object, essentializing, or resorting to origin myths about the invention of the bicycle, i.e. the ‘great man’ history of the bicycle.¹³³ While this history is chronological, it is not an account of a particular place or a specific time. Rather, it is history of people who share common dispositions about the function and use of the bicycle. Given the lull in cycling throughout the first half of the 20th century I will mainly focus upon two time periods in this chapter, the late 19th century and the 1960s-1970s. In each of these time periods there are excellent examples of cyclists who appropriated the bicycle

¹³² Joshua Robin, *New York Newsday*, 22 June 2004, in reference to cyclists presence at the Republican National Convention of 2004.

¹³³ For more on this point see Iain Boal, “The World of the Bicycle,” in *Critical Mass*, 167-174.

as a tool for political critique and political mobilization. This is not a comprehensive analysis of every group that articulated such ideas, rather, it is a way of illustrating the ideas and actions of the ‘pioneers’ who paved the way for Critical Mass and the small, but active, grassroots political cycling movement that developed in the 1990s.



Figure 4-Early Cycling

In what follows, I will look specifically at the manner in which a simple form of technology, the bicycle, has been historically politicized as an instrument of critique in regards to class, patriarchy, and car culture; utilized as a vehicle for direct action protest (literally and figuratively); and simultaneously promoted as the preeminent symbol for what Ivan Illich dubs “conviviality.”¹³⁴

¹³⁴ Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*.

3.1 BICYCLES, WORKING CLASSES, AND SOCIALISM

In the late nineteenth century, cycling was linked to a technological narrative of progress and closely tied to a vision of a broader and more mobile civilization that integrated the best aspects of nature and culture.¹³⁵ Cycling first became popular amongst the upper classes in the U.S. and England, given the necessary income and leisure time that one needed in order to participate in such a hobby. However, innovations in mass production quickly decreased the cost of the bicycle which provided members of the working class access to the new technology. This prompted claims that “as a social revolutionizer [the bicycle] has never had an equal.”¹³⁶ While history has shown such technologically determinist statements to be fallacious, the effects of the bicycle were significant for a large segment of the working class populations in both the U.S. and Europe who had been otherwise constrained in their mobility. In other words, the bicycle gave working class individuals new access to people and places, and ultimately, new methods for political mobilization. Given the vast geography of the U.S., the effects of the bicycle were especially strong, since it was arguably the first time that non-elites had the ability to utilize personal forms of transportation technology in their daily lives. While horses were certainly instrumentalized as forms of transportation before the bicycle, it is important to note that the upkeep of horses was quite expensive and largely outside the range of most working class budgets: “To keep matched pairs of horses for a single year cost more than most Americans consumed in food during the same length of time.”¹³⁷ On this point, I would also argue that any

¹³⁵ Bijker, *Of Bicycles*, 40.

¹³⁶ *Scientific American* (1896), 391, quoted in Smith, 112.

¹³⁷ Quoted in Smith, 112.

paradigm that equates animals with technology is highly anthropocentric and implicitly encourages the debasement of both animal life and the environment.¹³⁸

The existing class tensions that resulted from the popularization of the bicycle amongst the working classes in 19th U.S. and Britain are indicative in the literature of English tricyclists, a group of elites who took pains to distinguish themselves from the ‘lower class’ of bicyclists: “Tricyclists were dignified, and tricycles expensive. Associations of tricyclists developed among the professional and wealthier milieu, excluding, mechanics, day-labourers, chimney-sweeps, costers, etc.”¹³⁹ The Tricycle Union, formed by the wealthy members of the London Society in 1882, put pressure on city governments to exclude bicycles from parks, and made no bones about their disdain for the blossoming bicycle culture in England: “It is desired by most tricyclists to separate themselves entirely from the bicyclists, who are a disgrace to the pastime, while tricycling includes Princes, Princesses, Dukes, Earls, etc. It is plain that the tricyclists are altogether a better class than the bicyclists, and require better accommodation on tours, etc.”¹⁴⁰ The most interesting aspect of such discrimination is that the elite Tricyclists not only distanced themselves from bicyclists in terms of their ‘character,’ but also in terms of their supposed technological superiority. By doing so, they attached a specific moral/social narrative to the bicycle that was largely perpetuated throughout the 20th century, and continues to stigmatize cyclists in the 21st century—although the automobile has become the new standard for such technological ‘superiority’. The important difference is that in the present day, negative connotations regarding both the technology of bicycles, and cyclists themselves, are less a

¹³⁸ For more on anthropocentrism see: Dave Foreman, *Confessions of an Eco-Warrior* (New York: Harmony Books, 1991); Christopher Manes, *Green Rage: Radical Environmentalism and the Unmaking of Civilization* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990).

¹³⁹ Andrew Ritchie, *King of the Road* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1975) in Pryor Dodge, *The Bicycle*, (New York: Flammarion, 1996), 76.

¹⁴⁰ *Boneshaker* 7, no. 66 (1972), 160. Quoted in Dodge, 76.

product of open, elitist discrimination and more of a widely accepted ideology that has been perpetuated and reinforced through the billions of dollars spent by automobile, oil, and gas corporations on advertising, federal lobbying, ‘soft-money’ political donations, and the systematic elimination of public rail systems.¹⁴¹ In other words, the automobile has been mythologized as part of the ‘American dream’ of mobility and access, therefore the ideological assumptions of car culture are largely invisible and/or implicit. One such assumption is that people who choose to ride bicycles are typically poor or deviant, both of which are frowned upon within the context of the ‘American dream’.

In terms of political organizing in the late 19th century, working-class organizations in the U.S. and England were able to capitalize upon their newfound mobility by personally reaching workers in areas that were previously difficult to reach, and by holding meetings in locations that were now accessible by bicycle. Wiebe Bijker acknowledges this point in his text *Of Bicycles, Bakelites, and Bulbs*: “Cycling was also linked with new social movements in more concrete ways. The first meeting of the bicycle society of the town of Coburg was observed by a local police officer, who had to ensure that this society was not an undercover meeting of the forbidden social democratic party.”¹⁴² Bijker’s story illustrates the threat posed to the larger political structure of the time, in that cycling technology, like other transportation technologies before it, aided in the decentralization of political organizations, which made the job of policing dissidents more complicated and increased the threat of wider political mobilization. Bijker points to the fact that bicycles were not affordable to the proletariat throughout much of the early 1880’s, but by the mid-1890’s there were numerous examples of the bicycle being used as a

¹⁴¹ Snell, *American Ground Transport*.

¹⁴² Bijker, *Of Bicycles*, 40.

vehicle for political enfranchisement amongst the working classes in England, Germany, and the United States.

In 1894 a group of socialists in Birmingham, England started the Clarion Cycling Club, which was named after their favorite political newspaper, *The Clarion*. Started in 1891 by journalist Robert Blatchford, who wrote under the name Nunquam), *The Clarion* was a highly accessible Socialist paper that focused on issues facing poor and working class peoples in England. Blatchford and his colleagues passionately wrote about injustice and inequality and their lack of a rigid economic dogma allowed the paper to serve as an open forum where other Socialists and like-minded writers could contribute.¹⁴³ By the end of 1894, four other Clarion Cycling Clubs had emerged in the Potteries, Liverpool, Bradford and Barnsley and by 1895 they held their first national meeting where it was decided that the main purpose of the association of clubs was to spread good will and distribute Socialist propaganda as a means to create a unified Socialist party:

We are not neglectful of our Socialism, the frequent contrasts a cyclist gets between the beauties of nature and the dirty squalor of towns make him more anxious than ever to abolish the present system. To get healthy exercise is not necessarily to be selfish. To attend to the social side of our work is not necessarily to neglect the more serious part. To spread good fellowship is the most important work of Clarion Cycling Clubs. Then, perhaps, the 'One Socialist Party' would be more possible and we should

¹⁴³ Denis Pye, "The Clarion Movement 1891-1914," *Working Class Movement Library*, <http://www.wcml.org.uk/group/clarion.htm>

get less of those squabbles among Socialists which make me doubt whether they understand even the first part of their name.¹⁴⁴

Throughout 1894, tens of thousands of copies of *The Clarion* and hundreds of thousands of copies of Blatchford's essay "Merrie England" were sold or given away by the Clarion cycling clubs and a new fleet of Clarion scouts, or "Clarionettes." The following year, another publication, *The Scout*, was started through the Clarion organization and it specifically instructed Socialist workers and cycling propagandists as to how they might more effectively target and mobilize workers with their message:

The importance of the bicycle in the work of the Scouts was emphasized by the paper's editor, who suggested the compiling of a list of speakers able to cycle twenty to fifty miles on Saturdays and Sundays to address public meetings in towns and villages which had, as yet, no Socialist organizations. Cyclist supporters could paste walls and fences with stickers bearing Socialist slogans, these being obtainable from the Clarion Office in London.¹⁴⁵

Bicycling continued to play an important role in the mobilization of workers throughout England as the number of socialist cycling clubs grew to approximately 70 by the end of 1897. Throughout the late 1890s cycling was also integrated with the activities of the Clarion Socialist Choir and a traveling propaganda caravan that was started by Julia Dawson, who wrote under the pen name Mrs. D.J. Myddleton-Worrall. Dawson, a feminist and Socialist, planned a thirteen-week Clarion Women's Van Tour in which women would speak and Socialist literature would be

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

distributed at meetings “on village greens and in the market-places of small towns.”¹⁴⁶ Clarion cyclists accompanied the rides in order to supplement the propaganda efforts and provide support to the caravan.

As Clarion cyclists literally peddled the Socialist message throughout England during 1896, workers in Germany organized the Worker’s Cycling Federation Solidarity—a group of tens of thousands whose members called themselves the “Enlightenment Patrols of Social Democracy.”¹⁴⁷ According to bicycle historian Pryor Dodge, the federation played an important role in politicizing members of the working classes in Germany at a time when local and regional governments were banning working class organizations, including unions.¹⁴⁸ German cyclists engaged in similar political campaigning activities as the Clarion clubs in England, but they added some panache with the organization of parades in which cyclists would blaze through the streets *en masse*, armed with handfuls of propaganda that they threw at the crowds. According to bike historian James McGurn, the cyclists flew through the crowds in order to evade identification, given the German’s negative disposition towards Socialism and their strict bicycling laws: “The freedom, mobility and privacy of the bicycle were more than the authorities would tolerate. Significantly, Germany was one of the first nations to provide bicycles for its policemen and local militias—agents of social control.”¹⁴⁹ By 1913, membership in the Worker’s Cycling Federation had reached over 150,000 people and the workers involved collectively owned and operated a chain of bicycle shops, a bicycle factory, and a bi-weekly newspaper called *The Worker-Cyclist*.¹⁵⁰ Given the large number of Germans that immigrated to America in order to look for work, it is probable that some of these immigrants influenced the

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Dodge, 164.

¹⁴⁸ Dodge, 164.

¹⁴⁹ James McGurn, *On Your Bicycle* (New York: Facts on File, 1987), 94.

¹⁵⁰ Dodge, 164.

creation of similar cycling groups in their new home, because in 1898, the Socialist Labor Party of America founded a Socialist Wheelmen's Club in order to distribute political literature along routes from Boston to New York City.¹⁵¹

We can not be sure as to whether the intention of workers was to explicitly *appropriate* bicycle technology (they certainly would not have used such terms), because the general use of bicycles amongst the working classes can be attributed to technological diffusion: A process in which new technologies are initially available only to the rich, and then eventually diffused amongst other members of society. However, given the fact that cycling was initially popularized as a bourgeois 'hobby' and later popularized as a form of transportation, the political use of bicycles by the working classes in the late 19th century is certainly an instance of technological appropriation. Given the scorn that many elites had for bicycles and bicyclists, it is clear that cycling technology was *not* created as a political tool to disperse socialist literature, promote worker's rights, recruit members, and mobilize disenfranchised workers. Nevertheless, these were ways that cycling technology was historically utilized, and it arguably set the trend for other individuals to appropriate the bicycle for political and cultural purposes.

3.2 EARLY FEMINISM AND BIKING

While it is difficult to accurately gauge the political and social gains made by the working classes in the late 19th century via the appropriation of bicycles, the strongest political effects of bicycle appropriation became evident when women appropriated such technologies for the purposes of mobility, pleasure, and empowerment. There have been a number of different

¹⁵¹ Dodge, 169.

books, essays, and oral histories regarding the links between early feminism and feminist use of bicycle technology,¹⁵² most of which focus upon one of three interrelated topics; 1) the manner in which bicycles helped enable women to become emancipated through mobility, 2) the connections between female cycling and subsequent changes in ‘moral’, social, and behavioral norms, and 3) changes in women’s clothing that were prompted by their use of bicycles.



Figure 5-Women and Their Bicycles

As the popularity of cycling increased in the 1880’s and 1890’s, women began to utilize cycling technology in their daily lives; first through the use of tricycles, on which they were typically accompanied by a male chaperon, and then through the use of bicycles, which

¹⁵² Smith, *Social History*; Oddy, “Bicycles”; Marks, *Bicycles, Bangs, and Bloomers*; Dodge, *The Bicycle; Return of the Scorcher*, VHS, directed by Ted White (1992) and *We are Traffic*, VHS, directed by Ted White (1999); Willard, “Conspicuous Whiteness”.

eradicated both the possibility and need for a male chaperon (on the vehicle itself). Atop a bicycle, women began to enjoy a greater degree of personal mobility than had arguably been afforded to them at any point in the history of transportation technologies. While it is impossible to make quantitative statements as to the number of women that were ‘freed’ by the bicycle, it is also impossible to underestimate the liberating effects of the bicycle for women who learned how to re-appropriate an otherwise male-gendered technology.¹⁵³ Understanding women’s use of cycling technologies as a form of appropriation is both justifiable and important, because it was not a simply a matter of women learning how to ‘use’ a new form of technology; female cycling was met with a considerable degree of resistance from men, the medical community,¹⁵⁴ the church, and ironically, from women such as the Woman’s Rescue League—a ‘feminist’ organization that believed “bicycling by young women has helped more than any other media to swell the ranks of reckless girls, who finally drift into the standing army of outcast women of the United States.”¹⁵⁵ Put simply, although the bicycle was not explicitly forbidden to women, social conventions regarding women’s manners, desires (for exercise, pleasure, and mobility), and clothing all encouraged women not to take up their bicycle as their own.

As noted by nearly every historian of the bicycle, a great deal of the uproar over female cycling had to do with the subsequent changes in women’s clothing that resulted from their use of bikes. Based upon the inability for women to properly ride a bicycle while wearing long, cumbersome skirts, many women opted for the ‘divided skirt’ or ‘bloomers’; a form of clothing that had previously gained minimal acceptance due to the negative connotations that surrounded such *loose* attire. In conjunction with cyclist’s advocacy for bloomers, women seized the

¹⁵³ Oddy, 60; Rosen, *Velourution*.

¹⁵⁴ See Smith, 67-69 for a detailed list of such ludicrously diagnosed bike-related health conditions as 'bicycle wrists', 'bicycle twitch', 'bicycle hands', 'bicycler's heart', and my favorite: 'bicycle face'.

¹⁵⁵ Smith, 74-75.

opportunity to mobilize against other forms of restrictive, unhealthy clothing, such as the corset, in order to make larger arguments about the oppressed status of women in America. Frances Willard, a temperance activist and female cyclist, provided an excellent illustration of feminist sentiments regarding the corset in a speech to the Women's National Council of the United States: "She is a creature born to the beauty and freedom of Diana, but she is swathed by her skirts, splintered by her stays, bandaged by her tight waist, and pinioned by her sleeves until—alas, that I should live to say it!—a trussed turkey or a spitted goose are her most appropriate emblems."¹⁵⁶ The burgeoning feminist movement rallied around both female cycling, and the clothing issues raised by female cyclists, through the creation of such organizations as the Rational Dress Society; a group that diligently advocated for the use of functional clothing and against the Victorian ideals of femininity that were perpetuated through 19th century women's fashion. Such organizations explicitly connected aspects of women's liberation to cycling technologies, via the issue of clothing. There was a great deal of overlap between these issues, given the fact that women were literally and socially constrained in their ability to move freely.

¹⁵⁶ Frances Willard, "Women and Organization." Speech to the Woman's National Council of the United States, Washington, D.C., February 22-25, 1891, <http://prohibition.osu.edu/Willard/willard.htm>.



Figure 6-Bloomers

Despite the oft-intersecting issues of cycling and clothing, one should recognize the fact that women who advocated cycling in the 19th century did so in a variety of ways, and it is important to understand these differences in order to avoid making generalized statements about female use of bicycles in the 19th century. While the bicycle “posed a challenge to the doctrine

of separate spheres by offering women a way to escape the physical confines of the home,”¹⁵⁷ there were women who utilized the bicycle as a means of personal empowerment, and others who envisioned the bicycle as a tool for political emancipation. This is a significant distinction because there were greater political risks taken by women who used the bicycle in order to make a break with conventional norms and morals associated with women. In this regard, women such as Frances Willard who tied issues of clothing together with cycling were not necessarily motivated by political emancipation, rather, their perspective on cycling was tied to an explicitly moral narrative:

That which made me succeed with the bicycle was precisely what had gained me a measure of success in life-it was the hardihood of spirit that led me to begin, the persistence of will that held me to my task, and the patience that was willing to begin again when the last stroke had failed. And so I found high moral uses in the bicycle and can commend it as a teacher without pulpit or creed. He who succeeds, or, to be more exact in handing over my experience, she who succeeds in gaining the mastery of such an animal as Gladys [the name of the bicycle], will gain the mastery of life.¹⁵⁸

However inspiring such accounts might have been, it is important to contextualize the claims made by women like Willard who, on the one hand, advocated for mobility and independence, but on the other hand, did so within a rigid moral framework. In their article, “The Bicycle and Women’s Rights,” authors Lisa Strange and Robert Brown state that although Willard was a champion of female cycling, she ultimately “reinforced conventional gender stereotypes and the

¹⁵⁷ Strange and Brown, 616.

¹⁵⁸ Frances Willard and Carol O’Hare, *How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle: Reflections of an Influential 19th Century Woman* (Sunnyvale: Fair Oaks Publishing, 1991), <http://www.barnard.columbia.edu/amstud/resoureces/womem/willard.htm>.

prevailing distinction between the public and private sphere by insisting that the bicycle posed no threat to either the morality of women or to traditional gender roles.”¹⁵⁹ In opposition to the ‘acceptable’ narratives of female riders, there were other women who utilized cycling as a means to critique prevailing social norms, whether such critiques were based on mobility, clothing restrictions, patriarchy, or religion. One such woman was Elizabeth Stanton, who “viewed the bicycle as a tool of liberation—liberation from conventions of fashion, from artificial gender distinctions, and from oppressive religion.”¹⁶⁰

Unlike women such as Willard, Stanton attacked the basis of critiques made against female cyclists by male establishments and she tied her critique of patriarchy to a larger set of issues that included women’s suffrage, clothing restrictions, and a transcendentalist-based, radical critique of organized religion that was manifested in her book, *The Women’s Bible*—a text that “proved so controversial that even many of Stanton’s strongest supporters, including the National American Women Suffrage Association condemned it as ‘heretical’.”¹⁶¹ According to Strange and Brown, Stanton celebrated the bicycle as a way of advocating a ‘higher’ set of virtues that were present in all people and she tried to persuade other women that cycling was a means to not only escape the physical confines of the church, but also the moral tenets of self-denial and restraint.¹⁶² While Stanton represents what was probably a small minority of women in the 19th century, her perspective on the bicycle stands as a testament of how technologies can be radically appropriated by people who understand the relationships between technology, social norms, mobility, and liberation.

¹⁵⁹ Strange and Brown, 615.

¹⁶⁰ Strange and Brown, 621.

¹⁶¹ Strange and Brown, 620.

¹⁶² Strange and Brown, 619, 621.

Along with women such as Elizabeth Stanton, historians such as Patricia Marks, author of *Bicycles, Bangs, and Bloomers*, further reiterate the importance of the bicycle within the context of female emancipation:

No other individual sport seemed to further the woman's movement so radically. It could be ladylike or daring, depending on whether its rider pedaled demurely, petticoats and all, on a tricycle or donned bloomers, tie, and waistcoat and 'scorched' down the streets on a two-wheeler. This revolutionary traveling machine changed patterns of courtship, marriage, and work, to say nothing of transportation; it altered dress styles and language, exercise and education.¹⁶³

Interestingly, Marks' analysis of female cycling is focused upon the mediation of such experiences within the popular press, and she illustrates the shifts that took place in regards to the representations of female cyclists. Whereas female cyclists were initially satirized, mocked, and admonished as 'manly,' threatening, or immoral, there was a gradual shift in popular media that acknowledged, and thereby accepted, the idea of female cycling; a shift that gave direct efforts for women's emancipation "an unexpected boost."¹⁶⁴

One specific way in which the issues of female cycling became more widely accepted was through the medium of advertising, wherein magazines such as *Munsey's*, *McClure's*, *Cosmopolitan* and the *Ladies' Home Journal* printed ads that offered a variety of bicycles and bicycle related products to women.¹⁶⁵ According to Carla Willard, the "anxious debates about female bicycling were implicit in many brand-product ads, where they were distilled in and quelled by the sales pitch."¹⁶⁶ In other words, while advertising helped dispel the negative

¹⁶³ Marks, 184.

¹⁶⁴ Marks, 184.

¹⁶⁵ C. Willard, 194.

¹⁶⁶ C. Willard, 195.

connotations surrounding female bicycling by ‘legitimizing’ women’s issues in popular media, the businesses who ran such ads did not do so in order to empower women, or contribute to the goals of feminist emancipation; rather, they ran the ads in order to create a new consumer demographic based around the image of the “new woman.”¹⁶⁷ Ellen Garvey reiterates this sentiment in her analysis of female cycling and advertising-supported magazines, where she claims that “women’s riding had to be made socially acceptable to sell safety bicycles to a larger market.”¹⁶⁸

While such representations were possibly helpful in the short term, they ultimately commodified the progressive demands of female cyclists and feminists, and did so for the purposes of brand-recognition and profit by “turning rebellion into money.”¹⁶⁹ The main reason why it is important to consider such factors within the context of cycling technologies is that many cycling histories conflate feminist appropriation of bicycles with changes in clothing; a scenario that acknowledges the advances of female cyclists, but ultimately neglects the role of advertisers who perpetuated a myth of liberation-through-consumption. For contemporary activists who utilize biking as a means to critique the ideological assumptions perpetuated by advertising, it is important to recuperate such historical perspectives in order to create alternative histories of cycling technologies that de-emphasize transformations in fashion, and re-emphasize the manner in which bicycles have historically been utilized as vehicles for empowerment and dissent. Patricia Marks alludes to this empowerment most clearly in her analysis of women’s athletics:

¹⁶⁷ See C. Willard, and Marks.

¹⁶⁸ Ellen Garvey, “Reframing the Bicycle: Advertising-Supported Magazines and Scorching Women,” *American Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (1995): 69.

¹⁶⁹ The Clash, “White Man in Hammersmith Palais,” *The Clash* (New York: CBS Records, 1977), LP.

Clothing was the most noticeable manifestation of change and one that the satirists seized upon immediately. Less obviously, perhaps, even the proposition that a woman should care for her own machine (and as all bicycle riders know, tire inflation and oiling can become personal manifestos) meant a radical reinterpretation of the division of labor. The woman who traveled on her own wheels, then, whether she did so for a lark or for serious transportation, expanded her boundaries well beyond the home circle. She became a citizen of the world.¹⁷⁰

Along the same lines, it is also important to be critical of the manner in which the histories of female cycling, and all cycling for that matter, have the tendency to perpetuate a myth of liberation-through-technology without properly contextualizing the nature of the technology in a wider cultural and political framework. To put it another way, it *is* possible to talk about the emancipatory qualities of the bicycle without resorting to myths of technological liberation, i.e. “technologies set people free.” Such myths that have a distinct bearing on women’s roles in society, and typically serve the interests of capitalist enterprises at the expense of historical accuracy. With this perspective in mind, Ruth Cowan debunks the myth of technological liberation through a detailed historical account of the “industrialization of the home.”¹⁷¹

Cowan describes how women have been historically sold on idea that household technologies will decrease the amount of labor that women are required to do, when in fact, the nature of the labor has changed (less drudgery) but the amount of work has actually *increased*. There are numerous reasons why labor has increased for housewives, but Cowan illustrates the

¹⁷⁰ Marks, 203.

¹⁷¹ Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 5.

ways in which household industrialization has decreased and/or eliminated the assistance of men and children, and the need for domestic servants and labor services (such as rug cleaning and food delivery). In other words, the industrialization of the home eliminated the web of individuals that were once needed in order to perform household labor (such as cooking, cleaning, transportation of family members), and placed all the labor responsibilities squarely upon the shoulders of housewives and working mothers. Cowan's work illustrates the importance of being both skeptical and critical about the myth of female emancipation through technological progress, and I would argue that the same skepticism should be applied to cycling histories that conflate feminist gains with technological progress. This is not to say that female appropriation of the bicycle was not profound, but rather, the point is to clarify and contextualize the nature of technological inventions/innovations in order to avoid historical accounts that mythologize technology at the expense of the women who used them. Furthermore, as Cowan reiterates in her text, it is important to debunk the myths of female emancipation through technology *writ large*. What is necessarily then, is to make an important distinction about cycling technologies in order to distinguish both the historical accounts of female emancipation, and the myths of technological emancipation. Put more simply, it is crucial to look at the differences between bicycle technology and household technologies in order to talk about the problems and prospects for using technology in progressive ways.

While Cowan is clear about the problems associated with the "incomplete" industrialization of the home, she recognizes the important function that tools have in shaping society, and in turn, the important role played by social institutions in mediating the availability of such tools: "As industrialization has progressed, the nature of institutions has changed—we now have manufacturing firms and advertising agencies and market researchers; but the impact

of the institutions remains structurally the same. They mediate the availability of tools by keeping some tools off the market and promoting others, or by organizing the pricing and distribution of tools.”¹⁷² Ivan Illich is similarly concerned with the types of tools available to the public and the effects that such tools have upon the social, political, and cultural institutions. His advocacy for convivial reconstruction is an attempt to promote the need for different tools to work *with*, rather than *for*, because “our imaginations have been industrially deformed to conceive only what can be molded into an engineered system of social habits that fit the logic of large-scale production.”¹⁷³ Given these perspectives, it is crucial to recognize the fact that bicycles, as opposed to household technologies, are convivial tools that enable a greater degree of freedom for individuals who utilize them.

By recognizing the *nature* of such technologies, and the potential benefits that such tools present within the larger contexts of political, cultural, and social institutions, it is possible to emphasize the emancipatory qualities of convivial technologies without resorting to a grand myth of technological liberation. This is an important distinction that separates contemporary biketivism from other forms of political activism that either explicitly or implicitly equate technological progress with democratic potential; a perspective that should be acknowledged in the way that biketivists read, write, and evaluate cycling histories. Put simply, historical accounts of female emancipation via cycling technology should focus more explicitly upon the convivial nature of bicycles in order to distinguish them from other forms of technology that have been erroneously and carelessly perpetuated as vehicles for female emancipation; such as the automobile. Although automobile corporations and advertisers stand to profit by selling women on the idea that they will have increased mobility and freedom, scholars such as Cowan

¹⁷² Cowan, 11.

¹⁷³ Illich, *Tools For Conviviality*, 15.

demonstrate how mothers actually spend *more* time trapped in automobiles, running errands and taking children back and forth, whereas the burden of driving was once distributed amongst a variety of delivery services.¹⁷⁴ Despite the fact that women, especially mothers, spend an increased amount of time doing unpaid labor in automobiles, they are largely excluded from car culture, in that women are not encouraged to fix their own vehicles and they frequently have to deal with condescending attitudes from male mechanics if/when their vehicles need to be repaired. Along with everyday restrictions based upon labor, traffic, economic costs, and environmental decay, these factors indicate the oppressive, rather than emancipatory, qualities of the automobile.

Though various activists and authors such as Lewis Mumford,¹⁷⁵ began to systematically challenge the implied successes of transportation policy and automotive transportation in the Western culture, cycling remained somewhat detached from a critical narrative of transportation until the 1960's. This was largely due to the fact that cycling sales had plummeted in the first half of the 20th century following the popularization of the automobile. As a result, there were far less people who had a sense of identity as a cyclist and even fewer who recognized the relationship between cycling and political enfranchisement (which was common in the late 1890's). In the late 1960's this situation began to change when a small group of activists from Amsterdam publicly advocated cycling as a radical alternative to the oppressive qualities of the automobile and automotive infrastructure.

¹⁷⁴ Cowan, 81-82.

¹⁷⁵ Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects*. (New York: Harcourt, 1961).

3.3 THE PROVOS AND THE WHITE BICYCLE PROGRAM

During the 1960's, a group of young radicals known as the Provos emerged in Amsterdam, dedicated to the "provocation of Dutch society and the 'Dreary People of Amsterdam'."¹⁷⁶ Following the collaboration of two distinct personalities; Roel van Duyn, a philosophy student at the University of Amsterdam, and Robert Jasper Grootveld, a performance artist and local underground hero, the Provos won 13,000 votes and one seat in the municipal elections in Amsterdam, and "regarded themselves as the manifestation of a new, heterogeneous class: the Provotariat."¹⁷⁷ Grootveld was an outspoken critic of capitalism who would attract large crowds of students and street punks by espousing his belief that "the masses had been brainwashed into becoming a herd of addicted consumers, the despicable plastic people."¹⁷⁸ Based upon the influence of the Frankfurt School, anarchism, and Dadaism, van Duyn also recognized the need to politicize the widely disenfranchised youth of Amsterdam, and in 1965 he wrote that "it is our task to turn their aggression into revolutionary consciousness."¹⁷⁹ The combination of van Duyn's theoretically-inspired, revolutionary approach to social change, and Grootveld's passion for public dissent and consciousness expansion (marijuana legalization was a strong theme for the Provos) created a short-lived movement that laid the foundations for a variety of long-lasting social changes that have taken place in Amsterdam including drug legalization and one of the most progressive transportation infrastructures in the world.

¹⁷⁶ Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (London: Routledge, 1992) 91.

¹⁷⁷ Plant, 91.

¹⁷⁸ Teun Voeten, "Dutch Provos," *High Times*, Jan. 1990, 32-36, 64-66, 73, accessed through *Community Bike*, http://www.communitybike.org/files/provo/high_times_article/.

¹⁷⁹ Voeten, online.

The White Bicycle Plan was part of the Provos' White Philosophy (not related to Aryan conceptions of whiteness), which considered work, especially factory labor, obsolete.¹⁸⁰ The program, initiated by industrial designer Luud Schimmelpennick called for a ban on all automobiles within Amsterdam, and a free bicycle program that would replace the car for urban transportation. In addition to other 'White' program proposals such as free daycare centers, free medical care for women, and heavy taxation for polluters, the White Bicycle Plan sought to politicize an important feature of everyday life; transportation technology.



Figure 7-The First White Bicycle

In conjunction with former Situationist architect Constant Nieuwenhuys, Luud called for the municipality of Amsterdam to purchase 20,000 white bicycles each year to supplement public transportation, all of which would be used freely by the city's inhabitants, "these White

¹⁸⁰ Voeten, online.

Bikes would belong to everyone and no one.”¹⁸¹ While Luud’s critique of the automobile was partially based on traffic problems in the city, the White Bicycle Plan was tied to a much wider critique of capitalist society, emphasizing the danger and pollution of automotive technologies by linking such technologies directly to capitalist infrastructures and consumer ideology.

Although environmental concerns were an important part of the critique against automobiles, individuals such as Constant supplied a more rigorous analysis of the relationship between automobiles and the use of urban space that transcended arguments about utility by focusing more explicitly upon the notions of public space, desire, and work. His critique of urban space entitled “New Urbanism” is a direct reflection of his past experiences with the avant-garde collective COBRA; a group whose theories and practices greatly influenced the critique of urban space developed in the 1950’s by Guy Debord and the Situationists.¹⁸² In “New Urbanism,” Constant argues that in addition to work dominating the lives of people by demanding their time and quashing their desires, the use of urban space as a mere conduit for the automobile has destroyed the possibilities for authentic, non-consumer social spaces:

So much public space is forbidden ground to the pedestrian that he is forced to seek his social contacts either in private areas (houses) or in commercially exploited ones (cafes or rented halls), where he is more or less imprisoned. In this way the city is losing its most important function: that of a meeting-place. It is highly significant that the police try to justify their measures against ‘happenings’

¹⁸¹ Luud Shimmelpennick, *The White Bicycle Plan* (1970), accessed through *Community Bike*, http://www.communitybike.org/files/new_urbanism.

¹⁸² See Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998); Tom McDonough, *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

one the public thoroughfares by arguing that such manifestations impede traffic.

This is an implicit acknowledgement that high-speed traffic is king of the road.¹⁸³

The arguments proposed within “New Urbanism” are extremely significant because they provide a critique of urban space that cannot be reduced to environmentalism. This is not to say that an environmentalist approach to transportation is non-productive, but it does seem easier—now more than ever—to co-opt the environmental approach by advocating for alternative energy sources for automobiles rather than addressing the structural problems that cars create.¹⁸⁴ This is not the fault of the critique, but rather, the fault of individuals and corporations who have the ability to frame public issues to their liking via mass media. Therefore, one of the most positive contributions of the Provos was the manner in which they created a multifaceted critique of the automobile that gave future bicycle activists a wider range of rhetorical and practical tools to use.

By situating the White Bicycle program within a more radical critique of capitalism, labor, public space, and desire, the Provos were able to politicize the bicycle as an instrument of critique against both the automobile and the culture spawned from it, thus, perfectly illustrating the revolutionary potential of convivial technologies. Furthermore, the Provos pioneered the first public use bicycle program (PUB) in Amsterdam, and since that time there have been four generations of PUB programs that have supplied thousands of bicycles to that city’s residents. In addition, there is an extensive PUB program in Copenhagen, Denmark and approximately fifty other cities throughout the world with PUB’s, including Portland, OR; Minneapolis, MN; Boulder, CO; and Princeton, NJ.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ Constant Nieuwenhuys, *New Urbanism* (1970), accessed through *Community Bike*, http://www.communitybike.org/files/new_urbanism.

¹⁸⁴ Eric Jenner, “Greenwashing: Visual Communication and Political Influence in Environmental Policy,” Ph.D dissertation, Louisiana State University, 2005.

¹⁸⁵ Paul DeMaio, “Smart Bikes: Public Transportation for the 21st Century,” *Transportation Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2003): 9-11.

The Provos praxis of theory and action set a precedent in which cycling could be tied directly to a radical political critique of both automotive transportation and capitalist infrastructure in Western society. The perspective articulated by these young rabble rousers initiated a trend that eventually made its way across the Atlantic, into the heart of Western car culture, where activists began to use bicycles as a tool for political protest.

3.4 VELORUTIONARIES

In 1975, “Bicycle Bob” Robert Silverman and Claire Morissette founded a cycling advocacy group called Le Monde à Bicyclette that utilized direct action and street theatre as a means of protesting the land use, traffic congestion, and environmental/health risks associated with automobiles in Montreal. Calling themselves “*velorutionaries*” “*velo-Quixotes*,” and “*velo-holy rollers*,” the group drafted their ideas into the “Cyclist’s Manifesto” and presented it to Mayor Drapeau, along with a bicycle.¹⁸⁶ Citing the dangers of automobiles, they argued before the Canadian Radio and Television Commission for the restriction of auto advertising, saying that cars are more harmful than cigarettes and alcohol¹⁸⁷—a gesture that echoed the Provos earlier appeals to the city government of Amsterdam.

Le monde à Bicyclette utilized a combination of techniques in their initial plans to make Montreal a more bike friendly city, because at the time, there were no bicycle facilities in the city and cyclists were unable to cross the St. Lawrence River, which allows access between Montreal and the South Shore. Prompted by these conditions, they wrote letters to officials, organized through legitimate government channels, and worked tirelessly in order to secure rights for

¹⁸⁶ David B. Perry, *Bike Cult* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1995), 308.

¹⁸⁷ Perry, 308.

cyclists in the area. While these tactics made gains for cyclists in the area, they were nowhere near as effective as the creative direct action approach that the organization took to the streets (and the river). Le Monde à Bicyclette planned out a number of different ‘cyclodramas,’ which were theatrical protests that were staged in order to draw attention to the dangers of automobility and the plight of cyclists in Montreal. Many of the cyclodramas were focused on very specific issues, such as cyclists’ inability to use bridges and tunnels that crossed the river. In protest of this particular scenario, the group once attempted to fly across the river with fake wings on their bike, another time they put bikes in canoes and paddled across the St. Lawrence, and on one Easter Sunday, one member dressed as Moses and attempted to part the river for the rest of the group who had amassed at the shore, eager to bike across.¹⁸⁸ In addition to their river cyclodramas, Le Monde à Bicyclette also held various “Space Demonstrations” wherein cyclists would construct car-sized, wooden frames around their bicycles and ride normally in traffic in order to protest the massive amount of space afforded to, and utilized by automobiles.¹⁸⁹

While these actions received a great deal of press, the most striking cyclodramas staged by Le Monde à Bicyclette were in protest of the dangerous conditions created by automobiles in Montreal. As a means to address these problems, the group organized different performances that featured the use of gas masks, stretchers, bandages, crutches, mangled bicycles and fake blood. On one occasion, their “Ambulance Theatre,” was used in order to block the entrance to the Montreal Auto Show, and these same techniques were also used in one of their most dramatic events, which took place on the first anniversary of the metro fare hike in 1976. On that day, “about a hundred people, cyclists and pedestrians, lay prostrate on the street at the corner of Ste.

¹⁸⁸ Harmony Foundation, extract from “Climate Change: A Profile for Community Action,” <http://www.harmonyfdn.ca/images/ClimateChangeExtract.pdf>.

¹⁸⁹ Perry, *Bike Cult*, 308.

Catherine and University.”¹⁹⁰ At this intersection, activists filled the area and posed as piles of dead bodies that were surrounded by mangled bicycles, fake blood, a coffin, and a four year old child carried on a stretcher. This event, referred to as the “Montreal Die-in” was meant to call attention to the dangers of car culture and to “dramatize the car's most irrevocable consequence: death.”¹⁹¹

By combining grassroots advocacy efforts with the dramatic flair of their cyclodramas, Le Monde à Bicyclette was able to draw significant attention to the plight of cyclists in Montreal, and their efforts are one of the main reasons why Montreal has become regarded as one of the best cities for bicycling in N. America. Through their theatrical performances, Le Monde à Bicyclette demonstrated how activists could use the bicycle as a tool for symbolic protests against car culture, and these tactics have since been utilized by several different organizations including Transportation Alternatives, who staged extensive protests for ‘car free’ parks (Central Park and Prospect Park) throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and Time’s Up!, who hold funeral rides and services for cyclists who have been killed by cars in New York City. In addition to these examples, bicycles have also been used as symbolic tools for protest in various “ghost bike” demonstrations, where people paint mangled bicycles stark white and then chain them to sites where cyclists were hit or killed by automobiles. Placards featuring the phrase “Cyclist Struck Here,” are attached to the bicycles in order to remind people of the human costs of automobile transportation.¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ Robert Silverman, “Preface of the book *Deux roués, un avenir* by Claire Morissette,” <http://www.cam.org/~rsilver/>.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Dan Nephin, “Group uses art to draw attention to bike safety,” *The Associated Press*, 6 June 2004.

3.5 CONCLUSION

As I have illustrated in this chapter, there are a number of different historical examples of individuals appropriating the bicycle as part of a larger critique of social, cultural, and political institutions. Similarly, I have stressed the importance of recuperating such historical accounts without resorting to reductive myths of emancipation through consumption or technology. In addition to my points about the prospects and pitfalls of historical recuperation, it is also important to recognize the fact that not all historical forms of bicycle-based protest have yielded positive and/or progressive results. Chris Carlsson illustrates this point in the introduction to ‘The Great Bicycle Protest of 1896,’ an article about a massive bicycle protest in San Francisco that was organized in order to create better roads for cyclists. In his note, Carlsson says that “primarily the fight for better conditions for bicycling unknowingly set the stage for the rise of the private automobile. Within a decade of the big demonstrations detailed here, better roads and improved tire technology combined with breakthroughs in internal combustion to launch the car industry.”¹⁹³ Historian Robert Smith further contextualizes the depths of the social relationships implicit to early bicycle activism by recognizing the impact of the ‘good roads’ movement on labor practices: “the road builders faced other problems, such as the lack of machines to do the work...as a result they encouraged the growth of one of the country’s most infamous institutions, the convict road gang. Unhappily, cyclists stand as one of the earliest groups to advocate the widespread use of convicts as road builders.”¹⁹⁴ Carlsson’s point in raising such issues seems to be twofold, in that he is warning individuals to be critical of the manner in which cycling histories can de-contextualize other social factors (a point I addressed in regards to early

¹⁹³ Chris Carlsson, editor’s note to Chapot, “The Great Bicycle Protes of 1896,” in *Critical Mass*, 175.

¹⁹⁴ Smith, 213.

advertising and female cycling), and also, to encourage contemporary biketivists to acknowledge their historical role in the development of car culture. This is an important reminder that biketivists must work *with*, rather than against, individuals who rely upon automotive technology in their daily lives. As a basis for successful activism, this type of respect and attention to history provide an excellent foundation for the potential convivial reconstruction of society.

The political use of bicycles raises important issues concerning our relationship to our technologies, whether such relationships are historical, contemporary, or yet to be realized. Cyclists who have creatively appropriated and politicized the bicycle not only demonstrate the capacity for communities of people to challenge the hegemonic assumptions of our culture, they figure out ways in which to translate this consciousness into acts of defiance, solidarity, and political mobilization. In the following chapter, I will focus my attention upon one of the main strategies that cyclists have utilized in order to pursue such goals.

4.0 CHAPTER FOUR: CRITICAL MASS, CAR CULTURE AND THE POLITICS OF SPACE

“What alters the way we see the streets is more important than what alters the way we see painting.”¹⁹⁵

The white bicycle program initiated by the Dutch Provos and developed by their political spawn, the Kabouters, marked an important shift with respect to the politics of cycling because it used the bicycle as part of a critical narrative of capitalism that focused upon the relationship between technology and space. While the Provos’ advocacy for bicycles was tied to a macro critique of environmentally destructive technologies, their desire to rid Amsterdam of automobiles was also based upon idea that cars deteriorate urban life and contribute to a more “spectacular” society wherein auto transportation alienates people from their surroundings and creates an infrastructure that disrupts both the geography and flow of the city. By politicizing the bicycle, the Provos sought to raise an “awareness of the influences of the existing environment” in order to “encourage the critique of the present conditions of daily life.”¹⁹⁶ Specifically, they initiated a paradigm shift about cycling in order to point to the larger issues regarding public space, community, and the possibilities for political mobilization within the city.

¹⁹⁵ Debord, *Spectacle*, 49.

¹⁹⁶ Plant, 58.

Beginning in 1992, these critiques became amplified through the development of Critical Mass, a leaderless organization of cycling participants who attempt to create an “antidote to the elimination of public space”¹⁹⁷ through their monthly events. Since the initial ride, Critical Mass has taken root in hundreds of cities throughout the world, caused incredible amounts of controversy, politicized thousands of cyclists, and helped to transform public perceptions about cycling. With an approach to politics and communication that evokes the spatial critiques of Guy Debord and the Situationist International (SI), Critical Mass has not only drawn attention to the joys of urban bicycling, it has used bicycling in order to address macro issues of labor, community, consumerism, and space. Like the SI, Critical Mass reveals the capacity for individuals to use spontaneity, playfulness, and decentralized organization in order to create new forms of dissent that encourage a politicized engagement with everyday life. Critical Mass has helped to create a political consciousness amongst cyclists that has been translated into a wave of bike-oriented activism and the creation of new networks of politicized cyclists throughout the world. Moreover, the political praxis created by Critical Mass directly engages important questions about technological choices, ideology, and the production of space—issues that are of great concern to activists and scholars in our era of corporate globalization.

In what follows, I will examine the organizational, communicative, and political dimensions of Critical Mass in order to demonstrate how the group politicizes cycling through a dialectical process of direct action and theory. More specifically, I will talk about how CM celebrates urban life and utilizes biking as a way to contest public space and car culture.

¹⁹⁷ Carlsson, “Critical Massifesto,” *Critical Mass Essays, flyers*, online.

4.1 CRITICAL MASS-BACKGROUND AND (DIS)ORGANIZATION

Critical Mass (CM) emerged from the collaborative efforts of various individuals in the San Francisco Bay Area who had been involved with the San Francisco Bike Coalition, social movement activism, and the largely underground bike messenger culture that flourished throughout the 1980's.¹⁹⁸ Based upon the suggestions made by numerous individuals at SF Bike Coalition meetings, the Commute Clot—as it was initially called—was planned as a collective ride where bike commuters could get together once a month in order to make their presence felt and ride home together.¹⁹⁹ These spontaneous gatherings quickly began to draw more riders on undirected rides through San Francisco's streets, despite the fact that the rides were not organized by specific leaders and participants were not bound by an overarching dogma. Initial rides in San Francisco drew between 50-60 people and within several years, there were rides that numbered in the hundreds and thousands. Since its inception, CM participants have amassed on the last Friday of every month in over 200 cities throughout the world.

Critical Mass is essentially a direct action, anarchic²⁰⁰ “organization,” in that rides are almost always unsanctioned by the cities in which CM thrives, and the riders are motivated by self-determination, self-rule, and the lack of an established hierarchy: “within Critical Mass itself there are no leaders; organizers, yes, we are all organizers—but we're not in charge. That has been the key to its success.”²⁰¹ Critical Mass rides are planned for the last Friday of every month, and participants meet at a designated spot in order to collectively decide upon a route. In some cases, routes are decided upon before the rides, and maps are distributed to participants at

¹⁹⁸ For a description of bike messenger culture, see Travis Culley, *The Immortal Class*.

¹⁹⁹ Carlsson, “Critical Mass Inside Out,” (1993), *Critical Mass Essays, flyers*, online.

²⁰⁰ By referring to Critical Mass as anarchic, I am explicitly referring to the non-hierarchical, autonomous, direct action qualities of the rides. In short, rather than promoting an explicitly anarchist ideology, Critical Mass puts aspects of anarchism into practice.

²⁰¹ Michael Klett. “A Uniquely Democratic Experiment,” in *Critical Mass*, 90.

their arrival. However, this practice has been hotly debated by CM riders that prefer to keep the route spontaneous through the process of discussion before and during the ride. Many of the techniques still used by CM were developed in the early rides in San Francisco, including the practice of corking, whereby riders would position themselves at traffic intersections in order to block traffic while the rest of the pack rode by. Because the rides were designed to be a celebration of biking, it was/is common for people to ride with costumes, decorated bicycles, signs, or noise makers, and in many cities, people still mark the event in this way—especially rides that fall on a holiday, like Halloween. In addition to monthly rides, CM has also been used in order to pay tribute to cyclists who have been killed by automobiles, and it has become part of a larger series of tactics used in urban protest, such as Reclaim the Streets events, or protests against political leaders.²⁰²

By organizing in a way that de-emphasizes specific leadership roles, CM has been able to spoil certain aspects of police intervention, in as much as police typically try to arrest the people ‘in charge’ in hopes of diminishing both the momentum and infrastructure of a given direct action protest. Matthew Arnison, a CM participant in Sydney, Australia points to the irony of this situation in the opening lines of a 1995 essay:

The cop says, ‘Who organized this? Who’s in charge here?’ The guy they’re hassling says, ‘I don’t know.’ He asks the guy next to him in a bike helmet, ‘Who’s in charge?’ The guy in the helmet doesn’t know either. Picture a police ‘Who’s in charge? Who’s in charge?’²⁰³

²⁰² Recent cycling protests were disrupted by police at the Republican National Convention in NYC. See Randal C Archibold, *New York Times*, August 28, 2004.

²⁰³ Matthew Arnison. “Critical Mass III,” in *Critical Mass*, 55.

This is not to say that CM is able to avoid encounters with police, because the disruption and persecution of Critical Mass participants has been ongoing since the events began to gain popularity in the early 1990's.²⁰⁴ In San Francisco, Austin, Montreal, Portland, Seattle, New York, and a number of other US cities, police have harassed, arrested, intimidated, and brutalized riders.²⁰⁵ In cities such as Portland, police have detained Critical Mass riders for intense questioning and kept illegal files on Critical Mass participants.²⁰⁶ Along with police intervention, city officials in most major cities have actively sought to end Critical Mass; most notably in San Francisco where Mayor Willie Brown has repeatedly attempted to shut down the group, likening CM to the notorious Hell's Angels and also referring to the group as a "critical mess."²⁰⁷

Despite these circumstances, Critical Mass cyclists have been successful in their ability to resist external definition, classification, or reduction by creating independent, autonomous, non-hierarchical groups of riders throughout the world. As a result, it has been incredibly difficult for the police and government officials to determine who is involved, thus making the prospects for co-optation and that much more difficult. This has proven to be a most effective strategy for CM participants, particularly those in San Francisco:

We've inoculated Critical Mass against the logic of 'loyal opposition' in which a hierarchical organization sends its leaders into closed meetings to strike a 'deal' over some tepid reforms, handing Mayor 'Build on Every Square Inch of Available Space' Brown a public relations coup. He

²⁰⁴ On harassment, see Fred Nemo, "Personal History of Portland's Critical Mass," in *Critical Mass*, 204-210.

²⁰⁵ For more on Critical Mass's encounters with police, see the *Critical Mass Webring*, <http://CriticalMassRides.info/police.html>.

²⁰⁶ See Nemo.

²⁰⁷ Paul Dorn, "Pedaling to Save the City," *The Quarterly* (San Francisco: San Francisco State University, 1998), <http://userwww.sfsu.edu/~pdorn/urban.html>.

can't find any leaders to negotiate with, he can't nail down the demands in order to bargain them into insignificance, and he can't guilt-trip us into playing by his rules. He faces constant and incessant pressure and politicians hate that more than anything!²⁰⁸

The decentralized structure of CM is not only advantageous in terms of dealing with public officials, it also creates a flexible rhetorical space in which participants can basically define what CM 'is' and 'is not' through the production and circulation of discourse. Promotion of Critical Mass rides takes place through "xerocracy," which is the distribution of flyers, zines, stickers, and posters that provide listings of the dates and meeting places for the monthly ride. In addition to materials that exclusively promote rides, xerocracy is also the way in which participants can independently define what the ride is, or is not, through the production of essays and images. This is a key feature of Critical Mass because participants have the ability to "channel the energy and focus of the mass in various directions through xerocracy."²⁰⁹ In this sense, xerocracy provides a mediated framework in which the physical tactics of Critical Mass can be articulated, and communicated in a way that directly reflects the organization and social structure of the rides, i.e. both the media and the rides are decentralized.²¹⁰ The grassroots circulation of political ideas and images creates an interesting rhetorical space in which cycling is explicitly tied to issues of ecology, autonomy, and public space through techniques that stand in direct contrast to centralized, profit-based forms of advocacy that are implicit to car culture, including various types of automobile advertising that are supported by an oligarchic corporate structure.²¹¹ Therefore, xerocracy is not only about shaping participant and public perceptions

²⁰⁸ Carlsson, "The Hidden Class Politics of Bicycling," in *Critical Mass essays, flyers*, online.

²⁰⁹ Klett, 90.

²¹⁰ Atton, 102.

²¹¹ See Ben Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly 6th edition* (Boston: Beacon, 2000).

about the act of biking (through facts, statistics, and personal narratives), it is also part of a larger communicative shift wherein cyclists can celebrate their vision of preferable alternatives; namely xerocracy over corporate media, and “bicycling over car culture.”²¹²



Figure 8-PGH Critical Mass, BikeFest 2005 (photo by Matt @ PGH Indymedia)

Generally, one might say that Critical Mass uses cycling in order to create discourse about the problems associated with automobiles, and they ‘use’ automobiles in order to talk about the macro problems of capitalism and consumerism. More specifically, CM cyclists show how corporate economic interests affect technological ‘choices’, how these technological choices

²¹² Carlsson, “Bicycling Over the Rainbow,” in *Critical Mass*, 237.

affect spatial production/distribution, and how this status quo is perpetuated and reinforced by the same corporate interests:

Bicycling is held by some to be the crucial step each of us must take to begin breaking the stranglehold of large centralized, capital-intensive transit systems. The argument, paralleling that of alternative energy boosters nearly two decades ago, holds that in the simple act of reducing individual dependence on automobiles we will expand our autonomy and help erode the power of centralized hierarchies, and by extension capitalism itself.²¹³

The perspectives articulated by Critical Mass participants are interesting because they borrow from several different environmental, technological, and activist discourses in order to develop a negative narrative of car culture, a positive narrative of cycling, and a direct action strategy that draws attention to both:

Critical Mass is an unparalleled practical experiment in public, collective self-expression, reclaiming our diminishing connectedness, interdependency and mutual responsibility. CM provides encouragement and reinforcement for desertion from the rat wheel of car ownership and its attendant investments. But even more subversively, it does it by gaining active participation in an event of unmediated human creation, outside of economic logic, and offering an exhilarating taste of a life

²¹³ Carlsson, "Critical Massifesto."

practically forgotten—free, convivial, cooperative, connected,
collective.²¹⁴

In what follows, I will first look at the rhetorical discourses produced by cyclists while paying specific attention to the theories and motives that inform their positions. Following these sections, I will then focus more explicitly upon the direct action, performative critique of CM.

4.2 CAR CULTURE AND CONVIVIALITY

Along with anti-road protestors, Reclaim the Streets activists,²¹⁵ and bike advocacy groups such as Transportation Alternatives and Time’s Up!,²¹⁶ Critical Mass participants reflect some of the strongest rhetorical positions that have been developed by critics of automobiles, consumerism, and Western culture. Thus, CM is squarely situated within a discourse of car culture that describes various problems with the *sociotechnological ensemble* of automobiles, which includes the technology, itself, as well as the practices, and values implicit to a given society.²¹⁷ Paul Rosen, a technology scholar who writes extensively about bicycles, suggests that struggles against the automobile in Western culture are particularly problematic because of this complexity: “To disembody the automobile from Western culture would entail disembedding each of these different elements from the overall *ensemble*—an extremely difficult task.”²¹⁸ As a means of tackling this difficult task, CM ‘xerocrats’ articulate critiques of the material infrastructure of the automobile by producing new ideas that are related to cycling, and also by

²¹⁴ Carlsson, “Critical Massifesto.”

²¹⁵ For more on anti-roads protests and Reclaim the Streets, see McKay and Shepard and Hayduk.

²¹⁶ For more on Transportation Alternatives and Time’s Up!, visit their websites at:
<http://www.transalt.org> and <http://www.times-up.org>.

²¹⁷ See Bijker and Pinch.

²¹⁸ Rosen, *Framing Production*, 156.

making efficient use of texts that specifically illustrate such problems. In both cases, there is an overwhelming emphasis upon the negative influence of corporations in the creation and development of car culture.

The corporate influenced transformation of both rural and urban environments in the United States reflects the fact that automobiles are widely considered to be the default, or exnominated, mode of transportation in our country. As such, automotive technologies and the infrastructure that supports them largely exclude the free use of other forms of technology and cements certain material and social relationships into place. Ivan Illich describes this situation as a *radical monopoly*: “A branch of industry does not impose a radical monopoly on a whole society by the simple fact that it produces scarce products, or because it drives competing industries off the market, but rather by virtue of its acquired ability to create and shape the need *which it alone can satisfy*.”²¹⁹ In other words, radical monopolies are imposed from the ‘top down’ through the proliferation of particular technologies or institutions that make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for people to choose which ones they would prefer to use. In addition, radical monopolies dis-empower people by forcing them to rely upon a vast network of experts and essentially adapt their lives to such institutions whether or not they directly yield economic, environmental, social, and/or personal benefits. In *Energy and Equity* Illich’s assessment of transportation makes this point most clear, and deserves to be quoted at length:

The harm done by contemporary traffic is due to the monopoly of transport. The allure of speed has deceived the passenger into accepting the promises made by an industry that produces capital-intensive traffic. He is convinced that high-speed vehicles have allowed him to progress beyond the limited autonomy he

²¹⁹ Ivan Illich, *Energy and Equity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974). Accessed through the *Ivan Illich Archive*, http://www.cogsci.ed.ac.uk/~ira/illich/texts/energy_and_equity/energy_and_equity.html. Emphasis is my own.

enjoyed when moving under his own power. He has allowed planned transport to predominate over the alternative of labor-intensive transit. Destruction of the physical environment is the least noxious effect of this concession. The far more bitter results are the multiplication of psychic frustration, the growing disutilities of continued production, and subjection to an inequitable transfer of power—all of which are manifestations of a distorted relationship between life-time and life-space. The passenger who agrees to live in a world monopolized by transport becomes a harassed, overburdened consumer of distances whose shape and length he can no longer control.²²⁰

Illich's contention with the radical monopoly of transportation is based upon a critique of the unequal distribution of power based upon speed, planning, and one's distorted experience of space and time. Like other radical monopolies, transportation also requires an immense personal investment in time and money:

The typical American male devotes more than 1,600 hours a year to his car. He sits in it while it goes and while it stands idling. He parks it and searches for it. He earns the money to put down on it and to meet the monthly installments. He works to pay for petrol, tolls, insurance, taxes and tickets. He spends four of his sixteen waking hours on the road or gathering his resources for it. And this figure does not take into account the time consumed by other activities dictated by transport: time spent in hospitals, traffic courts and garages; time spent watching automobile commercials or attending consumer education meetings to improve the quality of the next buy. The model American puts in 1,600 hours to get 7,500

²²⁰ Illich, *Energy*.

miles: less than five miles per hour. In countries deprived of a transportation industry, people manage to do the same, walking wherever they want to go, and they allocate only three to eight per cent of their society's time budget to traffic instead of 28 per cent.²²¹

In opposition to radical monopolies, Illich argues for conviviality, which is a social arrangement characterized by “individual freedom realized in personal independence, and as such, an intrinsic ethical value.”²²² Specifically, conviviality emphasizes the use of tools, or technologies, that people can work with, as opposed to tools that people have to work *for*. Therefore, against the radical monopoly of automotive transportation, Illich advocates bicycles as the convivial technology *par excellence*:

Bicycles let people move with greater speed without taking up significant amounts of scarce space, energy or time. They can spend fewer hours on each mile and still travel more miles in a year. They can get the benefit of technological breakthroughs without putting undue claims on the schedules, energy or space of others. They become masters of their own movements without blocking those of their fellows.²²³

The reason I bring up Illich’s perspectives on radical monopoly and conviviality is because these themes either directly or indirectly frame the discourse of Critical Mass. In other words, the bulk of CM’s rhetorical maneuvering is done in a way that reflects Illich’s distinctions between radical monopoly and conviviality given the fact that he is directly engaged with the problems of automobiles and the benefits of bicycles. Like Illich, Critical Mass xerocrats use cycling as a

²²¹ Illich, *Energy*.

²²² Illich, *Conviviality*, 11.

²²³ Illich, *Energy*, 1974.

way to talk about the same macro issues that are implicit to the function of our transportation system, particularly the relationships between transportation, labor, and personal freedom. Cycling is thus described as an oppositional stance against the radical monopoly of transportation because it allows one to exercise a greater degree of independence and autonomy while they disengage from monopolistic arrangements:

The simple choice to ride a bicycle becomes an assertion of common sense and an act of radical refusal. By bicycling, we refuse to participate in our own degradation on an increasingly dysfunctional public transit system. By bicycling we refuse to pay the enormous costs of a murderous transit system built on private cars. When we bicycle, we refuse the perpetual marketing noise of corporate advertising piping into car radios, and we refuse to accept as ‘news’ the shallow and intellectually retarded reporting that claims to be objective and true. When we bicycle we subvert our ‘responsibility’ to behave as loyal members of this society, undercutting the auto economy, challenging the propaganda system, and directly re-creating meaningful encounters with one another.²²⁴

Taken within this context, one might assume that Critical Mass cyclists advocate cycling as an end, in and of itself. Moreover, one could also assume that Critical Mass cyclists over-inflate the importance of cycling within the framework that Carlsson identifies above. However, it is important to recognize that participation in Critical Mass is typically seen as part of a much larger paradigm shift in which cycling is used in order to point to what could be possible outside of the framework of *all* radical monopolies:

²²⁴ Carlsson, “Whither Bicycling?” in *Critical Mass essays, flyers*, online.

The threat lies in a powerful social movement that can challenge the organization of life at its roots, where we re-create it every day, at work. Our cultural embrace of bicycling is part of discovering ourselves anew in self-forming communities, from which can grow the vision of a different way of life. Eventually our shared vision can lead to larger initiatives that ‘wield meaningful social power.’ But it will have to extend itself beyond mere bicycling, which is at best only a small but important part of a larger cultural, political, and economic transformation.²²⁵

As evident in this quote, Critical Mass xerocrats are not merely concerned with the substitution of one technology for another (bikes instead of cars), rather, they point to the bigger issues of radical monopoly that Illich articulated some twenty years earlier. These cyclists tend to recognize the fact that *convivial reconstruction*—the term that Illich uses to describe structural transformations based upon convivial technologies—is dependent upon their ability to show which technologies promote participation and democracy and which ones inhibit such processes. However, one of the problems with bringing about social changes that include transformations in technology is that the cultural dimensions of a given society encourage people to believe and act in certain ways. Like Illich, CM cyclists recognize the powerful role that dominant culture and ideology play in the maintenance and proliferation of radical monopolies:

Bicycling is generally a very individual experience, especially on streets filled with stressed-out motorists who don’t think cyclists have a right to be on the road. But when we ride together in Critical Mass, we transform our personal choices into a shared, collective repudiation of the prevailing social madness. The organic connections we’ve made (and continue to make anew, month after month) are the

²²⁵ Carlsson, “A Serious Pleasure, A Partial Revolt,” (1999), in *Critical Mass essays, flyers*, online.

root of a movement radically opposed to the way things are now. As we continue to share public space free from the absurd domination of transactions and the Economy, we are forging a new sense of shared identity, a new sense of our shared interests against those who profit from and perpetuate the status quo.²²⁶

This movement against the ‘status quo’ is way of directly engaging in an ideological contestation against “the culture of the automobile that secures its hold over us.”²²⁷ Critical Mass participants focus explicitly upon the cultural dimensions of transportation through their rhetorical advocacy for conviviality and sustainable technologies. However, there is a much larger dimension of CM that is explicitly focused contesting ideology through direct action.

4.3 CONTESTING SPACE, CONTESTING IDEOLOGY

When CM takes over a street, it creates an obvious presence of cyclists in an environment that otherwise marginalizes biking and restricts activities that hamper automobile transportation. Unlike activist groups that attempt to physically change such material conditions through traditional protest or sabotage, CM attempts to reclaim a space in order to show what could be possible if we, as a society, were to reevaluate our investment in the current system. In this sense, CM participants are less interested in changing the actual material conditions (the form) of the city through their actions than in using CM as a means to initiate, or amplify, an ideological break with the norms (the function) of the city. This is not to say that CM participants would not like to see tangible changes in car culture, because this desire is abundantly clear in both their discourse and through their celebratory acts of defiance. Rather, CM participants recognize the

²²⁶ Carlsson, “Whither Bicycling?”

²²⁷ Rosen, *Framing Production*, 174

fact that changes in ideology precede changes in the material world, and this process is not simple. As a result, CM utilizes direct action tactics in order to contest the ideologies that are implicit to the production, function, maintenance, and governance of such space(s).

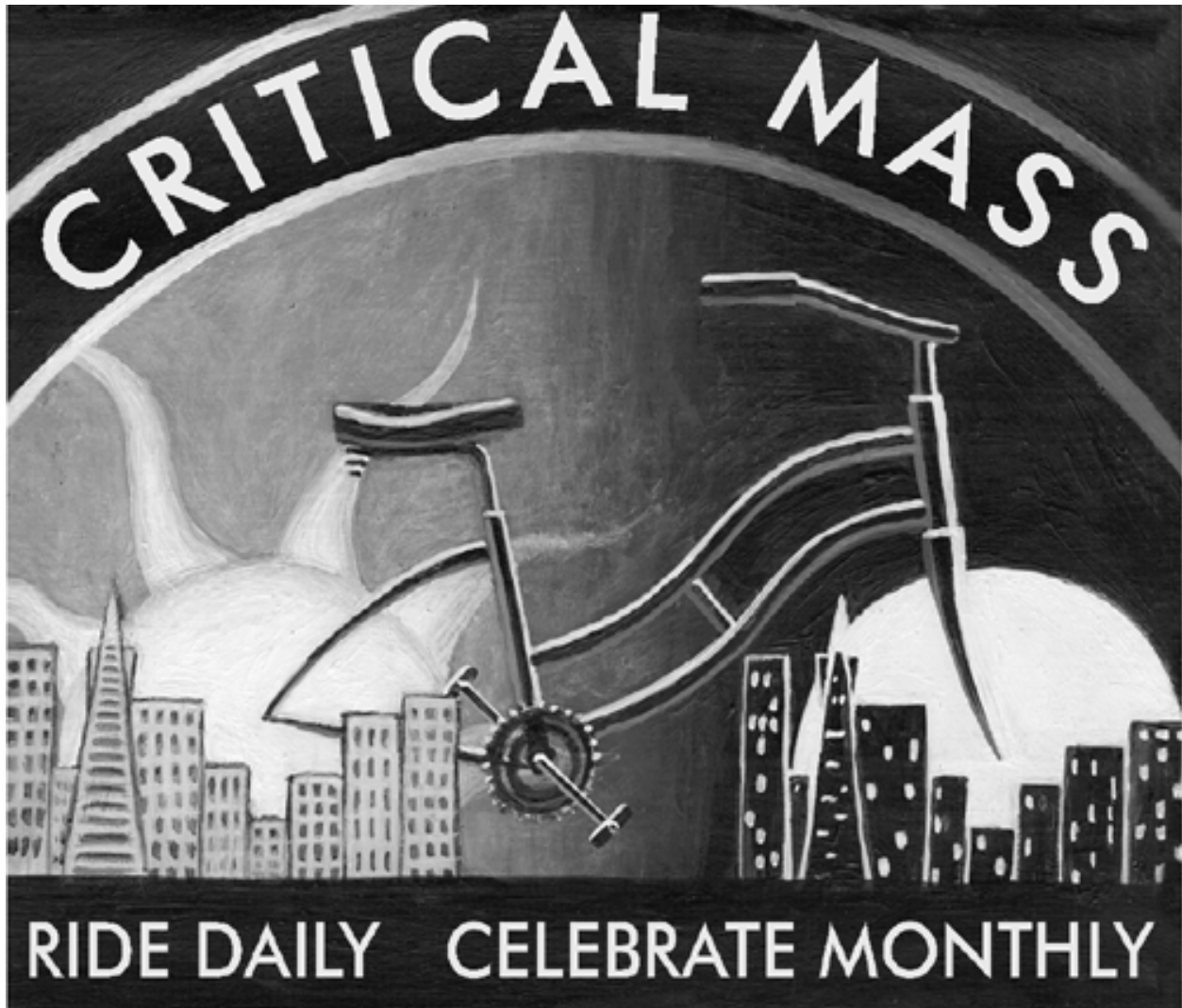


Figure 9-Critical Mass Flyer

4.3.1 Performative Critique

In numerous texts devoted to the relationships between skateboarding, architecture, and the production of space, Iain Borden claims that skateboarders engage in a performative critique of architecture through their ability to manipulate bodily spaces and material spaces in order to

advocate pleasure rather than work, use values rather than exchange values, and activity rather than passivity.²²⁸ Borden states that skateboarding's representational mode is not that of writing, drawing or theorizing, but of *performing*: "of speaking their meanings and critiques of the city through their urban actions. Here in the movement of the body across urban space, and in its direct interaction with the modern architecture of the city, lies the central critique of skateboarding – a rejection both of the values and of the spatio-temporal modes of living in the contemporary capitalist city."²²⁹ Borden's notion of performative critique is an apt way of describing what it is that Critical Mass 'does' when cyclists take to the streets, because they not only use the street differently, they call attention to the ideological norms that dictate both the prescribed uses of the environment and the manner in which such environments can be traversed. One important distinction between Borden's examples and CM is that CM participants' engagement with urban space is both an end in itself, and also a means to amplify a wider political and cultural critique, whereas skateboarding is not "consciously theorized."²³⁰ CM is theorized as a performative critique, but one that points to a larger revolutionary consciousness that cannot be limited to the mere use of bikes. In other words, the paradigm of Critical Mass is based on the idea that the rides can initiate a break with capitalist/consumerist ideology through a direct engagement with the spaces in which these ideologies are materialized. As a "public declaration that suddenly reveals individual choices as social, political, and collective responses to the insanity that passes as inevitable and normal,"²³¹ Critical Mass echoes the goals of the Situationist International (SI), an avant-garde political group who developed an extensive

²²⁸ Iain Borden, *Skateboarding, Space, and the City* (New York: Berg, 2001), 173.

²²⁹ Iain Borden, "A Performative Critique of the American City: the Urban Practice of Skateboarding, 1958-1998," (1998). Accessed through *Skateboard Directory*, http://skateboarddirectory.com/articles/263054_a_performative_critique_of.html. Emphasis is my own.

²³⁰ Borden, *Skateboarding*, 173.

²³¹ Carlsson, "Cycling Under the Radar—Assertive Dissertion," in *Critical Mass*, 78.

critique of capitalism and urban life in the 1950's and 1960's. In the same way that that CM utilizes physical tactics in order to work towards revolutionary consciousness that transcends cycling, the SI sought to politicize people's engagement with material space in order to break through ideology that inhibits revolutionary struggle. The SI's ideas are useful to reflect upon because they supplement CM's articulation of their actions by describing how revolutionary consciousness can be initiated through a break in ideology. In addition, CM demonstrates the fact that SI's ideas are still relevant in the 21st century.

4.3.2 Situationism

Born out of the collaboration between the avant-garde art groups, COBRA and the Lettrists, and the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus,²³² the Situationist International (also known as the situationists) created inspirational and sometimes erratic diatribes on urban space, media, revolutionary politics, and everyday life that have greatly influenced protest groups from the Yippies to culture jamming groups such as Adbusters.²³³ Situationism was founded upon the basic belief that “general revolution would originate in the appropriation and alteration of the material environment and its space.”²³⁴ Following the theoretical trajectory of COBRA, the SI formulated an extensive critique of the material world called *unitary urbanism* that served as the centerpiece of their critique of the “spectacle” of capitalism, in that urbanism was seen as a method that solidifies a passive, consumer-oriented way of life and renders alienation tactile. In hopes of disrupting the patterns of life that are promulgated by specific urban settings, the SI

²³² For a synopsis of these avant-garde groups, see Stuart Home, “*The Assault on Culture : Utopian Currents from Lettrisme to Class War* (London: Aporia Press/Unpopular Books, 1988); Stuart Home, *Neoism, Plagiarism & Praxis* (San Francisco: AK Press, 1995).

²³³ See Lasn and Dery.

²³⁴ Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998) 13.

created new theories about space that emphasized the revolutionary potential of “everyday life.” According to Guy Debord, the SI’s self-appointed leader, the process of such revolution was initiated through the construction of ‘situations’, or moments of everyday life that could be transformed into “a superior passional quality.”²³⁵ In his book *The Situationist City*, Simon Sadler describes the essence of Debord’s theory of ‘situationism’ that was advocated most passionately in the mid-to-late 1950’s:

One only appreciated the desperate need to take action over the city, situationists felt, once one had seen through the veil of refinement draped over it by planning and capital. If one peeled away this official representation of modernity and urbanism—this “spectacle,” as situationists termed the collapse of reality into the streams of images, products, and activities sanctioned by business and bureaucracy—one discovered the authentic life of the city teeming underneath.²³⁶

As a means of uncovering the “beach under the pavement”²³⁷ the situationists utilized the technique of the *derive*, which was a method of exploring the city in which a person “was to notice the way things resonate with states of mind, inclinations, and desires.”²³⁸ Though the technique was influenced by the Surrealists and the flaneur tradition in Paris,²³⁹ the *derive* was not based on a submission to the unconscious, rather, it was used as a means to explore those aspects of the city that had not been totally incorporated by the spectacle. *Derives* were typically conducted during a period of hours or days, where one or more people would “drop their usual

²³⁵ Debord, “Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency’s Conditions of Organization and Action,” (1958), in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb, (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), 22.

²³⁶ Sadler, 17.

²³⁷ The slogan, “Under the pavement, a beach!” was used by the Situationists with reference to the life that could be extracted from the city.

²³⁸ Plant, 59

²³⁹ See Christel Hollevoet, *The flaneur: Genealogy of a modernist icon* (Ph.D diss., City University of New York, 2001).

motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they might find there.”²⁴⁰ By studying the maps and notes taken from lengthy derives—a practice called psychogeography—the SI formulated different ideas about how one could, or more precisely, *should* strive to disengage from the spectacle by empowering oneself through “the self-conscious construction of new subjective environments—an unfolding of art through space...involving spatial exploration and celebration of the essentially subjective unalienated areas of life.”²⁴¹ The main idea of the *derive* was threefold: it was used as a tool in order to analyze and understand the city as is, it was used as a means to imagine the possibilities for a built environment, and it was intended as a technique that people could use for pleasure and play in a world where “leisure is defined in terms of commodified time, activities, and goods...free time is spent and the realm outside work is increasingly to province of alienated relations.”²⁴²



Figure 10-Situationist Graffiti

²⁴⁰ Debord, “Theory of the Derive” (1958), in *Anthology*, 50.

²⁴¹ Sandy McCreery, “The Claremont Road Situation,” in *The Unknown City: Contesting Architecture and Social Space* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 241.

²⁴² Plant, 23.

Practices such as the *derive* and *psychogeography* were developed in conjunction with the media-based practice of *detournement*, a technique that utilizes a pre-existing form (such as texts, film, or images) for the purpose of manipulation in order to combine “present or past artistic production into a superior construction of a milieu.”²⁴³ The hope was that through such manipulation, the *detournement* could deny the implicit value of a cultural artifact (its authenticity) in order to demonstrate the futility of the spectacle and the shallowness of capitalism. One can see the principle of the *detournement* in the work of contemporary culture jamming groups like The Billboard Liberation Front, Guerilla Girls, and Adbusters, wherein consumer-oriented texts and images are manipulated and transformed into tools for critique.²⁴⁴ Ultimately, the *derive* and the practice of *psychogeography* were conceived as embodied versions of the *detournement*, in which one’s everyday life could serve as a *living critique* of the spectacle through the creation of “situations,” or experiments in behavior that are intended to change the way participants understand and negotiate their surroundings:

The main achievement of contemporary city planning is to have made people blind to the possibility of what we call unitary urbanism, namely a living critique, fueled by all the tensions of daily life, of this manipulation of cities and their inhabitants. Living critique means the setting up of bases for an experimental life, the coming together of those creating their own lives on terrains equipped to their ends.²⁴⁵

The basic premise of the living critique is very similar to Borden’s conceptualization of the performative critique in that one’s actions, or in the case of Debord, one’s art, was meant to be

²⁴³ Debord, “Definitions,” (1958), in *Anthology*, 45.

²⁴⁴ Also see Debord, “Detournement as Negation and Prelude,” (1959), in *Anthology*, 55.

²⁴⁵ Attila Kotanyi and Raoul Veneigem, “Elementary Program of the Bureau of Unitary Urbanism,” (1961), in *Anthology*, 65.

expressed through a direct engagement with the lived environment. In both cases, the idea is to invert the function of a space while at the same time producing a new relationship to that space, even if the experience is only temporary. Through such experiences, or experiments, one has the capacity to realize that the material world and culture are not static, and this effect cannot be underestimated in terms of mobilizing people for political action: “the most pertinent revolutionary experiments in culture have sought to break the spectator’s psychological identification with the hero so as to draw him into activity by provoking his capacities to revolutionize his own life...The situation is thus made to be lived by its constructors.”²⁴⁶ To restate this quote from Debord, one might be able understand how life might be different in a different political or cultural milieu, but it is almost impossible for one to work towards radical change if they have never *experienced* life outside of the paradigms of capitalism and consumption. What Debord refers to as an experiment in culture or what Borden refers to as a performative critique are means to initiate a break with the function and paradigm of the lived environment as a way to see beyond the ‘spectacle.’

4.3.3 CM and “Situations”

Like the SI, Critical Mass cyclists astutely recognize that one of the major obstacles impeding the transformation of the city (and by default, the transformation of ‘spectacular’ consciousness) is the infrastructure and ideology of the automobile. The main problem, as the SI saw it, was that urbanism was exclusively concerned with the “smooth circulation of a rapidly increasing quantity of motor vehicles,”²⁴⁷ which led to the construction of urban environments in which the

²⁴⁶ Debord, “Report” in *Anthology*, 25.

²⁴⁷ Debord, “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography,” (1955), *Anthology* p 5.

automobile and capital essentially replaced the citizen as the focal points for urban design. When cyclists take over the street during a Critical Mass event they send a message that despite laws and norms that say otherwise, the streets are public domain and people should have the right to use them. They point to the idea that *people* should be the focal point for urban design, and public spaces should suit the needs of communities, as opposed to automobiles:

Streets are our largest and most important piece of public open space in the city. They account for up to 30% of the total surface area of the city, yet we consider them only as afterthoughts. Streets are everyone's open space. We fret and tussle over every precious inch of our grassy parks, yet we overlook the massive wasted public spaces right outside each of our front doors, accessible to each and every resident. Streets could be our main stage.²⁴⁸

Debord clearly blamed the urbanists and the capitalists for their proliferation of automotive ideology, but he also recognized the deeper problem raised by the acceptance of auto-based design—a widespread belief in the “permanence of the present society.”²⁴⁹ In other words, the construction and maintenance of a massive infrastructure reflects a desire to keep things the way that they are, despite the fact that such infrastructure virtually negates other options for how people might want to live. Whereas the SI sought to break the “topological chains” of spectacular culture through *revolutionary urbanism*²⁵⁰ and the creation of situations, most inhabitants of the city were content to accept the conditions as natural. At the heart of Critical Mass lies the same attempt to create ‘situations’ in which participants can make a break with the prescribed, capitalist function of the city in order to point to the possibilities of life

²⁴⁸ Joshua Switzky, “Riding to See,” in *Critical Mass*, 189.

²⁴⁹ Debord, “Situationist Theses on Traffic,” (1959), in *Anthology*, 58.

²⁵⁰ Debord, “Traffic,” 58.

outside of that framework. The site in which Critical Mass intervenes—the street—is a place where participants can literally demonstrate how space can be used in a different way, and more importantly, what the alternative use of space can reveal about ideological norms that govern such spaces. As a complete anomaly in an environment dominated by cars, Critical Mass immediately changes the dynamics of the street because at once everything ceases to function ‘normally’ for people who occupy that space, whether they are cyclists, drivers, or people passing by. It is not only significant that the typical patterns of the environment are disrupted, it is the fact that the environment is being disrupted by people who are demonstrating an alternative to both the technology and environment of the car.

For Debord and CM cyclists, the automobile is not “an evil in itself,”²⁵¹ but it is a direct reflection of capitalist propaganda and a “a sovereign good of an alienated life.”²⁵² This alienation is felt at a deep level by many people who spend a great deal of their life commuting in vehicles that separate them from other people and their environments.²⁵³ Such isolation is compounded by our living arrangements, work environments and existing public spaces:

In the age of private content-controlled, enclosed malls and sidewalk-less, single-use, subdivision pods, the only public space we know in common is that which we traverse by car. But in our cars we are usually alone, even if together on a ‘crowded’ road. We peer at each other through tinted glass or stare at taillights, or sometimes we get out of the car to stand in line together to buy something....the only spaces designed for large numbers of people –stadiums and malls—are located on the fringe, isolated from daily life and populated only for special

²⁵¹ Debord, “Traffic,” 57.

²⁵² Debord, “Traffic,” 56.

²⁵³ “Commuters put in an average of ten forty-hour weeks behind the wheel each year,” quoted in Kay, 14.

events, mostly sitting vacant. Drive-to or self-contained attractions are not functional public spaces. Good public spaces are integrally and seamlessly tied into the urban fabric and unavoidable parts of our daily routines.²⁵⁴

As a performative critique, Critical Mass amplifies the experience that individual cyclists have in the city, where they are more directly connected to their environments and the people therein.²⁵⁵

But more importantly, through their engagement with material space, Critical Mass also creates an entirely new space that stands in direct contrast to the alienation produced by automotive transportation. The creation of a mobile street party is an attempt to directly subvert the function of a space that is normally utilized by people who are enclosed and otherwise alienated from one another in vehicles that fragment the “dialectic of the human milieu.”²⁵⁶ As “a unique laboratory for experimenting with group dynamics”²⁵⁷ Critical Mass creates a space of resistance in which people can enjoy themselves and communicate with one another. Not only does this defy the norms that dictate the environment of the street, it also gives people a chance to reflect on the act itself:

Putting ourselves and our bicycles on the line, confronting automotive dominance through direct action, we invent the impossible: an island of safety, calm, and conversation in the middle of a busy street. And, in fine reflexive fashion, we inhabit this island with talk of Critical Mass rides in other cities, strategies for surviving encounters with motorists, sabotage in the workplace, anarchist history, and other subversions.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁴ Switzky, 188.

²⁵⁵ See Zack Furness, “Cruisin’ Envy,” *Bad Subjects* 59 (2002), <http://bad.eserver.org/issues/2002/59/Furness.html>.

²⁵⁶ Debord, “Traffic,” 58.

²⁵⁷ Klett, 90.

²⁵⁸ Ferrell “Statute,” in *Critical Mass*, 124.

Often, this type of reflection and communication forges important bonds for activists who might not otherwise meet one another or understand the depth of their community. Through the rides, activists can share a common experience and use this a basis in order to develop new networks and new modes of resistance. In this sense, the event works much like how Debord envisioned the ‘situation,’ in that people can live their dissent and use the experience in order to sow the seeds of revolutionary discontent amongst their peers:

Such individuals share an alternative culture, but—for as long as they remain anonymous to each other—are unable to develop joint projects from their shared ways of life, values, and goals. Critical Mass made—and continues from time to time to make—visible and tangible the connections between them, transforming anonymous inhabitation of an imagined community into meaningful and possibility-laden participation in a realtime face-to-face community....and herein lies the undoubted importance of Critical Mass; it is a tool not only for enhancing the activist identities of the individuals, but also for building a wider sense of political community.²⁵⁹

The logic behind the creation of situations was not only to encourage participants to break from their conditioning of the city, but also to recognize the potential that can arise when such breaks are initiated. Through direct action, Critical Mass serves this same purpose by creating a ‘situation’ or a what Hakim Bey refers to as a Temporary Autonomous Zone, or TAZ: “the TAZ is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form

²⁵⁹ Dave Horton, “Lancaster Critical Mass: Does it Still Exist?,” in *Critical Mass*, 63-4.

elsewhere/elsewhere, *before* the State can crush it.”²⁶⁰ Within this space, the typical norms that apply to an environment are negated and people have the capacity to rethink their relationship to one another and their environment. As mentioned above, this experience can forge new networks of like-minded people, it can enhance one’s identity as an activist, and it can serve as an initial break with capitalist ideology. Moreover, Critical Mass or other TAZ’s can arise anywhere, at anytime.

4.3.4 Contributing to dissent (other functions of the performative critique)

As a group, CM cyclists demonstrate the rhetorical position, “we are not blocking traffic, we *are* traffic.” This message in and of itself is considered to be an affront by hosts of people including; drivers who are forced to sit behind a slowly moving ride, policemen and government officials who construe the event as mere lawlessness, and often times, other cyclists who perceive the event as being detrimental to goals of law abiding bicycle advocates.²⁶¹ While there have been notable cases of bad behavior and recklessness on behalf of certain CM cyclists over the years—which has been heavily scrutinized by fellow participants²⁶²—there are a number of important functions that the rides serve.

Like other ‘radical’ components of a social movement, Critical Mass directly impacts the efforts of other bike activists. For groups that are engaged with issues that are typically viewed with skepticism and/or hostility, such as the animal rights movement or the environmental movement, direct action ‘radical’ groups shift public debate, whether they are represented

²⁶⁰ Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1991), http://www.hermetic.com/bey/taz_cont.html.

²⁶¹ For more on this heated debate see the Critical Mass messageboard ‘flame war’ hosted at: <http://www.subluna.com/CriticalMass/words/flamewar/index.html>.

²⁶² See Klett and Steven Bodzin, “Politics can be fun,” in *Critical Mass*, 100-104.

positively or negatively. In the same way that Earth First! makes a group like Greenpeace seem more moderate, and therefore more appealing for public officials to ‘deal with’, Critical Mass shifts the public debate in a way where ‘regular’ bike activists seem more reasonable, despite the fact that their requests might normally seem illogical. Amy Stork—one of the founders of the bike advocacy group, Shift, in Portland Oregon—makes this point in a recent interview:

I really appreciate Critical Mass because when you are going to change culture, it’s good to have a radical wing, because that pushes folks towards the center. If people see CM and that appears radical to them, then putting a bike lane in seems reasonable. In places where they don’t have Critical Mass, they think bike lanes are radical.²⁶³

Critical Mass also impacts other social movements by creating new protest techniques, or tools for resistance that can be utilized by anyone, anywhere, without a formal structure in place: “In creating a moving event, celebrating and being a real alternative, Critical Mass simultaneously opens up the field of transit to new political contestation, and pushes it to another level by pioneering swarming mobility as a new tactic.”²⁶⁴ While these techniques are not appropriate for every type of political demonstration, they give activists new ideas about what can be accomplished through mobile protests and/or the creation of a ‘party’ atmosphere during a protest. As a case in point, the NYC bike advocacy/environmental organization Time’s Up! utilized Critical Mass techniques in the formation of ‘bike blocs’ that were used as strategic tools in the direct action RNC protests of 2004. Notably, Critical Mass rides have been also been used in conjunction with Reclaim the Streets protests in several cities throughout the 1990’s.

²⁶³ Amy Stork, interview by author, Portland, OR., 10 August 2004.

²⁶⁴ Carlsson, “Under Radar,” 78.



CRITICAL MASS!!!

AUGUST 27, MEET AT 7PM

AT UNION SQUARE NORTH & 17TH STREET

**LET'S SHOW THE
REPUBLICAN NATIONAL CONVENTION
THAT THEY ARE *NOT* WELCOME IN OUR CITY!**

www.rncnotwelcome.org

www.times-up.org

Figure 11-RNC Protest Flyer

Perhaps most importantly, Critical Mass creates a convivial environment where dissent is palatable and *visible*. Unlike culture jamming actions that attempt to invert an image or message in a discreet way, Critical Mass attempts to subvert the meaning of an environment while remaining visible to the public. When one *detourns* or manipulates a billboard or some other public media text, all that remains is a trace of the activist—whether it is a spray painted message or a smoothly doctored image. While this discretion is obviously needed in order to keep culture jammers out of jail, it arguably leaves the impression that creative forms of activism are *only* a trace—a visible referent to the absence of dissent. In Critical Mass, cyclists not only bring creative dissent into the streets, they give it a new face and a set of wheels.

4.4 CONCLUSION

Through a combination of media production and direct action Critical Mass offers a cogent critique of car culture and simultaneously points to viable alternatives. Since the rides began, there has been a noticeable increase of cyclists in cities where CM rides have occurred, and with this, an increase in all forms of bike-related advocacy. At the very least, Critical Mass provides a demonstration of dissent in an era where protest has become all too predictable and/or subject to the restraints of ‘free speech’ zones and corporate-biased news coverage. Even if the moments of dissent are fleeting, they can still give participants the means to realize that one can use their voice, their bodies, and their bikes in order to disrupt the smooth function of capitalist society and at least question the cultural norms that maintain it.

At its best, the spaces of resistance created by Critical Mass can expose the futility of ‘the spectacle’ and provide the impetus for people to work towards radical change in the world. The

events point to a wider struggle against corporations and the radical monopolies of transportation and media production that encourage people to accept the status quo at face value. In addition, CM reveals how people can create forms of dissent that are vibrant, inclusive, non-dogmatic, and non-hierarchical. Through the combination of their theories and tactics, Critical Mass points to idea that there is a battle raging between capitalists and anti-capitalists over the meaning, function, and purpose of everyday life in which freedom is the ultimate goal and the city is the terrain in which a “coherent revolutionary program in culture” must develop.²⁶⁵

²⁶⁵ Debord, “Report,” 18.

5.0 CHAPTER FIVE: DIY BIKING/DIY MEDIA

*“Regional culture and personal transportation, while seemingly separate, are all part of the same quality-of-life equation. Thus, independent music, community art and bicycles are crucial expressions of a burgeoning movement towards genuine democracy—uncommodified, uncompromised, inclusive, responsive to individuals, families, communities, and regional cultures”*²⁶⁶

In the previous chapter I described the politics of Critical Mass as they are articulated through a dialectic of direct action and advocacy. Like other political cyclists that preceded them, Critical Mass cyclists recognize the need to frame the act of cycling within a critical context in order to produce alternative narratives that serve to redefine both cycling and bicycle technology. Importantly, the rhetorical dimensions of Critical Mass—its written and/or visual forms of advocacy—creates a space in which cyclists can develop and circulate ideas about cycling without being inhibited by the oligarchic structure and ‘apolitical’ mandates of mass media. In addition to the media produced by and for Critical Mass participants, there is an extensive network of alternative media in which cyclists articulate perspectives about cycling and bicycles that are not found elsewhere. These media texts are not only vital in terms of their messages—especially those that are overtly political—they are also an important means for like-minded

²⁶⁶ Josh Wilson, “Unleashing Public Imagination,” in *Critical Mass*, 95.

cyclists to create and affirm a sense of community. In this chapter, I will focus my attention upon these forms of grassroots, Do It Yourself (DIY) media in order to discuss the relationship between “alternative” or independent media, activism, political ideology, and cycling. Specifically, I focus upon the largely underground, oft-intersecting, punk rock and zine communities—networks of people who create and distribute their own media outside of ‘mainstream’ channels. The reason I choose to focus upon these communities is because they have each played a pivotal role in the creation and proliferation of independent media/media institutions in Western culture, and they have provided a strong impetus for bike activism in the United States. In the punk rock and zine communities, the production of grassroots alternative media is one important way in which cyclists communicate with one another about specific cycling-related issues and/or celebrate different aspects of bikes and bike culture. Another avenue for such translation is film documentaries, and this chapter will explore a few of the different ways in which the documentary has been utilized by cyclists.

Through the production and distribution of such media, cyclists not only create dialogue about biking, they also create different bonds between cyclists who identify with the content and/or DIY ethic of the people who produce such media. Moreover, the production of bike-related alternative media creates important narratives about cycling and its relationship to other social, cultural, and political institutions. As a result, such forms of media are not merely symbolic—they are reflections of how people actively negotiate their ideologies, formulate communities, and live their everyday lives. In what follows, I argue that the media produced by these groups not only develop the politics of biking that have been previously articulated in chapters two and three, they also articulate new ideas about biking that emphasize the commonalities between the politics of cycling, Do It Yourself (DIY) culture, and independent

media. These forms of media not only serve an important epistemological function, they also foster new communities, or networks, of people that have a shared sense of what it means to be a biker. Far from insular, these networks of people provide an important impetus for grassroots political activism and they play a vital role in the development of various community institutions throughout the Western world, specifically in the United States.

In the following sections, I will first provide a synopsis of some of the media utilized by the ‘underground’ cycling community and I will explore some of the common themes and issues that are articulated therein.

5.1 ALTERNATIVE MEDIA/ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITIES

For decades, individuals who were unable or unwilling to participate in corporate-driven mass media production have created alternative, independent institutions and self-produced media that are as diverse as the people who yearn to have a voice in their culture. Through these outlets, people have the ability to freely express ideas that would be otherwise ignored and they have the capacity to reflect their participation in various communities and sub-cultures that lack both the money and/or desire to utilize mass media as a means of identification or representation. In this way, alternative media are about “offering the means for democratic communication to people who are normally excluded from media production.”²⁶⁷ Based on my personal involvement with independent media production and my reading of media scholars Duncombe (1997), Downing (2001), and Atton (2002), I would define alternative media as non-corporate, driven by content as opposed to profit, and based upon a Do It Yourself (DIY) ethic. Independent

²⁶⁷ Atton, 4.

newspapers, pirate radio, independent record labels, and zines are some of the most notable forms of alternative media that differ from “mainstream” forms of media in their content, production, and purpose. By appealing to smaller, specialized audiences through a more personal approach to content that is not dependent upon corporate advertising, the producers of alternative media can utilize different formats for their own ends, whether one’s goal is to make avant garde music or circulate a treatise on anarchism. Participation is the key ingredient to alternative media, which makes it fundamentally different from media models in which producers are seen as separate from audiences: “by their practice of eroding the lines between producer and consumer they challenge the dichotomy between active creator and passive spectator that characterizes our culture and society.”²⁶⁸ In this regard, participation can be seen as a logical outgrowth of what Stuart Hall refers to as *oppositional* readings of media texts, wherein viewers resist the prescribed, *dominant* ideological readings of media. However, one should note that even where Hall describes an audience member’s ability to develop a *negotiated* or *oppositional* reading (which differentiated his analysis from that of Althusser), there is still a basic assumption that the audience is somehow fundamentally different from those who make and produce media. Independent media producers break down these boundaries because they are simultaneously *oppositional* readers *and* producers of new media texts.²⁶⁹ Through the production of independent/alternative media texts, media producers “typically go beyond simply providing a platform for radical or alternative points of view: they emphasize the organization of

²⁶⁸ Duncombe, *Notes*, 127.

²⁶⁹ There are numerous alternative media texts that both advocate these positions and simultaneously educate people as to how they can do it themselves. Some notable examples are: Amy Spencer, *DIY: The Rise of Lo-Fi Media* (London: Marion Boyers, 2005);, *Book Your Own Fucking Life*, <http://www.byofl.org/>; Alex Wrekk, *Stolen Sharpie Revolution* (Portland: Microcosm Publishing, 2003).

media to enable wider social participation in their creation, production and dissemination than is possible in the mass media.”²⁷⁰

5.1.1 Bike Zines

One of the most common forms of independent media produced by cyclists are zines, which are (typically) small, photocopied publications that are either sold for a small fee or given away. Zines not only provide an outlet for cyclists to express opinions and ideas about bicycling that are unique to their concerns/interests, they are an important means of communication for cyclists who either lack the resources or desire to publish articles through mainstream publications or on the internet. Until the 1970’s, fan magazines, or zines, were mainly circulated within the science fiction community as a means for amateur writers to publish content that was more explicitly honed to their specific interests. Beginning with *The Comet*, published in 1930, the content of zines was characterized by letter columns in which readers debated and discussed issues concerning science fiction, science articles, fiction that was written by both amateurs and professionals in the field, columns written by editors, reviews of new books and films, and contact information that allowed readers to establish networks of communication with other science fiction fans.²⁷¹ The format established by these early science fiction zines provided both a model, and source of inspiration for people who wanted to create media that would directly address their interests and relate to the communities with which they were involved. Zines played an important role in independent publishing because they helped to form communities, validate marginalized cultural activities, and provide a venue where people could take a political

²⁷⁰ Atton, 25.

²⁷¹ Heath Row, “From Fandom to Feminism: An Analysis of the Zine Press,” (1997), in *The Zine and E-zine Resource Guide* (2002), <http://www.zinebook.com/resource/heath.html>.

stance against the morality of elite groups in society.²⁷² These factors were most evident in the zines produced by punks throughout the late 1970's and 1980's, which were spawned by Mark Perry's classic punk zine, *Sniffin' Glue*; a publication consisting of interviews, editorial columns, letters from readers, and reviews of albums and concerts that would otherwise be ignored by mainstream publications.

During the 1980's, there were a host of punk zines that followed in the tradition of *Sniffin' Glue*, such as *Maximum Rock and Roll*, and other zines such as *Cometbus* that took a more personal approach to punk culture through stories and first person narratives from people who were involved in the punk community. The popularity of such publications often lead people to assume that zines are exclusively associated with punk. However, it is important to recognize the fact that while zines are often affiliated with punk culture (with respect to DIY production, content, or a writer's relationship to punk) they serve as an important source of mediation for a variety of communities, whether one is interested in science fiction, European football, or bicycling.²⁷³ Stephen Duncombe notes that zines can cover an "extremely wide spread of subjects, including politics, the personal, 'fringe culture', and issues surrounding sexuality and sexual practices, and life at work."²⁷⁴

Through the production and circulation of bike zines (zines that are largely written by and for bicyclists), writers articulate both the political and pleasurable aspects of cycling by combining critical discourse with personal experiences and oral histories that 'authorize' oneself to speak. In this regard, zines are not based upon "the study of the 'other' (celebrity, cultural object or activity) but the study of self, of personal expression, sociality and the building of

²⁷² Atton, 56.

²⁷³ For more information on zines and zine culture, see V. Vale, *Zines!* (San Francisco: V/Search, 1996).; and *The Zine Book Online*, <http://www.zinebook.com/>.

²⁷⁴ Chris Atton provides a synopsis of zine categorization as articulated by Stephen Duncombe's reading of the zine, *Factsheet Five*—a publication that serves as a 'zine taxonomy', 58.

community.”²⁷⁵ Zines written about biking and bike culture not only play an important role in terms of how cyclists identify themselves and represent themselves to one another, they also open new channels of communication between cyclists. Scott Spitz, author of the bike zine, *Leapfrog*, says:

Bike zines can certainly reflect what certain communities are doing, but they’ve also been known to create communities. It all depends on the specific areas that the zines come from and what they have going on. An area that has no bike counter-culture may see a spike in counter-culture events after a zine starts connecting like minded people to each other.²⁷⁶



Figure 12-Leapfrog #9 (Cover)

²⁷⁵ Atton, 55.

²⁷⁶ Scott Spitz, interview by author, email received on September 24, 2004.

Within recent years, the distribution of bike zines amongst cyclists, punks, and zine writers (“zinesters”) has had the exact effect that Spitz describes—creating new networks of cyclists that are connected through DIY ethics and a dedication to independently produced media. Through publications such as *Leapfrog*, *Chainbreaker*, *Go By Bicycle*, and *Under the Sign of the Bicycle*, bike zine writers have created and/or advocated narratives about cycling that they are not evident within mainstream bicycle publications. As a result, these publications fill an important void for cyclists who do not identify with existing media produced by/for cyclists. Joe Biel, the owner and proprietor of Microcosm Publishing, one of the United States’ biggest distributors of zines, says “I think people are really starved for information about [biking] if they don’t know about it . If they do know, they want the encouragement or something to go home and read when they’re not biking—something to show symbols of pride.”²⁷⁷ Due in part to resources like Microcosm Publishing, bike zines have become more widely circulated to cyclists who are “starved” for information about aspects of cycling that emphasize self-empowerment, women’s issues in cycling,²⁷⁸ and self-reflection about politics and bike commuting—issues that are largely outside of the scope of publications devoted to the sport of cycling, which constitute the majority of the bicycling media market. For example, bike zines have given a voice to female cyclists who have few outlets in which to express their own perspectives about bicycling and bike culture in the male-dominated realm of bicycle media. In this sense, zines create an important critical space in which cyclists can discuss the problems of mainstream bike culture and articulate their own ideas about the politics, culture, or practice of bicycling. Scott Larkin writes in *Go By Bicycle* about a series of heated but productive email exchanges between himself

²⁷⁷ Zack Furness, “Microcosm Publishing.” Interview with Joe Biel and Alex Wrekk. Interview by Zack Furness. *Punk Planet* 65 (2005): 46-47.

²⁷⁸ See *Chainbreaker* #1, #2, #3, #4, ed. Shelly, (New Orleans: self-published, n.d.). Zine.; *Clitical Mass*, ed. And A. Lusia, (Pittsburgh: self-published, n.d.). Zine.

and an automobile driver in which they debated about transportation, automobiles, and the ‘problems’ associated with opinionated bike activists.²⁷⁹ Zines also create a space in which cyclists, particularly commuters, can share information about DIY bicycle maintenance²⁸⁰ or discuss how to make homemade devices such as paniers²⁸¹ (bags that attach to the sides of one’s bicycle) and bike carts,²⁸² both of which are useful but expensive. Finally, zines enable cyclists to share their own stories and experiences about their cities, their neighborhoods, or their local bike ‘scene.’

5.1.2 Bikeumentaries

In 1992, Ted White released the thirty minute bicycle documentary, *Return of the Scorcher*; a self-produced film focused upon the bicycle cultures of the United States, the Netherlands, Denmark, and China. White’s film featured numerous interviews with cycling historians, bicycle designers, transportation experts, and technology critics that provided a framework in which he articulated a vision of the bicycle as a “life-affirming vehicle for change.”²⁸³ Aside from a few earlier fictional films that situated bicycling within a cultural or socioeconomic narrative, such as *The Bicycle Thief*²⁸⁴ and to a lesser extent, *Breaking Away*,²⁸⁵ White’s documentary focused acutely upon the social, cultural, and economic influences that shaped both the history of bicycling and the contemporary development of bicycle culture. More specifically,

²⁷⁹ Scott Larkin, *Go By Bicycle* (Portland, self-published, n.d.).

²⁸⁰ See “How to do a proper tune up” and “Overhauling an unsealed 1-speed hub,” in *Chainbreaker #3*; also see *A Rough Guide to Bicycle Maintenance*, ed. Shelly. Compiled for the workshop “How to Love Your Bicycle Right,” Portland Zine Symposium. Portland, Oregon, 2003. Zine.

²⁸¹ Joe Biel, “Make Your Own Bucket Paniers!,” in *Chainbreaker #3*.

²⁸² Anonymous, *Community Bike Cart Design*.

²⁸³ Ted White, description for the film *Return of the Scorcher*, <http://www.tedwhitegreenlight.com/scorcher.htm>.

²⁸⁴ *The Bicycle Thief (Ladri Di Bicicletta)*, VHS, directed by Vittorio De Sica (Italy: Produzioni De Sica, 1948).

²⁸⁵ *Breaking Away*, VHS, directed by Peter Yates (Hollywood: 20th Century Fox, 1979). Film.

Scorcher described the influence of cycling on the women's movement in the late 19th century, the cultural differences between cycling practices in other countries, and the relationships between technology, urbanism, and sprawl. *Return of the Scorcher* played an important role for politicized cyclists at the time because it not only brought together different discourses about bicycling, it was one of the first widely viewed forms of independent media produced about 'bike culture'. In short, it provided an important history of the bicycle and it helped to describe and define what bike culture was becoming in 1992. The movie resonated particularly strong with the cycling community in San Francisco who had just begun to develop a greater sense of self-awareness through their spontaneous "Commute Clot" rides, which were promptly renamed to "Critical Mass" following a screening of the film—the term Critical Mass was used in the film, by bicycle designer George Bliss, in reference to the traffic flow created by Chinese cyclists. White became heavily involved with the emerging Critical Mass 'movement' throughout the mid-1990's and in 1999 he produced a film about Critical Mass entitled (*We aren't blocking traffic,*) *We Are Traffic!*

We Are Traffic! was arguably the most comprehensive look at the tactics and ideas behind Critical Mass, and like *Scorcher*, it reflected the wider cultural and political issues that were/are raised in the previous chapter. However, unlike written texts that merely describe events or recount one's involvement therein, the film format was a particularly useful way of demonstrating the vivacity of Critical Mass events. White's filming techniques greatly contributed to one's sense of 'being on the ride,' given the fact that he filmed a number of the sequences from the back of a homemade bike trailer. And like other films that document acts of creative dissent, *We Are Traffic!* captured the spirit of the event and juxtaposed that experience with analysis and commentary from those who were most closely involved with the development

of CM. *We Are Traffic* was screened by cyclists throughout the United States and it undoubtedly created an additional impetus for CM rides in the first half of this decade. More importantly, it created an even greater sense of self-awareness amongst CM participants and other cyclists who felt connected to the ethics and politics of those involved.

White's films ushered in a new wave of 'bikeumentaries' that have been made by, for, and about the DIY cycling culture that has emerged in recent years; particularly within North America. With the advent of editing programs such as Final Cut and iMovie and the increased proliferation of digital recording technologies, cyclists have been actively creating a film library that documents some of the wider trends in bike culture and their relationship to smaller, localized events and/or organizations. In addition, these films incorporate a great deal of home video footage, which has been a vital tool for cyclists; especially those who participate in Critical Mass rides. Not only do these forms of media serve to document events that are spontaneous and fleeting, they provide an important resource for activists who must contend with police harassment, lawsuits, and negative publicity spun by local officials. In a number of recent cases, home video documenting physical violence and harassment from the police has directly discredited certain claims made by police in NYC about the behavior of certain CM cyclists, the circumstances of particular arrests, and the illegal seizure of bicycles during the RNC protests in 2004.²⁸⁶

Like bike zines, these forms of media explore different dimensions of cycling that are not documented by mainstream media outlets. However, film and video technology arguably provide a more 'in depth' perspective on bike culture since video inherently combines both visual and aural components. Documentaries not only create an increased sense of

²⁸⁶ See the documentary *Still We Ride*, DVD, directed by Andrew Lynn, Elizabeth Press and Chris Ryan (New York: In Tandem Productions, 2005).

closeness/proximity between the viewer and the subjects filmed, the screenings of such films also create environments in which cyclists are literally brought together. The recent development of the Bicycle Film Festival, which took place in 5 major cities this past year, is a perfect example of how films can bring communities of cyclists together in order to communicate (mediated and face-to-face) about issues that they feel are important.²⁸⁷

5.1.3 Bikes and the punk community

In the last 5-10 years it has become more common to see clusters of bicycles parked outside of punk shows in various cities throughout the United States, especially in Portland (OR), San Francisco, New Orleans, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, Chicago, Pittsburgh (PA), Berkeley, Gainesville, and New York City. Cycling and bike activism have become integrated into punk culture in a number of ways and there are visible contingents of riders who utilize punk as both an outlet for expression, and as network in which to advocate bikes and the cycling lifestyle. Bicycles have attained a positive status in the punk community because of a combination of factors related to punks' ethics, lifestyle choices, and their political dispositions towards technology, environmentalism, and labor. As a result, the punk community has spawned a growing subculture of politicized cyclists that are dedicated to sensible technologies, car-free lifestyles, Do It Yourself (DIY) maintenance, and independence from both the auto and oil industries.²⁸⁸ Within certain factions of the punk community, custom built fixed-gear bikes, old cruisers, bmx bikes, converted single speeders, and thrift store "beaters" have become as integral to punk rock as mohawks and vinyl records.

²⁸⁷ Bicycle Film Festival, <http://www.bicyclefilmfestival.com/dev/index.html>.

²⁸⁸ As much as one can possibly be detached from an industry that has saturated the global market with products and additives that can be found in any number of non-automotive goods. Ironically, two examples are bicycle tires and the vinyl records.

While earlier generations of rock bands, including Pink Floyd and Queen, penned such classic biking songs (respectively) as “Bike” and “Bicycle Race,” the bike-oriented messages of punk bands such as Rambo, Fifteen, the Haggard, Dead Things, Crucial Unit, and Divide and Conquer, have a markedly different tone than Syd Barrett’s psychedelic musings on an early Pink Floyd recording: “I’ve got a bike, you can ride it if you like, it’s got a basket, a bell, and other things that make it look good.”²⁸⁹ This is not to say that songs that celebrate bicycles and cycling are unimportant in the ‘bike punk’ community, rather, I mean to suggest that punk music serves different functions and convey messages that are not *solely* reducible to songs of praise for bikes. Through their songs, graphics, and imagery, these bands help to politicize the act of cycling while they simultaneously help to both define and advocate a ‘punk’ identity for cyclists.

Bike punk bands are highly critical of the automobile industry, sprawl, angry drivers,²⁹⁰ and the socioeconomic institutions that encourage car-centricity, technocracy, pollution, and oil production:

Oil: The biggest contradiction in DIY punk culture. We’ve always been dependent on it, though there are alternatives, we haven’t seemed to used them yet. In May, Dead Things, in an attempt to prove that DIY punks can do things more sustainably, communally, and collectively, is leaving the van behind, giving a finger to Shell, Exxon, and all the other companies that have been destroying our planet and co-opting our lives for profit. We’re getting on our bikes and pedaling our way around the south. This is not simply a tour of our little band. It is also an attempt to strengthen our small DIY punk culture that we’ve all been a

²⁸⁹ Pink Floyd, “Bike,” *The Piper At the Gates of Dawn* (Los Angeles: Capitol Records: 1967). Sound recording. LP.

²⁹⁰ Dead Things, “Bike Lane,” *Because Sometimes You Just Want to Ride Your Bike to the Show* (self-released). Sound recording, CD.

part of for a good bit of our lives. This is everyone's tour because it can't happen without our community working together.²⁹¹

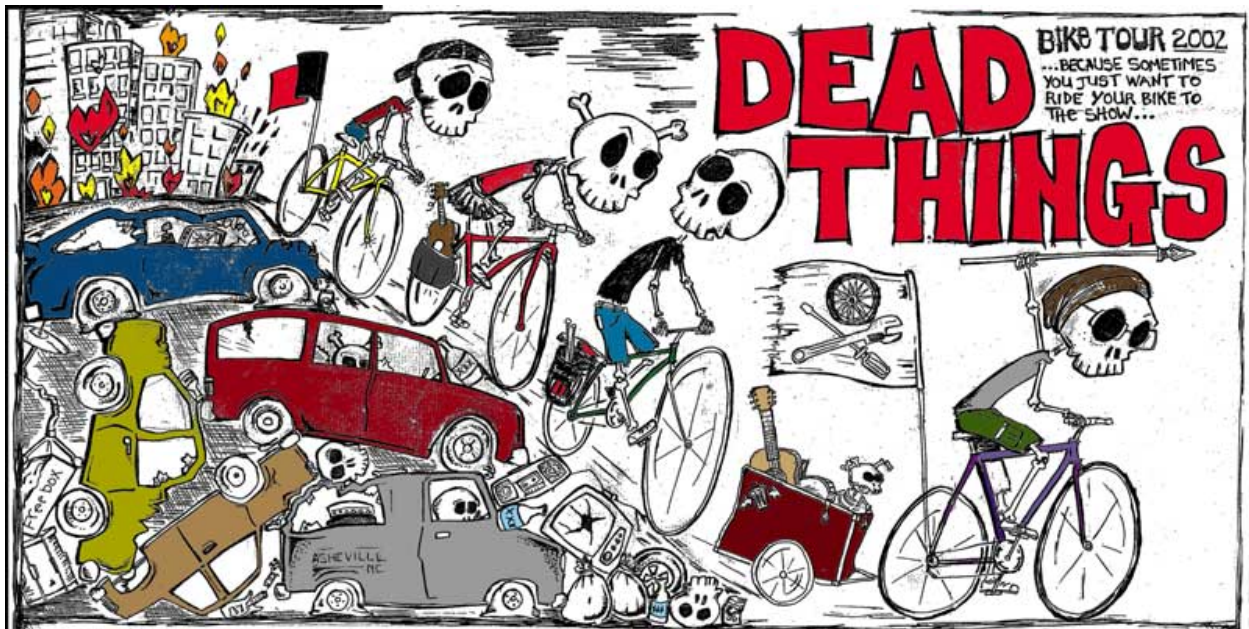


Figure 13-Dead Things Bike Tour Poster (artwork by Jason Trashville)

Some bands advocate bike militancy and self-defense as a means to create a strong self-identity as a cyclist,²⁹² and others help to develop and advocate the bike punk identity by connecting biking to other political issues, such as feminism. For example, the 'queer-positive' female punk band, the Haggard, have members who work as bike mechanics at a Portland bike co-op, and they also bring their bikes on tour when they travel out of town. Their 'pro-bike' songs are integrated into a framework of political punk, wherein the women also address issues of homophobia, sexism, and feminism. Like female-positive bike zines such as *Chainbreaker* and *Clitical Mass*, the Haggard's lyrics help to define the bike punk identity as something that is

²⁹¹ Dead Things "Bike Tour" webpage. Accessed through *Slave Magazine*, <http://www.slavemagazine.com/deadthings/biketour.html>.

²⁹² See R.A.M.B.O., "U-Lock Justice," *Wall of Death the System* (San Francisco: 625 Records, 2000). Sound recording. LP.; R.A.M.B.O., "Apocalypse Riders", *Crucial Unit/R.A.M.B.O* (Philadelphia: Ed Walters Records, 2002). Sound recording. 7 inch record; Divide and Conquer, "Bike Punx." *Bike Punx* (France: Zorlac Records, date unknown). Sound recording. CD.

inclusive of both men and women; thus providing a positive role model for female cyclists in the punk community.

The punk community arguably presents the most interesting case with respect to the relationship between alternative media, bicycling, and identity because while the messages articulated by specific bands are important, the context in which these messages are translated are arguably more important than the actual media:

Since becoming deeply involved with bike culture and ‘biketivism’ it has only been natural for me to ride everywhere, including shows, and at first i never saw anything connected to ‘punk’ by doing it. But the more I rode and questioned the socio-political effects of riding; it not only became recreational to ride to a punk show, but an obligation. A very satisfying obligation. What I came to realize was that riding to a show is a direct connection to the DIY ethic that we as punks hold with such high regard. Not only does it encompass the DIY ethic, but it is also an extension of my environmental beliefs, my attempts to live in good health, and my adherence to non-violence.²⁹³

5.1.3.1 Perspectives on punk

Beginning with the work of Dick Hebdige in the 1970’s, there has been a substantial body of analytical writing devoted to punk culture in England and the United States.²⁹⁴ This body of work is an attempt to both describe and understand the development of a subculture that has morphed and fluctuated throughout the last two decades. While it is not necessary to summarize

²⁹³ Scott Spitz, *Crucial Unit/RAMBO 7*” insert,

²⁹⁴ Throughout my discussion of punk, I will use the term ‘culture’ as a general reference to people who are involved with and/or support punk music. I use ‘community’ in order to refer specifically to the self-consciously political group of punks in punk culture. Finally, I use the term ‘scene’ in order to talk about punk culture in a particular place, e.g. ‘the Pittsburgh punk scene’.

every perspective on punk throughout the last 20 years, it is important to recognize some basic premises of punk culture in order to both clarify my position with respect to punk, and describe the ways in which biking and bike activism have been integrated into punk culture. To begin with, there are *drastic* differences between certain factions, or scenes, of people that self-identify as part of the punk community, despite the fact that there has been a culture developed in and around punk music since the late 1970's. The punk moniker is embraced by different groups for different reasons, and it is important to recognize the fact that punk culture is not cohesive and it should not be over-generalized as such by theorists who are interested in understanding it. For example, the straight edge, vegan scene within the punk community bears little or no resemblance to the "drunk punx" who live to drink and write songs about beer. Such divisions, between these or other groups of punks, are not reducible to musical preference or clothing style because often times such differences are the result of deeply held ethical and/or political beliefs. As a result, the meaning of punk and people's identification with punk culture can be radically political or radically benign. This is not to suggest that certain factions of the punk community are more authentic or noble than others, but to remind the reader that such dissonance exists and is partly responsible for the fact that punk culture continues to attract different types of people.

While many writers choose to extol the most visible stylistic and aural aspects of 1970's punk scenes in England²⁹⁵ and New York, I would argue that punk culture began to develop when people started to create viable alternatives to mainstream, corporate culture through the creation of independent media outlets, independent show spaces, and a politicized subculture that developed in and around the punk scene. Like cultural theorist Gary Clarke, I would argue that early conceptions of the punk subculture were inadequate because they emphasized style, rather

²⁹⁵ See Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The meaning of style* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

than describing “what subcultures actually *do*.”²⁹⁶ As a result, there are various accounts of punk that fail to recognize the DIY, participatory ethics that have created hybrid musical genres, independent media companies, collectively owned performance spaces, national/international support for touring bands, and networks of activists throughout the Western world. In short, punk culture is based upon what people create and how they choose to relate to both mainstream culture and one another. Mark Anderson, co-founder of Washington D.C.’s activist collective, Positive Force, articulates this idea most clearly:

Punk isn’t a fashion, a certain style of dress, a passing ‘phase’ of knee-jerk rebellion against your parents, the latest ‘cool’ trend or even a particular form of style or music, really—it is an idea that guides and motivates your life. The Punk community that exists, exists to support and realize that idea through music, art, fanzines and other expressions of personal creativity. And what is this idea? Think for yourself, be yourself, don’t just take what society gives you, create your own rules, live your own life.²⁹⁷

Despite strong ethics of self-empowerment and individualism,²⁹⁸ punk culture has a long history of political and social consciousness that has been translated into musical recordings, zines, newspapers, and various forms of activism throughout the last 25 years. Animal rights activist and communication scholar, Maxwell Schnurer, accurately describes this lineage:

Many punks have been political and within the subculture of punk there has been a vibrant element that has been adamantly active, engaged in causes ranging from

²⁹⁶ Gary Clarke, “Defending Ski Jumpers,” in *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. by Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (New York: Routledge, 1997), 178.

²⁹⁷ Mark Anderson, Positive Force pamphlet (1985). Quoted in Craig O’Hara, *The Philosophy of Punk*, (San Francisco: AK Press, 1999), 36.

²⁹⁸ This was particularly evident in the Washington, D.C. scene that was driven by Minor Threat and their DIY record label, Dischord Records. For an excellent description of both the music and activism of the D.C. punk scene, see Mark Anderson and Mark Jenkins, *Dance of Days* (New York: Akashic Books, 2003).

nuclear disarmament to human rights promotion. While the public was consuming media perceptions of violent punks, small enclaves of punk activists have emerged.²⁹⁹

The enclaves of punk activists that Schnurer describes have utilized forms of media, such as music and zines, as a means to articulate their ideas, educate their peers, and recruit allies within the punk community (which is not implicitly political). Furthermore, they have utilized the punk community as a network in which activists can engage in dialogue, and establish bonds with other groups of people that can lead to the formation of new projects, new coalitions, new communities, and new forms of media. With respect to my analysis of punk culture, I will be explicitly referring to this lineage of politically conscious/politically active punks when I make references to the punk community. This is not to say that cycling and bike activism are exclusive to one specific faction of punks, but the majority of bike-oriented advocacy in the punk scene are created by people who are typically involved with other political and/or DIY projects. In other words, the punk community is not merely united around the production of loud music, rather, it serves as a hub for different types of media production and activism.

The DIY community has a long history of advocating personal responsibility with respect to issues of consumption, activism, and lifestyle practices. As a result, it is not surprising that many punk bands emphasize the idea that one can become empowered by choosing not to participate in institutions that are antithetical to one's ethics; whether one chooses to quit their job, squat, become a vegan, or in this case, where one makes the decision to bike and live a car-free lifestyle. Nate, of the band Soophie Nun Squad, makes this most clear in a recent interview:

²⁹⁹ See Schnurer, dissertation.

It's easy to ignore or put aside the passive support we lend a violent and heartless group of men and their interests by the way we spend our money, the kind of transportation we use, where we give our time and efforts at our jobs...It is empowering to be in control of one's body and decisions about where to put energy, to choose very carefully what to support.³⁰⁰

Cyclists in the DIY community are certainly not alone in their advocacy for personal responsibility with respect to transportation decisions, seeing as how the same rhetoric is also deployed by transportation engineers, community activists, and technology scholars.³⁰¹ However, through the combination of loud/intense music, passionate lyrics, and active live performances, punk bands can arguably make a moving case that “riding a bike is revolutionary.”³⁰² These messages resonate particularly with punks, given the fact that they are more likely to attend shows and buy punk music. This is not to make absolute claims about the effects of music, but rather, to point out how punk music can encourage one to become a cyclist based upon the perceived benefits of cycling and the perceived ills of automotive transportation and car culture.

5.2 ARTICULATING THE POLITICS OF CYCLING

By and large, urban cyclists occupy a marginalized social position because of the ways in which cycling is perceived to be childish, regressive, and technologically inferior with respect to the

³⁰⁰ Massacre, Eve, “Soophie Nun Squad.” Interview by Eve Massacre, <http://www.evemassacre.de>.

³⁰¹ See Forrester, Time's Up!, Paul Rosen.

³⁰² Chris Ziegler, “Haggard,” interview by Chris Ziegler, *Punk Planet* 47 (2002): 46-50.

‘norms’ of car culture and modern capitalism.³⁰³ Furthermore, cyclists literally occupy a marginalized position on city streets as they are forced to deal with aggressive drivers, poor urban design, and a widespread lack of adequate bicycle facilities, such as bike lanes. In the face of such circumstances, cyclists must develop their own strategies in order to deal with everyday life in the city—whether such strategies are related to navigation, bike maintenance, or confrontations with automobile drivers. In addition, cyclists must develop a sense of identity that provides them with the confidence and knowledge necessary in order to continue riding for any significant period of time.

The relationship between cyclists and car culture is not unlike the relationship that exists between alternative media producers and mainstream media. To use a metaphor, we might imagine the street to be the mainstream media world. The street is filled with all different types of vehicles of various shapes, sizes, and models that can all be accommodated and used at any drivers’ discretion.³⁰⁴ However, upon closer examination, the street is part of the public domain, yet it is only designed for these particular vehicles in the same way that the media industry is only designed for media products produced by our media oligopoly.³⁰⁵ In addition, while each of these vehicles may be different, they are all basically modifications of a similar design produced by a small number of companies. The new SUV and the old Honda Civic, while different in some respects, are like pop stars of a different genre, or TV sitcoms produced by competing studios. The appearance may vary, but they generally look the same, sound the same,

³⁰³ “The U.S. transportation department’s study reported that Americans, for example, view cycling for transport or work as ‘uncool’, a ‘children’s activity,’ or ‘socially inappropriate for those who can afford a car’.” From “When cities take bicycle seriously,” by Gary Gardner, *World Watch* 11, no. 5 (1998): 16-22.

³⁰⁴ This is essentially the “Hyde Park Soapbox model” that governs our perceptions of mass media. It assumes that anyone who wants to speak can do so, regardless of who they are and what they want to say. Dr. Jonathan Sterne first made me aware of this concept in the Mass Communication seminar that I assisted with at the University of Pittsburgh. Also see: John Michael Roberts, “The Enigma of Free Speech: Speakers’ Corner, The Geography Of Governance And A Crisis of Rationality,” *Social & Legal Studies* 9, No. 2 (2000): 271-292.

³⁰⁵ See Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*.

and they rely upon a dense network of advertising, mass production, and consumption in order to exist. Like mass media products, there are so many cars on the street that it seems normal—to the point where we never even think about what's on the street, who produced the vehicles, or what things we trade in order to have such forms of transportation.

In the same way that independent media producers have created their own streets and their own traffic patterns, cyclists have a similar struggle to find their own space on the road, or to find enough people in order to create their own paths. People who participate in the punk community or the zine community foster an anti-corporate, DIY ethic through the creation of alternative media. Metaphorically, they are the cyclist on the street crowded with cars. However, my choice for metaphors is not accidental, because many of the same people who participate in DIY culture and/or institutions are *literally* the cyclists on the street. They are cyclists out of necessity, preference, or some combination of both. As such, they recognize how cycling is the DIY alternative to vehicular transportation, and within their media they reflect upon these dynamics. Through such media, people articulate perspectives about cycling that are not found within the mass media industry, nor are they necessarily found within media that are specifically targeted to cyclists. With music, writing, and film, cyclists have created a new form of identity based around the DIY ethic, and they have created a mediated space in which to circulate their perspectives on the culture and politics of cycling.

In order to understand how and why the oft-intersecting punk and zine communities embrace and advocate bicycling, it is important to understand the political context in which ideas about bicycling resonate. Therefore, it is necessary to provide some background information about political issues in the DIY community that frame bike advocacy.

5.2.1 Radical politics in the DIY community

Like previous generations of punks and zinesters who integrated their political ideals with DIY media and everyday practices, there were legions of people throughout the 1980's and 1990's that advocated individual and collective responses to corporate capitalism, pollution, and technological reliance.³⁰⁶ During this period, the DIY community began to focus attention on issues such as female reproductive rights, animal rights organizing,³⁰⁷ anti-roads protests, and the radical environmental movement spawned by Earth First!. EF!'s dedication to anti-corporate, DIY, "no compromise" strategies of environmental defense found natural allies within the political punk and zine communities, whose numbers had consistently been growing and becoming more radicalized through the influence of earlier anarchists bands that emphasized a collective distrust for both corporate power structures and social hierarchies that devalued nature, animals, women, and minorities. With the added influence of such environmentally-oriented movements such as "hardline" (militant) veganism, the DIY community began to create radicalized discourses that equated environmental destruction with corporate capitalism, hierarchal government, and technological growth.³⁰⁸ With the added influence of anti-technology, *primitivist* theories proposed by anarchists such as John Zerzan, "green" anarchism became widely embraced by the radical wing of the DIY community in North America, and these ideas were reflected in zines such as *Green Anarchy* and *Fifth Estate* and in the

³⁰⁶ Crass is perhaps *the* seminal band that integrated music, activism, and zine production.

³⁰⁷ See Schnurer, dissertation; O'Hara; McKay; Shepard and Hayduk.

³⁰⁸ For a description of the "hardline" philosophy, see Schnurer's description of the hardline influence on the animal rights movement in punk, 46-54.

music/lyrics of bands such as Oi Polloi, Aus Rotten, Catharsis, 2.5 Children, and Propaghandi (to name but a few).³⁰⁹

Despite all of the anger vocalized against technology, the majority of people in the political DIY community were not active primitivists. Even some of the loudest critics of technology still supported the use of sustainable technologies and they implicitly supported the use of technologies that either mass produce literature or amplify sound to deafening volumes. In this regard, most of ‘anti-technology’ rabble created by the DIY community during this time often confused political and socioeconomic criticism with arguments about the *technomenace*.³¹⁰ It seems that the majority of the political DIY community advocate(d) what Paul Rosen refers to as *technoskepticism*; a position that suggests that technologies, in and of themselves, are not to blame for environmental/social problems. Rather, the political and economic structures that utilize technologies for profit and power, at the expense of sustainability and freedom, are to blame for the misuses of technology. This view is similarly embraced by Murray Bookchin,³¹¹ an anarchist who makes qualitative distinctions about ‘bad’ technologies—ones that are either unsustainable and/or inherently hierarchical (such as nuclear power)—and ‘good’ technologies, which are ones that are sustainable, relieve toil, and are capable of being utilized without hierarchical control.³¹² In recent years the majority of the DIY political community seems to be more careful with their distinctions about technology, especially because many have realized how communications and internet technologies can be effectively used in order to mobilize

³⁰⁹ See John Zerzan, *Questioning Technology: a critical anthology*, eds. John Zerzan and Alice Carnes (London: Freedom Press, 1988); *Running on Emptiness: the pathology of civilization* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2002).

³¹⁰ Anti-product, *The Deafening Silence of Gears Grinding* (Portland: Tribal War Records, n.d.). Sound recording, LP.

³¹¹ See Murray Bookchin’s essays, “Ecology and Revolutionary Thought” and “Towards a Liberatory Technology”, in *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (Berkeley: Ramparts Press, 1971).

³¹² The terms ‘bad’ and ‘good’ are not used as categories by Bookchin. I used them in order to simplify the issues in order to make my point.

activist communities. Creation is Crucifixion, a punk band that seamlessly integrates music, anarchist ideology, writing, and activism, makes this point most clear:

We are attempting to find ways in which activists can infiltrate and subvert the socialization system to take away its power. Right now we live at a unique time in which some form of this can be done through communications and internet technologies easier than more traditional physical means. It is not the tool but the user of the tool that we despise.³¹³

As the communication networks created through direct action, zine circulation, and punk distribution grew, the converging environmental discourses of the punk and zine communities helped to spark a radical environmental consciousness in the underground activist community. Conversely, the impetus of the environmental movement became more visible in the punk community as bands started to address oil production and the proliferation of car culture—issues that had taken on new urgency following the first Gulf war. Lyrics from songs like “Petroleum Distillation” re-emphasized the connections between corporate greed and environmental destruction, and also called explicit attention to the harm caused by automotive transportation:

I've been having a hard time trying to justify
The clouds arising from the cars we drive
And a little too easy seems just a little too hard today
And I'm afraid my children are going to have to watch the world waste
away...³¹⁴

³¹³ Infinite Monkey, “Creation is Crucifixion,” 2001, Interview by Infinite Monkey, <http://www.geocities.com/snuffan/interviews/interviews.html>.

³¹⁴ Fifteen, “Petroleum Distillation,” *Choice of a New Generation* (Berkeley: Lookout Records, 1989). Sound recording, LP.

Anti-car/anti-oil messages resonated especially strong with punks and this eventually led to a wider acceptance of bicycling as a politicized and cheap alternative to automobiles.³¹⁵ In addition, there was a crossover between bike messenger culture and the punk community, given the fact that bike messengering was one of the few professions that “allowed people with mohawks to earn a living” throughout the 1980s.³¹⁶

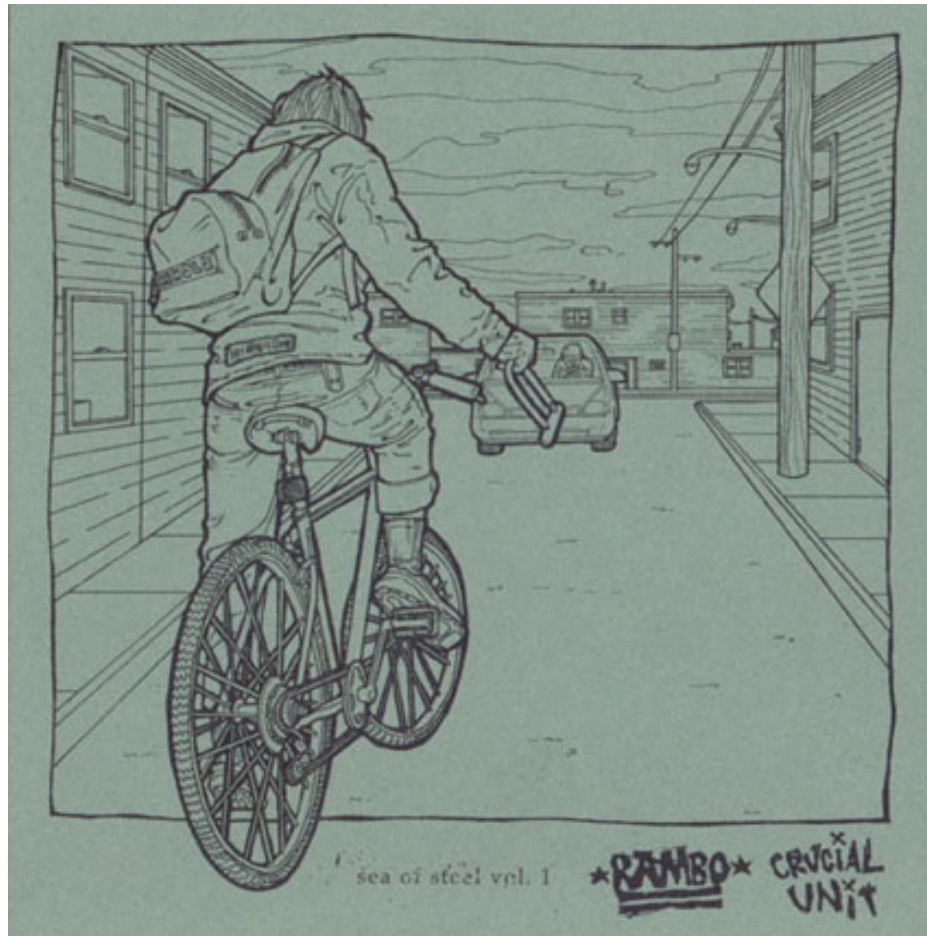


Figure 14-RAMBO/Crucial Unit 7" Cover (artwork by Mike Bukowski)

While not all messengers were part of the punk community, the numbers of people who were both punks and bike messengers began to increase in the 1980s and 1990s, thus making cycling more visible in punk scenes, and punks more visible in bike messenger culture. As a

³¹⁵ This is a serious factor for subculture that actively promotes dumpster diving, squatting, and in some cases theft, as an alternative to alienated labor.

³¹⁶ From a pamphlet by the SF Bike Messengers Association, 1996, <http://www.shapingsf.org>.

result, the convergence between messengering and punk rock brought more attention to the politics of car culture in the punk community, seeing as how both communities had developed critical discourses about sprawl, pollution, safety, and oil reliance.³¹⁷

Critical Mass amplified these critiques to the public and simultaneously created a different type of public space where activists, messengers, punks, cycling enthusiasts, and bike commuters could come together in order to celebrate cycling. Moreover, Critical Mass' celebration of xerocracy encouraged cyclists to produce and distribute thousands of zines, essays, flyers, and images that politicized cycling and forged a radical critique of car culture.³¹⁸ These easily photo-copied texts circulated widely within networks of cyclists throughout the 1990's and helped to create a noticeable shift in the way that underground cultures related to cycling. The radical, anarchist nature of CM events and media had a considerable impact on the punk and zine communities' interest in cycling because they could identify with the way in which CM was organized, and they supported the reasons why CM was started:

Anarchism in the zine community has its roots. Anarchy has always played a starring role in punk rock and thus punk zines, and prominent zinesters like *Factsheet Five* founder Mike Gunderloy have been active in the anarchist movement. More significant, however, are the homologies between the nascent philosophies of the zine scene and those of anarchism. On the most basic level, anarchism is the philosophy of individual dissent within the context of volunteer

³¹⁷ For more information on bike messenger culture, see Travis Culley's, *The Immortal Class* (New York: Villard Press, 2001); and Rebecca 'Lambchop' Reilly's, *Nerves of Steel* (New York: Spoke and Word Press, 2000). For more on bike messenger zines, see the International Federation of Bike Messenger Associations' list of worldwide bike messenger zines at: <http://www.messengers.org/resources/zines.html>.

³¹⁸ For an excellent look at such media, see *Critical Mass essays, flyers*, online.

communities, and zines are the products of individual dissenters who have set up volunteer networks of communication with one another.³¹⁹

Given the fact that the political punk community had participated in and experimented with various types of ‘leaderless’ direct action protests, and zinesters engage in an almost intuitive anarchism (as illustrated in the above quotation), Critical Mass started to gain widespread support from the DIY community, and has arguably been one of the driving forces in both its longevity and popularity.

To put it simply, the ethics of environmentalism, *technoskepticism*, lifestyle politics, and anarchism that had been developed in the DIY community throughout the 1980’s and 1990’s converged with the influences of bike messenger culture and Critical Mass in order to create an environment where bicycling could be more widely accepted. The impetus created through this intersection of political issues/ideas has undoubtedly made bicycling more appealing to people involved with alternative media production and more specifically the punk community, which serves as a hub for music, zine distribution, and radical activism. In other words, there is a particular interpretive frame created through the confluence of politics, media, and one’s immediate community that influences what people involved in DIY culture consider to be relevant, important, and in many cases, life changing.

5.2.2 Contextualizing bikes as part of the DIY consciousness

Media theorists have long talked about the agenda setting function of mass media,³²⁰ but we often forget that independent or alternative media also serves an agenda setting function that

³¹⁹ Duncombe, *Notes*, 35.

³²⁰ M.E. McCombs and D.L. Shaw, “The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36 (1972): 176-187.

greatly affects the ways in which people think about social and/or political issues. As I mentioned in the last section, specific political issues—such as anarchism and environmentalism—can be brought within the rubric of DIY consciousness and made to be relevant through the production of alternative media, specifically music. With reference to Vila and Wicke’s analysis of the role of rock music in politics,³²¹ sociologist Rob Rosenthal makes similar claims about the instructive/pedagogical function of music, “that is, to actually induce (or help induce) people to move beyond intellectual awareness or emotional sympathy to joining a movement organization or otherwise crossing the line into an identity (and self-identity) as a movement supporter.”³²² While these dynamics can be positively used in order to raise consciousness and mobilize like-minded people on progressive issues, these same dynamics can be, and have been, effectively utilized by neo-Nazi recruiters, corporate advertisers, and other groups that have no vested interest in social justice, democratic empowerment, or positive social change.³²³ In other words, music can play a powerful role in the construction of ideology, and the same is true with zines because they are often perceived to be more truthful and accurate than the media perpetuated through mainstream channels:

If communication can be viewed as food, then everything the mass media serves has been depleted of nourishment by a corporate self-serving agenda. Amidst this landscape of lies, the zine movement has arisen everywhere like hydra of discontent. Finally original, fresh and *truthful* communication between

³²¹ Pablo Vila “Rock Nacional and dictatorship in Argentina,” in *Rockin' the Boat*, ed. Reebee Garofalo (Boston: South End, 1992), 209-29; Peter Wicke “The Times They Are a-changing,” *Rockin' the Boat*, ed. Reebee Garofalo (Boston: South End, 1992), 81-92.

³²² Rob Rosenthal, “Serving the Movement: The Role(s) of Music,” *Popular Music and Society* 25, no. 3/4 (2001): 13.

³²³ Anti-Defamation League, “The Revival of Resistance Records,” 2000, http://www.adl.org/resistance_records/introduction.asp; Corporations not only disguise advertisements and self-promotional materials as ‘alternative’ media, they also co-opt the images, sounds, and icons from DIY culture. See Nike’s recent (sic) interpretation of a classic hardcore punk record cover (Minor Threat), which they used for an advertisement. Pitchfork Media’s Daily News, <http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/news/05-06/23.shtml>.

individuals is proliferating on a massive scale. This is a movement without leaders or spokespersons, and there are no rigidifying standards dictating what may or may not be presented.³²⁴

Therefore, when we combine the ‘truth’ claims of zine production with the persuasive capacity of music, we are essentially looking at a situation where people can be genuinely influenced by the content of alternative media. Moreover, certain issues or ideas raised through alternative media can resonate even more deeply with people in the DIY community once one considers the influence of peer pressure (explicit or implicit), and/or trend setting. For example, one might become a vegetarian not because he is intrinsically persuaded by arguments about animal rights but because vegetarianism is embraced by his peers. However, one should note that the same critical faculties that people in the DIY community apply to the behaviors and media of mass culture are also used self-reflexively. In other words, I do not mean to suggest that people uncritically engage zines or documentaries, or blindly follow the advice of their favorite bands; although there are cases in which this obviously happens. Rather, I raise these issues in order to explain the interpretive frame that many people in the DIY community utilize in order to make decisions, and also to explain *why* particular issues resonate with the producers/consumers of alternative media. As a result, it becomes easier to understand how something like bicycling can be ‘read’ as a political practice and subsequently embraced through that same interpretive framework.

³²⁴ V. Vale, *Zines, Vol. 1* (San Francisco: V/Search, 1996), 5.

5.3 THE LOCAL, OR A ‘SENSE OF PLACE’ THROUGH BIKES AND DIY MEDIA

The perspectives on biking featured within zines, documentaries and punk music are largely based upon first person accounts and experiences that use personal narratives as a way to validate many of the same ideas found in more scholarly works on the same subjects. This is not to say that alternative media producers necessarily shy away from their use of historical research, meta-analysis, or self-reflection, rather, they also recognize how the use of personal experiences is a way for individuals to seize authority: “personalization is the mark of individuals who don’t have a voice that matters in public discussions about culture and politics saying: Yes I do matter, this is what I believe, *this idea is mine*.”³²⁵ Part of what makes alternative media so personalized is the inclusion of narratives that both describe one’s environment and their perception of a given environment. For example, zines and punk songs are filled with detailed accounts of specific cities, towns, neighborhoods, streets, alleys, corners, and riversides that are part of peoples’ everyday world. From the Ramones’ description of life on the corner of “53rd and 3rd” in New York City,³²⁶ to Al Hoff’s reviews of small town thrift stores in Western Pennsylvania,³²⁷ to Michael Moore’s exposure of Flint, Michigan,³²⁸ D.I.Y. media enable one to capture the experiences and details of their surroundings with an emotion and precision that is sorely lacking from mainstream media outlets that typically portray cities as theme parks, tourist destinations, or reality TV sets. Zines, music, and film (not to mention photography) not only provide an outlet for people to express their vision—or version—of the material world, they also affect the ways in which recipients of such media texts engage and evaluate their own environments. One

³²⁵ Duncombe, *Notes*, 30.

³²⁶ The Ramones, “53rd and 3rd,” *The Ramones* (New York: Sire Records, 1976). Sound recording, LP.

³²⁷ Al Hoff, *Thrift Score*, self published.

³²⁸ *Roger and Me*, VHS, directed by Michael Moore. (Hollywood: Dog Eat Dog Films/Warner Brothers, 1989).

can endlessly debate whether these forms of expression are more ‘authentic’ than those produced by other media outlets, but one cannot ignore how DIY media collectively constitute a different way of ‘seeing’ that is more personal and less restricted (in terms of content) than the marketable drivel hyped by media corporations.

DIY media producers experience, and reflect, a version of the world that is different from the standard narratives circulated through mass media, and this situation is not unlike those experienced by bicyclists. The act of cycling produces an engagement with the material world that is markedly different than that experienced by users of automobiles because of important differences that exist with respect to speed, one’s literal exposure to their environment, and one’s ability to choose their travel routes. It is perhaps fitting, then, that an increasing number of bicyclists choose to articulate their unique experience of the world through zines, music, film, and other forms of DIY media that implicitly lend themselves to the articulation of such perspectives. The personalized narratives articulated by cyclists not only produce interesting stories and anecdotes about bicycling, they also create unique bodies of knowledge about the relationships between cycling, perception, the material environment, and one’s lifestyle. One of the ways in which lifestyle issues are addressed is with respect to speed. Cycling slows the world down to a point where people have a different engagement with both their environment and the people in their community. Scott Larkin, who writes the zine, *Go By Bicycle*, says that “the prospect of someone stopping to talk to someone when they’re jamming by at 35 miles an hour is unlikely.”³²⁹ The point that Scott raises is interesting because he alludes to the idea that cycling allows people to communicate in a more direct way, or it at least creates opportunities for direct communication in an environment where communication is implicitly discouraged

³²⁹ Scott Larkin, interview by author, Portland OR., August 7, 2004.

through automotive transportation. In conjunction with the issue of speed, one of the other perceived advantages of bicycling is the lack of enclosure that cyclists experience when they traverse the city:

When one rides a bike they have a much more direct experience of nature (this can be both rural and urban) than those who drive a car. In other words, there is a lack of “stuff” that mediates the experience between you and the world. While many cars, such as the Jeep, attempt to reproduce this experience, there is still no way of duplicating it...Since bikers have a more direct experience of the world, we also have the opportunity to look around and enjoy the ride. When one cruises on a bike they are not limited by a roof, a floor, passenger seats, or tinted windshields. As a result, there is a much wider range of aesthetic opportunities that present themselves on the ride.”³³⁰

This description of bicycling is juxtaposed against one’s perception of the automobile, which is often equated, in DIY bike media, as antithetical to one’s innate desire for exposure:

From my bicycle seat, car drivers usually look miserable. Locked in their fiberglass and steel earth-polluting chariots, they move about in a stupor of noise, speed, and consumption, en route to the next gasoline fix. Their vehicles evoke in me, not the mass advertised images of ease and freedom, but instead mobile coffins, brushing against endless other coffins, as they head towards those cemeteries called parking lots. Seeing bicyclists, the drivers become aware, if

³³⁰ Zack Furness, “Cruisin’ Envy,” *Bad Subjects 64* (2002), <http://bad.eserver.org/issues/2002/59/Furness.html>.

only for a second, of that time when they too were able to feel the world, not through a glass cage, but in a direct and particular way.³³¹

Albeit, this is a pretty heavy-handed account of automobiles, but it expresses the sentiments of many cyclists who understand how the decision to bike is not merely a transportation decision, it is the transformation of one's perception—from that of enclosure to a direct experience of the material world. The unique pace and exposure fostered by the bicycle enables cyclists to become highly attuned to their environment, and in many ways, one's world becomes articulated through the act of cycling:

I feel about this city [New Orleans] the way one dreams of feeling about the perfect love affair. I feel connected, forgiving, in full admiration and acceptance for its beauty and its shortcomings. I never thought I could feel this way about a place...it struck me that the things I love about this city are things I may not have noticed or appreciated enough if it weren't for my mode of transportation, my lovely bicycle.³³²

Shelly's experience of New Orleans is not uncommon for cyclists who learn how to interpret the often hectic environments of cities via bicycle—simultaneously drifting from place to place while recording the details of the landscape. Pragmatic cycling routes and favorite rides begin to synthesize into psychogeographical maps of the city that are not necessarily prescribed by norms of the environment. Space and time thus become measured, transformed, and re-defined through one's ability to navigate by bicycle:

Anywhere you want to go in Gainesville, you can probably get there from the intersection of university and main on bike in 20 minutes. From my house it's

³³¹ Alon K. Raab, *Under the Sign of the Bicycle*, (Portland: Gilgul Press, 2003), 11-12.

³³² Shelly, *Chainbreaker #4*.

fifteen minutes to Ward's grocery, fifteen to No Idea, eight to Wayward Council Records, ten to school, twelve to my friends at the ranch.³³³

A sense of *place* emerges through the act of bicycling and DIY media provide a space in which cyclists can reflect upon and represent their own versions of the places that constitute their world. Through this process, DIY media focused on cycling create different types of knowledge(s) about urban space, city life, and local culture that are either ignored or quickly forgotten. These types of 'local' knowledges are extremely important and are often dismissed in an era where local cultures and customs are being erased by corporate infiltration: "in a world of increasing globalization, the need for a strong home territory—with its own distinctive personality—becomes even more pressing."³³⁴ Without any documentation of 'local' culture or the expression of pride in one's 'home territory,' there seems to be little to prevent the erasure of local institutions and/or local culture. Furthermore, without the documentation of such experiences the only histories that remain over time are those written by people in positions of power. In this regard, film documentaries that portray the lives of commuter cyclists in Austin,³³⁵ bike messengers in New York City,³³⁶ or lone bicyclists in Tulsa³³⁷ are not merely accounts of specific individuals or practices, they are part of a much larger effort to foster and preserve local practices, cultures, and customs that would otherwise disappear in the cracks of history. Like zines, these forms of media give a voice to regular people who will never compete in the Tour de France or have their face plastered on the cover of a bicycling magazine. Nevertheless, these people help to shape and define bike culture and their media serves as a way

³³³ Mike Scenery and Travis Fristoe, "Biking," *Drinking Sweat in the Ash Age*. Re-printed in *The Zine Yearbook*, Vol. 5. 2001, (Bowling Green: Become the Media), 82-83.

³³⁴ Engwicht, *Street Reclaiming*, 17.

³³⁵ *Bike Like U Mean It*, VHS, directed by Rusty Martin and Susan Kirr. (Austin: Conspiracy Films, 2002).

³³⁶ *Red Light Go*, DVD, directed by Manny Kivowitz, Ben Barraud and Toby Barraud (New York: KSK Studios, Inc., 2003).

³³⁷ *Biking in the Bible Belt*, DVD, directed by James Plumlee. (Self-produced, 2005).

to express their energy and passion for bicycling. Ultimately, these cyclists realize that their only voice is the one that they create for themselves.

5.3.1 Biking is fun!

Through an intense focus upon the ‘local’ and the subjective experiences of cyclists, bike media fill an important void in social theory—that of daily mobility and its relationship to everyday life: “the less glamorous practice of daily mobility has to date been little affected by developments in social theory.”³³⁸ According to urban critic Robin Law, daily mobility is at least partially ignored and/or misunderstood because predominant theories about mobility fail to take into account the relationship between mobility and pleasure:

In conventional transportation theory, transport is a derived demand; people undertake trips for some other purpose, not for the pleasure of movement itself. Yet this does not hold true for all trips. For a full understanding of mobility we must recognize the physical pleasure of moving bodily through space and exercising embodied skills (such as riding a powerful motorcycle), and the way that those pleasures are differently experienced and made available to men and women.³³⁹

If DIY media devoted to bicycling can be viewed as theories of mobility—and I would argue that they *are*—then the theories proposed by cyclists contextualize pleasure as a vital component of mobility. To put this in the simplest terms possible, cyclists love to talk about how much fun it is to ride a bike! However, even within this context there are detailed accounts offered by

³³⁸ Robin Law, “Beyond ‘women and transport’: towards new geographies of gender and daily mobility,” in *Progress in Human Geography* 23, no. 4 (1999): 574.

³³⁹ Law, 578.

cyclists as to *why* biking is so much fun. For example, cyclists frequently describe a sense of profound connection between their body and their machine—a feeling that can be heightened by leisurely rides through the country, or when one navigates dense urban terrain:

I can't think of times when the exhilaration of being alive rivals those fleeting moments, hurtling myself out of the monument circle, like a slingshot into downtown traffic, then pulling up on the pedals to rip my bike in front of a car in the passing lane, ducking beneath two parallel sideview mirrors, praying the doors stay shut, then reaching that calm moment of open space that floats the yellow to red lights.³⁴⁰

Exhilaration is a common form of pleasure derived from bicycling, but it is only one dimension of the pleasure that arises from an act that “gives the necessary mix of the physical and the cerebral.”³⁴¹ Often, such sentiments are tied into larger narratives of freedom and expression that present biking as a positive alternative to the confines of the city:

Even Columbus looks better on the back seat of a bike and all my fears get washed away in a stream of blinking lights and the concrete strip below seems less like a noose and more like a tie that binds or at least a tourniquet. It's been such a hard season and the bridges we burned might be all we had to keep us from drowning. But at least we had this time; and I'd like to think we're better off for it...³⁴²

In this sense, the pleasure of biking is often tied to romantic view of the world, both in terms of one's disposition toward freedom/aesthetics and also with respect to the literal romance between

³⁴⁰ Scott Spitz, “Nobody Moves, Nobody Gets Hurt,” in *Leapfrog #7*.

³⁴¹ Scenery and Fristoe.

³⁴² Defiance, Ohio, “Bikes and Bridges,” *Share What Ya Got* (Bloomington: Friends and Relatives Records, 2004). Sound recording, LP.

bicyclists: “It’s the immediacy that I fell in love with, but I find the sustainability and physical interdependence quite sexy, as well. In Simone DeBeauvoir’s books, lovers ride bikes. If you don’t know what that means, you’ve got both reading and riding to do.”³⁴³



Figure 15-Latterman Sticker

Pleasure is not a minor factor when it comes to the ways in which cyclists describe their experience of riding, and these emotions provide fodder for a great deal of bike advocacy. The notion that things “could be so much better on our wheels” has been translated into widely used slogans, such as “Put the Fun Between Your Legs!,” and the proliferation of images/phrases that reflect the joys of cycling.³⁴⁴ The combination of such texts and images ultimately frame cycling as a pleasurable alternative to cars, which is an important part of making cycling

³⁴³ Scenery and Fristoe.

³⁴⁴ Red monkey, “Bike Song,” *Difficult is Easy* (Bayonne, NJ: Troubleman Unlimited Records, 1998). Sound recording. LP.

attractive to people that might otherwise be unconvinced by arguments that pertain to sustainability, health, or the use/misuse of space. This shift is a vital way in which to show people that “you can do amazing things on a bike that you can’t do in a car.”³⁴⁵ In a recent anthology entitled *Bicycle Love: Stories of Passion, Joy, and Sweat*, Dan Trabue eloquently expresses this sentiment:

I’ve entered into the community that I was never truly apart from except in prisons of my own creation. In traveling this path, I’ve had to move deliberately in a direction opposite from the norm and accepted wisdom, but I’ve not been alone. I ride upstream with all of nature and the goodwill of my friends who wish to break away from the foolishness of man. On my bicycle, I’ve found freedom and more. With my two-wheeled connection to the world, I’ve no reason to ever be caged again, and that’s been my salvation.³⁴⁶

5.4 CONCLUSION

The growing popularity of biking in the DIY community demonstrates how the convergence of politics and independent media can bring about cultural shifts in the ways that people negotiate their relationships to transportation, car culture, and everyday life. While these shifts have resulted in the creation of new politicized identities for cyclists who produce independent media, they have also prompted individuals to become involved with other aspects of bike advocacy such as Critical Mass, the creation and/or distribution of other forms of alternative media, such

³⁴⁵ Ziegler, 47.

³⁴⁶ Dan Trabue, “Surprised Into Flight,” in *Bicycle Love: Stories of Passion, Joy, and Sweat*, ed. Garth Battista (New York: Breakaway Books, 2004), 11.

as books and/or political comics,³⁴⁷ and the development of community bike programs (which I will talk about in the following chapter). Far from insular, these facets of bike culture extend into other communities and serve as pedagogical tools by which people can educate and inspire others to become cyclists. Through the support of independently produced media, the popularity of cycling in the DIY community has helped to spawn an outgrowth of bike activism that has created new networks of activists, artists, and cyclists who are determined to forge major changes in both car culture and bike culture during the 21st century.

³⁴⁷ For more on pro-bike/anti-car political cartoons, see: Andy Singer, *CARtoons* (Prague: Carbusters. 2001); Avidor, *Roadkill Bill*.

6.0 CHAPTER SIX: COMMUNITY CYCLING PROJECTS

“The more people we can get on bikes and give them skills to fix them means less oil and money for the corporations. It means less environmental degradation. It means doing what we can in the belly of the beast to stop the war for oil. It means empowering people. It means community.”³⁴⁸

Space, according to George McKay, is one of the primary concerns for the DIY activist community, and the development of anti-roads protests, Reclaim the Streets (RTS) events, and wilderness defense campaigns during the 1990’s reveal the extent to which small groups of people can appropriate space and lodge symbolic battles against both corporations and capitalist institutions. While such practices serve an important critical function, they also demonstrate people’s desire to create and develop communities that can exist independently of, or cannot be reduced to, consumption and consumer ideology. This conception of the relationship between space and community is prevalent in our current political state, because activists must strive to both retain local cultures and simultaneously assert their rights to develop communities in the face of widespread corporate globalization and the increased flexibility of capitalism. While there are aspects of contemporary anti-globalization/anti-corporate movements that are historically unprecedented, struggles over the creation, development, and/or preservation of

³⁴⁸ Mary Blue, introduction to *Velorution, Vol 1.: The Unofficial Documents of a Bicycle Underground*, self-published, 2004. Zine.

communities have a long history that is rich with examples of groups who have both sought refuge in intentional communities and/or strived to foster alternative communities through the creation and development of community spaces. Unfortunately, this approach to social and cultural change is often overlooked because it is less glamorous and less ‘sexy’ than direct action protests and the ‘semiotic warfare’ of culture jammers. However, it is crucial for academics and cultural critics to recognize how smaller, localized struggles play an important role in the development of both alternative communities and a collective political consciousness.

Like other politicized networks of activists, the community of cyclists I have described thus far utilize various means in order to advocate their political and ethical ideas about cycling, but one of the challenges that they face is creating more tangible bonds with other communities and creating *lasting* alternatives that transcend the proliferation of independent media and monthly Critical Mass rides. In this chapter, I look at different community projects organized by cyclists throughout North America that essentially put ethics into practice through the creation of independent institutions, recycled bike initiatives, youth curricula, and various programs that pay specific attention to issues of gender, race, class, car culture, and the environment. Like many cycling organizations, the groups I am interested in have developed from the grassroots efforts of volunteers who yearn to make cities more bicycle-friendly and also strive to educate people about cycling and bicycle-related issues. However, there are important ways in which these organizations and institutions differ from ‘typical’ cycling organizations, including the environments in which the organizations are housed, the structure of the organizations, the methods employed by participants, the materials used, the stated mission of the organizations, and the people who make these institutions ‘work’. Put simply, the majority of these organizations are collectively run, based upon strong DIY ethics of self-empowerment and are

either explicitly or implicitly political. These institutions are vital because they present an alternative vision of what bicycling is, how it works, and what it can become.

6.1 COMMUNITY CYCLING PROGRAMS

In 1984, a non-profit community cycling organization called Bikes Not Bombs (BNB) was started by Carl Kurz and fellow anti-war cyclists in Boston who began to refurbish used bicycles and bicycle parts in order to provide material aid, in the form of bicycles, to poor Nicaraguans during the war with the Contra guerillas.³⁴⁹ With donations from cyclists in Canada, America, and Europe, BNB began to send bicycles to teachers and health workers in the country in order to both help relief efforts in war torn areas and intentionally “plant the seeds for bicycles to be part of the transportation system there.”³⁵⁰ Eventually, BNB began to incorporate an educational program with their refurbished bicycle initiative, wherein children and/or adults in Boston could learn how to rebuild and repair used bicycles while trading their ‘labor’ for a low cost or free bicycle that they built themselves. Over the years, BNB has donated over 22,000 bicycles and parts to foreign countries, they have created a vocational education program that teaches teenagers how to become bicycle mechanics, and they have a full-service bicycle shop that employs graduates of the vocational program. In addition, they organize tours, visit schools, and provide bicycle mechanic workshops for adults and teenage girls.

Throughout the 1990’s a number of non-profit community cycling organizations began to emerge that used Bikes Not Bombs’ recycling and ‘earn-a-bike’ (EAB) programs as models.

³⁴⁹ Sue Halpern, “Cycles of Change,” *Mother Jones*, March/April (2002): 3, <http://www.motherjones.com/commentary/commons/2002/03/cycles.html>.

³⁵⁰ Carl Kurz, quoted in Halpern.

ReCycle Ithaca's Bicycles, which began in 1990 under the name Operation Free Bike, and Recycle-a-Bicycle, which began in New York City in 1994, were two early examples of groups to follow in BNB's footsteps—similar organizations now exist in over 17 U.S. states and four Canadian provinces, including Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, and British Columbia. While there are certain variations in the format and design of these organizations, the majority of them are small operations that are staffed by volunteers who collect used and/or donated bikes, facilitate programs, and write grants. Most of these organizations begin in small storefronts, houses, or garages and with funding/luck eventually locate to larger buildings or warehouses in order to create more space for workstations and/or accommodate the massive amounts of bicycles/parts that can accumulate through donations. As with other non-profit, non-corporate organizations, funding, space, and volunteers are always in short supply. However, certain groups have been able to secure larger amounts of resources through their affiliation with more established non-profit organizations—especially those that work on transportation and/or environmental issues. Like BNB, certain organizations such as the Community Cycling Center (Portland), and Bike Again! (Halifax, Nova Scotia) offer a wide range of educational, safety, and training programs and have lent support to Public Use Bicycle programs, community art initiatives, conferences, and other activist projects. More often than not, the lack of available funds and/or volunteers severely limits the ability for organizations to develop programs that transcend their recycling and EAB initiatives. But despite these circumstances, groups like Free Ride! (Pittsburgh), Plan B (New Orleans), Asheville Recyclery (Asheville, NC), Le Club de velo Freewheels (Montreal), Bike Woks (Seattle), and the Bike Kitchen (San Francisco) have been able to successfully recycle/reuse literally tons of bicycles that would have otherwise been put into landfills and they have created spaces in which people can have free access to tools,

equipment, and volunteer assistance. More importantly, they have created programs that serve to empower people and facilitate the improvement of local communities.



Figure 16-Bikes Not Bombs 20th Anniversary Design

There are certainly community cycling organizations have little or no political agenda, but the majority of these groups are organized and developed by environmentalists, activists, and other politically-minded cyclists who see biking as either an alternative to, or a critical stance against, automobile transportation and car culture. Some groups are more overtly political and they contextualize their programs within a larger framework that addresses the environmental, economic, and social costs of automobility. Bikes Not Bombs is one such organization:

Addressing political issues is an integral part of BNB...all of our work is intended to support people's ability to choose safe, clean and sustainable forms of transportation, and to do so by cooperating across the boundaries of nationality, gender, race and class. Inevitably, therefore, by shipping bikes overseas to self-help groups in the coming year, while engaging the hearts and minds of young people in our own community, we will continue to oppose the dominance of militarism and energy monopolies over people's lives, no matter where they live.³⁵¹

³⁵¹ Scott Spitz, "Rick Jarvis," Interview by Scott Spitz, in *Leapfrog* #8, self-published.

While some groups shy away from an overtly political agenda, I would argue that most community cycling groups are inherently political because they actively critique the wastefulness of capitalism through recycling programs,³⁵² they actively promote an environmentally sustainable mode of transportation through education and ‘hands-on’ experience, and they advocate self-empowerment and participation as alternatives to consumption and alienation. In other words, even when groups are not intentionally engaged in what they perceive to be ‘political’ forms of struggle their agenda can still serve a political function, depending upon how other people understand, evaluate, and engage their agenda. I raise these issues because it is important to acknowledge the role of community building efforts within the larger context of political and/or social change, especially when such efforts incorporate educational and mentoring experiences that reach out to communities that are frequently underrepresented, misrepresented, or ignored by the largely White activist community. Programs that integrate people of different ages, races, classes, and genders are a vital means by which to create channels of communication and bonds of solidarity between different groups of people in a given community. While these relationships are not guaranteed to spawn a collective struggle for unity and social justice, the prospects for political mobilization are greatly improved by the existence of organizations that integrate pragmatic, skill-building initiatives with a wider vision of social change that recognizes the importance of youth education, everyday practices (such as transportation use), and attention to race, class, and gender dynamics.

³⁵² For example, in 2002, the Community Cycling Center in Portland, Oregon recycled 31,840 pounds of material and reused a total of 70,228 pounds—over 15 school buses in volume.

6.1.1 Issues of race and class in community programs

Transportation is a realm that is implicitly connected to issues of race and class.³⁵³ The ability to have access to, or choices about, transportation are necessarily dependent upon one's economic situation and, often, these economic factors are closely tied to issues of race; African-American urban communities, for example, are some of the poorest, most poverty stricken communities in the United States.³⁵⁴ While certain transportation options exist for people in poor and/or African-American neighborhoods, a lack of access to transportation resources are not unlike the disproportionate lack of access that African-Americans and poor people have to other basic, daily goods and services, such as automobile mechanics or grocery stores.³⁵⁵ Community cycling organizations provide a way in which to address such issues by offering free services and the use of both tools and resources that would otherwise be unavailable or cost too much money. Through these resources, transportation—in the form of bicycling—becomes more accessible to people who arguably need it the most. The organizations that intentionally facilitate such programs to poor and/or 'minority' communities are thus implicitly engaged with issues of race and class. According to the Dead or (A)live bicycle collective in Indianapolis, "any action involving bikes as transportation almost inherently involves addressing class issues, since transportation is harder to achieve if you are not of a more financially stable class. Our bike

³⁵³ *Highway Robbery: Transportation Racism & New Routes To Equity*, ed. by Robert D. Bullard, Glenn S. Johnson, and Angel O. Torres (New York: South End Press, 2004); RD Bullard and GS Johnson, *Just transportation: dismantling race and class barriers to mobility* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 1997).

³⁵⁴ Michael A. Stoll, "African Americans and the Color Line," published by the Russell Sage Foundation and the Population Reference Bureau, 2005; George C. Galster, "Housing Discrimination and Urban Poverty of African-Americans," *Journal of Housing Research* 2, no. 2 (1991): 87-119.

³⁵⁵ Shannon N. Zenk, et. al., "Neighborhood Racial Composition, Neighborhood Poverty, and the Spatial Accessibility of Supermarkets in Metropolitan Detroit," *American Journal of Public Health* 95, no. 4 (2005): 660-667.

giveaway program will be directly servicing the economically disadvantaged classes.”³⁵⁶ In other cities in North America, cyclists are similarly concerned with the creation of programs that cater to the needs of disenfranchised peoples and they use whatever means available in order to incorporate bicycling as part of a solution to everyday transportation problems for such communities. For example, The BikeShare program in Toronto recently partnered with three community centers in order to have BikeShare hubs accessible in low income areas, BikeAgain! in Halifax, Nova Scotia provides services for the immigrant population, and the Working Bikes Cooperative in Chicago works to recycle and distribute bike to persons in need.³⁵⁷ Recently, the Community Cycling Center in Portland (OR) developed their “Create a Commuter” program in which low-income adults are provided with fully-outfitted commuter bicycles, five hours of bicycle commute training, lights, a lock, a helmet, rain gear and “all the other accessories needed to be successful year-round commuters.”³⁵⁸ In an effort to reach those most in need of bicycles as a form of transportation, the Community Cycling Center has also worked with members of Dignity Village, an intentional homeless community that began as a mobile tent village in Portland.

Importantly, organizations like these transcend the notion of charity by allowing people to develop their own skills and feel a sense of accomplishment through their own labor. This has been an especially important feature of recycled bike and EAB programs that are explicitly created for young people in inner cities—whether they are facilitated in schools or at community bike spaces. Children who participate in these programs feel “a sense of accomplishment and are

³⁵⁶ Mary Blue and Andrew Lynn, *Velorution: The Unofficial Documents of a Bicycle Underground*, Vol. 1, self-published, 2004. Zine.

³⁵⁷ Blue and Lynn.

³⁵⁸ Community Cycling Center description of programs at: <http://www.communitycyclingcenter.org/programs.html>.

empowered by the skills acquired through their participation.”³⁵⁹ Young people, especially those considered to be ‘at-risk’ benefit from their participation in community cycling programs and ‘service-learning’ experiences³⁶⁰ that exist outside of school—especially when such programs are fun, interesting, and utilize ‘hands-on’ techniques. Hands-on atmospheres, like the one facilitated by community cycling programs, help to teach children self-discipline, patience, respect, and cooperation, which are values that are sometimes “hard to grasp in the traditional classroom.”³⁶¹ The processes of bicycle assembly, repair, and maintenance require a working knowledge of mathematics, engineering, and reasoning skills, which also serve to build children’s mathematical and engineering skills that are frequently neglected within educational settings that teach such skills without the use of tangible materials or without any real-world applications that young people might consider to be valuable.³⁶² Perhaps most importantly, children in the recycled bike and EAB programs learn to make connections between bicycling and other environmental and social issues that affect their community. Karen Overton, the co-founder of NYC’s Recycle-A-Bicycle reiterates this point: “Most people think that Recycle-A-Bike only teaches technical skills, but it’s much more than that. These kids are our future, and we hope we’re giving them the means to embrace and respect that future.”³⁶³

³⁵⁹ Susan C. Kinnevy, et. al., “BicycleWORKS: Task-Centered Group Work with High-Risk Youth,” *Social Work with Groups* 22, no. 1 (1999).

³⁶⁰ Nancy P. Kraft and Jim Wheeler, “Service-Learning and Resilience in Disaffected Youth: A Research Study,” a study prepared for the 2nd Annual International Service-Learning Research Conference, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, October 2002.

³⁶¹ Delphine Taylor, “Tools for Life,” *Transportation Alternatives Magazine*, Jul/Aug 1996, 12-13, <http://www.transalt.org/press/magazine/964JulAug/12-13toolsforlife.html>.

³⁶² Lisa M. Bouillion and Louis M. Gomez, “Connecting school and community with science learning: Real world problems and school-community partnerships as contextual scaffolds,” *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* 38, no.8 (2001): 878 - 898; LE Carlson and JF Sullivan, “Hands-on Engineering: Learning by Doing in the Integrated Teaching and Learning Program,” *International Journal of Engineering Education* 15, no. 1 (1999): 20-31; Gary Robert Muschla and Judith A. Muschla, *Hands-On Math Projects with Real-Life Applications* (New York: Jossey-Bass Press, 1996); G.S. Goodman, *Alternatives in Education: Critical pedagogy for disaffected youth* (New York: Peter Lang Press, 1999).

³⁶³ Karen Overton, quoted in Taylor.

Community cycling organizations that work with ‘at-risk’ children and teenagers, most of whom are poor and either African-American or Latino, recognize how bicycling programs must incorporate participation with pleasure and creativity. As a result, certain groups have tweaked the recycled bike/EAB model in order to create different programs that also incorporate artistic and creative practices that go beyond the basics of bicycle construction and maintenance. For example, Third Ward Community Bike Center in Houston, Texas organized an ArtBike program for 5th and 6th grade children from the Project Row Houses in which the children fixed up a fleet of bikes and designed paper-mache art helmets for use in the Martin Luther King Jr. Day parade. In addition, they host a “Chopper Club” for teenagers who learn bike repair and welding skills in order to create hybrid, motorcycle-esque “chopper” bicycles and “lowrider” bicycles. A similar program is also hosted for at-risk teenagers in San Francisco through a community cycling institution called the Bike Kitchen. Programs like these not only foster peer education and skill building, they provide excellent outlets for at-risk teenagers who might otherwise be uninvolved in after-school activities or have no creative outlets available to them. In addition, ‘lowrider’ and ‘chopper’ clubs are a way to make cycling a more attractive and relevant activity for teenagers who grow up in environments where automobile and bicycle modifications are exceedingly popular.³⁶⁴

³⁶⁴ Automobile modifications and ‘lowrider’ cars are very popular in African-American and Latino communities, especially those on the West coast. Lowrider bicycles have also been heavily popularized in Latino communities throughout the West and Southwest. For more on ‘lowrider’ culture, see Ben Chappell, “‘Take a Little Trip with Me’: Lowriding and the Poetics of Scale,” in *Technicolor: Race, Technology, and Everyday Life*, eds. Alondra Nelson, Thuy Linh N. Tu and Alicia Headlam Hines (New York: NYU Press, 2001).

6.1.2 Foreign aid

Community cycling organizations not only work across boundaries of race and class through the creation of programs in the United States, they also address such issues through their direct support for community projects in developing countries throughout Central America, the Caribbean and Africa. Bikes Not Bombs has been at the forefront of this movement from its inception, and since its initial demonstration of solidarity with groups opposed to the U.S. supported Contra efforts, BNB has not only shipped tens of thousands of bicycles to community bike projects in Nicaragua and El Salvador, it has also sent bikes and technical assistance to Haiti and the Dominican Republic.³⁶⁵

Along with Bike Works (Seattle) and Recycle-a-Bicycle, BNB has sent thousands of bicycles to Ghana, West Africa through the Village Bicycle Project (VBP), a project developed in 1999 in order to help create transportation options for the 99% of Ghana residents that cannot afford an automobile. The VBP has brought trained staff to work with communities in Ghana, they have created bicycle maintenance programs, and they build trailers and cargo bikes that improve “farm-to-market access for village growers that are stranded due to lack of public transport.”³⁶⁶ Recently, Emily Lin, a BNB trained instructor, started Earn-A-Bike programs in three communities in the area. In addition to the VBP in Ghana, there are other foreign bicycle projects that explicitly work with economically disenfranchised populations, including Maya Pedal, an indigenous organization in Guatemala that manufactures and distributes pedal-powered machines that shell and grind grain, power rope-pumps for well water extraction, de-pulp coffee and spin fruit blenders. The machines developed and proliferated by Maya Pedal are vital

³⁶⁵ Bikes Not Bombs, “About,” <http://www.bikesnotbombs.org/about.htm>.

³⁶⁶ Bikes Not Bombs, “International,” <http://www.bikesnotbombs.org/international.htm>.

resources in a country where an estimated 90% of indigenous peoples live below the poverty line, and “obstacles to economic independence and self-determination can be daunting.”³⁶⁷ Without the support of organizations like BNB, Bike Works, and Recycle-a-Bicycle, programs such as the VBP and Maya Pedal would not be able to develop some of the life-enriching programs that have been created in recent years.³⁶⁸ Through their support, these organizations demonstrate the fact that community cycling projects are not only valuable to poor and/or minority communities in North America—they can also create empowering alternatives for people in poor and/or developing countries.



Figure 17-Extracting Corn with a Machine Designed by Maya Pedal

³⁶⁷ Suzanne Van Dam, February, “Pedaling Out of Poverty: How one Guatemalan NGO is Helping Rural Communities Help Themselves,” 2002, <http://www.bikesnotbombs.org/maya-pedal.html>.

³⁶⁸ Bikes for Chiapas, a program supported by ReCycle Ithaca’s Bicycles, is another recent example of a community cycling project that crosses borders between North and South and provides support for political groups, <http://www.schoolsforchiapas.org/bikes/>.

6.2 COMMUNITY BIKE SPACES

In her book *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Iris Young claims that one of the features of ‘new’ social movements is their advocacy for *participatory institutions*: “rather than demand that the state provide more services or support policies, these movements instead have determined to develop more participatory institutions to provide services or promote political goals marginal to, or outside the authority of the state.”³⁶⁹ Within the small movement of cyclists who view bicycling as either a critique of car culture or part of a larger vision of progressive social change, the creation of participatory institutions has become a vital way in which cyclists can empower themselves, establish relationships that extend across race/class boundaries, and foster an alternative cycling culture based upon conviviality and DIY ethics.

There are different types of settings utilized by community cycling organizations that vary in size, shape, and design, and the spaces created by these groups essentially serve as a way in which the ethics behind cycling advocacy can be materialized and experienced by anyone who wants to participate. To put it another way, the spaces created by community cycling groups are not merely buildings that conveniently house bicycles, parts, and tools—although they necessarily have to serve that function—rather, they are environments that operate contrary to the logic of capitalism; cooperation is emphasized over hierarchy, participation takes the place of consumption, and ‘waste’ is turned into goods that are created through productive, rather than alienated, labor. In this regard, community bike spaces are not unlike other alternative institutions that operate contrary to, or in direct response to, the profit-based logic of capitalism, such as independent music venues and radical bookstores/infoshops. It is not surprising then that many of the same people who are involved in the development and organization of community

³⁶⁹ Young, 85.

bike spaces are, or have been, involved with other political and/or artistic participatory institutions. In certain circumstances there have been community bike projects that have developed in conjunction with, or based upon support from, such institutions. For example, in my hometown of Pittsburgh (PA), the community cycling institution called Free Ride! initially began in a building called ‘the Multitool’ that was adjacent to the collectively run show space called the Mr. Roboto Project—a DIY music venue that operates through membership.³⁷⁰ Free Ride! shared the space with a similarly emerging radical bookstore/infoshop called The Big Idea, and both projects were largely staffed by people who were involved with The Roboto Project in some capacity. In addition, Free Ride!’s rent costs were kept to a minimum through supplementary income made from bands that rented practice space in the basement of the Multitool. Since that time, both the Big Idea and Free Ride! have their own, larger spaces, and Free Ride! now utilizes part of a warehouse owned and operated by Construction Junction—a Home Depot-type store that exclusively sells surplus and used construction materials. Like the Mr. Roboto Project and The Big Idea, Free Ride! is not only an alternative institution that provides ‘services’ for an integrated activist and arts community, it also creates an important cultural space where volunteers, ‘regulars’, and newcomers can relate to one another as cyclists. In spaces like Free Ride! people have the opportunity to congregate, learn from their peers, and share both their experiences and perspectives on cycling. Through this process, cyclists have the opportunity to communicate with one another and develop a shared sense of community or cultural identity, which is extremely important in places where cyclists are scarce, disconnected

³⁷⁰ The Mr. Roboto Project (<http://www.therobotoproject.org>) was basically modeled after the 924 Gilman St. show space in Berkeley, CA. Shows at Roboto are open to the public, but people buy yearly memberships that are used to pay for the venue’s rent, bills, and maintenance. Any member can reserve an open day on the calendar on which they can host their own event, and they receive a discount on any event they attend. Shows rarely cost more than 5-6 dollars and bands are given the entirety of the money collected at the door, following the small percentage that is collected by Roboto. The space is run by an elected board and meetings are open to the public. For more on Gilman St, see: *924 Gilman: The Story So Far*, ed. Brian Edge (San Francisco: MAXIMUMROCKANDROLL, 2005)

from one another, and/or feel alienated by the norms of car culture and mainstream bike culture. As a result, community bike spaces can foster the same countercultural ethics and identity that are fostered by radical bookstores and music venues. Nick Colombo, a college student and volunteer with the Working Bikes Cooperative in Chicago reflects that community bike projects are a good introduction to the “subversive yet innocuous rebel subculture of people who like bikes.”³⁷¹

In these types of environments, the countercultural and/or political ethics of cycling are not forced upon people as much as they are reflected in how such spaces are organized, or what the volunteers are like. Since many community bike spaces are developed by people with countercultural lifestyles/ethics, the environments often look different, feel different, and *are* different than other cycling institutions. At the surface level, this might mean the presence of volunteers with tattoos or dreadlocks, or wall decorations made from oddly-shaped bike parts. But aside from different aesthetics, such spaces can create environments in which one can learn about different aspects of cycling from others who might have very different lifestyles, political beliefs, or interests. In many cases, these circumstances provide opportunities in which people can learn valuable information about bicycle commuting, bike culture, and ‘carfree’ transportation options from people that they might not typically meet at a traditional bike shop or bicycling event. For young people who participate in recycled bike/EAB programs, the presence of such volunteers can positively influence the ways in which they think about bicycling and transportation options. Rick Jarvis, a member of Bikes Not Bombs, reflects upon this situation in

³⁷¹ Elizabeth DiNovella, “Bikes for the World,” *Progressive* 68, no. 4 (2004), http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1295/is_4_68/ai_n6132180.

a recent interview: “many of the members of BNB are carfree, and this gives our youth the ability to see that there are adults who are not dependent on fossil fuels and car payments.”³⁷²

In the same way that neighborhoods require *local spaces* in which people can “assert their right to use streets and squares as an integral part of their home territories,”³⁷³ communities that are not reducible to geography, such as the cycling community, require spaces in which they can congregate, communicate, and develop their own cultural practices and ethics. Community bike spaces serve this function and they do so by fostering the ethics of participation, cooperation, and environmental sustainability. However, such institutions are not without their problems. The development of any ‘alternative’ institution necessarily involves a great deal of attention to issues of behavior and conduct that can, and do, arise. Sometimes, issues like ‘bad behavior’ or the theft of tools (for example) can be easily resolved through structural changes or by tweaking policies. But other issues that affect the social and cultural dynamics of a space, such as gender, are more complicated.

6.3 GENDER ISSUES AND BIKE CULTURE

Despite the fact that women share a large burden of the responsibilities involved with the use, and subsequent maintenance, of motor vehicles, the culture surrounding automobiles is one that has been historically dominated by and catered to men. With very rare exceptions, men own all of the automobile companies, they comprise the majority of the automotive workforce (production, sales, and mechanics), they monopolize the world of professional racing, and they are more prone to learn automobile maintenance from a friend or family member at some point

³⁷² Scott Spitz, interview with Rick Jarvis.

³⁷³ Engwicht, 17.

in their life. Moreover, their aggressive driving behaviors also create a dangerous climate for drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians.³⁷⁴ With all of the differences that I have addressed thus far between automobility and cycling, one might naturally assume that the norms of the bicycling community would be drastically different from that of car culture. However, some of the most predominant masculine norms of car culture are also evident within the cycling community, such as the ethos of competition, machismo, and the exclusivity of bicycle maintenance. In addition, the same masculine fantasies of sexuality, technological performance, and adventure that are the stock and trade for automobile marketers are largely reinforced through the imagery and discourses of cycling publications.

The implicit masculine norms of bicycle culture have thus created an environment where women are less prone than men to be involved in everyday cycling and more specifically, bicycle commuting.³⁷⁵ While there are other social and cultural factors that contribute to the gender divide amongst everyday cyclists,³⁷⁶ many female cyclists feel especially intimidated by the process of bicycle maintenance and this greatly affects their involvement in bicycle culture. Victoria, a bike mechanic and youth educator at N. Portland BikeWorks (Portland, OR) describes this situation in an interview from 2004:

I continually meet women that don't know how to fix their bikes, and it's not because they don't have an interest but because of the intimidation factor. I don't think that a lot of men understand what it's like to be intimidated because a lot of

³⁷⁴ Dwight A. Hennessy and David L. Wiesenthal, "Aggression, Violence, and Vengeance Among Male and Female Drivers," *Transportation Quarterly* 56, no.4 (2002): 65-75.

³⁷⁵ John Anderson, "Where are the Women?," in *Bicycling Life*, <http://www.bicyclinglife.com/NewsAndViews/Gender.html>; William E. Moritz, "A Survey of North American Bicycle Commuters," presented at the 1997 Transportation Research Board Meeting in Washington D.C. on January 15, 1997.

³⁷⁶ For example, "whether or not individuals choose cycling as a mode of transport to work depends in part on whether they are working within norms of presentation which allow them to feel comfortable arriving at work sweaty and dishevelled." Quoted in Law, 578.

men have been privileged, whether it's because they had an older brother who taught them about bikes, or they rode their BMX and had to learn to fix it when they were 14. But at 14, girls are encouraged to be pretty and look good for the boys. That's what our concentration is at that at point, but it's usually not sports or biking, unless your dad is into biking or your older brother is into biking. There's more guys doing it, there's more of a culture, and there's not this intimidation factor. Women are scared to ask questions, scared of looking stupid, and I want that to end.³⁷⁷

More often than not, the intimidation experienced by many female cyclists not only results from their lack of mechanical knowledge (which Victoria rightly acknowledges ascribes to male privilege) or a perceived lack of necessary skills, it also stems from negative experiences that novice cyclists have with bicycle mechanics and employees at bicycle shops—in many cases, female cyclists feel like they receive the same condescending treatment from male mechanics in bicycle shops as they do from male auto mechanics. Women are thus put in a position where they are forced to be reliant upon men in order to maintain their bicycles, which is a common frustration that faces women of all ages: “I hate always having to ask some boy how to do things.”³⁷⁸ In addition, the inability to maintain a bicycle can also raise other issues of safety that may be invisible to male cyclists. Elicia Cardenas, a bicycle mechanic and bike culture enthusiast, explains how this dynamic impacts beginner female cyclists: “I was afraid to ride my bike because what happens if I get a flat and I'm stuck somewhere and I don't know how to

³⁷⁷ Victoria (Tory) Bortman, interview by author, Portland, OR., August 5, 2004. At the time, Tory was the director of youth cycling education at N. Portland Bikeworks.

³⁷⁸ And A. Lusia, “Derailing Sexism: The Evolution of a Female Bike Mechanic,” *Critical Mass*, 32.

change it. That puts me in a potentially dangerous situation, whereas if I know how do deal with it, then I'm golden."³⁷⁹



Figure 18-Andalusia at Free Ride!

For Elicia and many other women that get involved in cycling, the process by which one learns how to diagnose and fix bicycle problems is not only about gaining a certain degree of autonomy and independence—both of which are stressed by all community cycling programs—it is also a way to empower oneself and challenge the gender dynamics involved in bicycle maintenance. Women who are involved with community cycling projects not only facilitate this process by providing access to tools, workshops, and learned staff-volunteers, they also recognize the importance of creating ‘female-only’ spaces in which women can work with one another without feeling like they are being judged or subject to the gaze of male counterparts—a feeling experienced by both beginners as well as female bike mechanics:

I would absolutely hate it when men would hang out waiting for their repairs. In fact, it was totally incapacitating for me and I would be physically incapable of

³⁷⁹ Elicia Cardenas, interview by author, Portland, OR., August 5, 2004. Elicia is a bike mechanic, spokeswoman for the Portland ZooBombers (at the time of this interview), and member of the Sprockettes; Portland's *only* synchronized, mini-bike dance team.

fixing the bike. It was kinda embarrassing because I felt like the men would watch over me cause they didn't actually think that a girl could fix the bike, and then I would get so nervous that I wouldn't be able to do it. They could have been watching just to learn how to do the repair, but I just couldn't deal with it.³⁸⁰

Unfortunately, And A. Lusia's experience as a female mechanic in both New York City and Pittsburgh is not unique. Within And A. Lusia's own bike zine, *Clitical Mass*, there are other stories that corroborate her sentiments, as well as those expressed by female cyclists throughout North America. In one story, a woman named Adrian describes her encounter with a man who was questioning her ability to repair her wheels:

'Are you re-spoking that wheel?'

'Yeah,' I reply.

'You know, you won't be able to do that.'

I stare blankly, not understanding, and he continues.

'Where did you get those spokes?' he asks.

'Up front.' It had taken forever to sort through the unorganized boxes of spokes to find the right size for my wheel.

'Well, spokes are different lengths for different wheels,' J. explains, 'and you have different sizes there. It won't work,' he concludes in the patient voice of an adult speaking to a small child....J. continues, 'Re-spoking wheels is *very* hard.

Only a couple of people I know [both males, I realize as we talk] have been able to do it...'

³⁸⁰ And A. Lusia, *Clitical Mass*, 33. Also see: See Suzana Danuta Walters, "Visual Pleasures: On Gender and Looking," in *Material Girls: Making Sense of Feminist Cultural Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 50-66.

I finally ditched him, and both wheels have all new spokes. But I definitely felt shitty about the whole encounter...I guess it's just part of being a girl in bikeland (although bike girlfriends of bike dudes don't seem to have the same problems I've had), but I'm sick of it. Hey, bike boys, do me a favor. Just lemme do my bike girl thing. 'Cause even though I don't have a penis, that doesn't mean I can't use a wrench.³⁸¹

In situations like these, the gendered dynamics of bicycle maintenance reflect larger issues of male superiority and machismo that are unfortunately prevalent amongst cyclists—a scenario that Alex McFarland, a mechanic at N.Portland BikeWorks, casually refers to as the 'dude factor'.³⁸² For lack of a better term, the 'dude factor' describes the perpetuation of male machismo in bike culture that is prevalent amongst certain groups of men ('dudes') and not others. Unlike the performance or physique-based bravado displayed by male athletes, the machismo of bike culture can be based upon aggression, one's mechanical expertise and/or one's involvement with an 'exclusive' cycling group such as bike messengers, Alley Cat racers,³⁸³ and/or fixed-gear cyclists.³⁸⁴ Often times, the 'dude factor' is merely a form of biker elitism that can be attributed to male cyclists who are preoccupied with who has "the coolest bike, or the

³⁸¹ Adrian, "Bike Girl Blues," in *Critical Mass*, 46.

³⁸² Alex McFarland, interview by author, Portland, OR., August 5, 2004. Alex is a bike mechanic and bike polo enthusiast.

³⁸³ Alley Cat races are urban bike races that have no specific route, with only a beginning and ending point. Common within the bike messenger community, Alley Cat races demonstrate people's speed, their knowledge of a given city, and their ability to skillfully maneuver urban traffic. See *Red Light Go*.

³⁸⁴ 'Fixed-gear' bicycles, also known as 'track bikes' or 'fixies', are bicycles designed for racing on bicycle tracks, or velodromes. As one of the earliest 'types' of bicycles invented, fixed gear bikes are designed in a way where one cannot stop pedaling—the gears stay in constant motion in order to create maximum speed. These bikes became popular in the bike messenger communities in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco because of their speed, maneuverability, and lightness. Because they have no brakes, or are outfitted with one 'emergency' brake, fixed gear bikes require a great deal of skill in order to be successfully ridden in an urban environment. Over the years, fixed gear cycling has spawned its own devoted subculture. This subculture is sometimes perceived of as 'exclusive' or 'elitist' by outsiders.

coolest track bike.”³⁸⁵ Regardless of the cause, there is a palatable male disposition that marginalizes many women in the cycling community and has also contributed to problems that have arisen within certain Critical Mass rides on the West coast.³⁸⁶

In response to these gender dynamics, many cycling institutions host weekly or monthly ‘female only’ nights in which women can learn bicycle maintenance and create their own sense of community with other female cyclists. The creation of such spaces not only serves as an empowering alternative to the masculinized environment of bicycle shops—where women are often assumed to be unknowledgeable about the workings of a bicycle or incapable of fixing their own machines—the female-only environment also creates a space where women do not have to contend with the intimidation factor that may result even within an ‘alternative’ setting:

It [Plan B] can be an intimidating space—messy, dusty, not well-lit, in a big funky warehouse. Lots of guys in various states of dude-ness. Issues of gender have been raised and addressed in a variety of ways; right now we have a women-only day twice a month and it’s great that we have a good mix of people involved in general, all the time. Still, there is no denying that it can be intimidating to walk into a place like that, for anyone, especially if you don’t know anyone else there and/or don’t know much about bikes.³⁸⁷

Despite the fact that community bike spaces can be intimidating to novices and are not free from the gendered norms of Western culture, they directly challenge the gender hierarchies of bike culture by creating environments in which gender issues are either directly or indirectly addressed by the volunteers. More importantly, such hierarchies are implicitly challenged

³⁸⁵ Alex McFarland, interview.

³⁸⁶ Similar to the ‘dude factor,’ the “testosterone brigade” was/is a term used in reference to groups of male cyclists who disrupt Critical Mass rides with their aggressive behavior. See *Critical Mass*, 92, 103, 141, 234, 246.

³⁸⁷ John Gerken, “Plan B,” *Chainbreaker* #1, 28.

through the development of programs and/or community spaces in which women play an integral role. Based upon my research and interviews, I would say that women seem to be more involved with bicycle co-ops and community cycling projects than many other facets of bicycling.³⁸⁸ This is not surprising given the fact that many women helped to either found, organize, or facilitate the growth of bike spaces/cooperatives throughout the country. The egalitarian structure of such institutions not only encourages women to participate, it has also helped to foster a new wave of female bike mechanics. In certain cities, such as Portland (OR)—a city known both for its excellent bicycling infrastructure and creative bike culture—female bike mechanics are prevalent in a number of local institutions, including the Community Cycling Center and City Bikes. N.Portland BikeWorks provides an even rarer example given the fact that the majority of the collective is owned and operated by women. Kim Freer, the co-founder of N. Portland BikeWorks and organizer of the Portland Radical History Bike Tour comments on the environment in Portland:

There are so amazing women here that it's absolutely remarkable, it's really unbelievable actually. It's very welcoming, especially with this shop. I mean, our entire shop are women, except for Alex, and that's unheard of in this country, let alone the world. I've talked to people in other countries and they can't believe it, they say 'you really have six women and one guy?' Our entire board of

³⁸⁸ This is not a quantitative statement, merely an observation based upon extensive conversations, email exchanges, and interviews with people who are involved with community cycling projects and bicycle co-ops. In addition, one should not assume that female cyclists are somehow limited to participation in either community groups or co-ops. There are numerous examples of female cycling clubs, racing teams, and bike-oriented groups including (to name just a few): the Bay Area Velo Girls (a road racing club for girls and women), the WOMBATS (Women's mountain biking and tea society), The Cycling Sisters (Chicago cycling group), the Sprockettes (Portland synchronized mini-bike dance team), Girl Bike (online female cycling resource), and Girl Groove (online magazine for female cyclists). See bibliography for web addresses.

directors were all queer women at one point, two were transgendered. We're this very different, amazing conglomeration of people.³⁸⁹

N.Portland BikeWorks is certainly an exceptional example, but female bike mechanics have become more visible within bike culture and community bike spaces have undoubtedly contributed to this trend. This is not to say that gender is no longer an issue or that female cyclists/mechanics have not fought for the recognition they deserve. Rather, the presence of female mechanics and strong female role models in community bike spaces have challenged gender dynamics, and as a result, more women are becoming involved in bicycle mechanics, everyday cycling, and bike commuting. There are many positive gains made by female cyclists and female mechanics, but we are still a long way from having gender not be a factor in Western bike culture, never mind other parts of the world where there are social and cultural barriers that prevent women from cycling.³⁹⁰ Gender is slowly being acknowledged as an important issue for cyclists and community bicycling organizations to address. Female-only mechanic nights, women's bicycling workshops, and programs such as Girls In Action—a series of classes, hosted by BNB, that is designed to introduce 10-13 year old girls to mechanics and bike riding—are an important part of this process. Such programs have created spaces in which women can empower themselves, validate their own experiences, and develop their own vision of bicycling and bike culture. But dialogue is another part of this process and both women and *especially* men must learn how to engage in constructive, open dialogue about the gendered dynamics of bicycling. If there is to be any substantial transformation in the gender norms of the cycling

³⁸⁹ Kim Freer, interview by author, Portland, OR., August 6, 2004. Kim is a bike mechanic and co-founder of N.Portland BikeWorks. She also hosts a radical history tour of Portland, via bicycle. She authored an audio version of the tour and an accompanying booklet entitled *Portland Radical History Tour*, available through Microcosm Publishing, <http://www.microcosmpublishing.com>.

³⁹⁰ Sylvia Welke and Jennifer Allen, "Cycling Freedom for Women," *Women & Environments International Magazine*, *Women & Environments International Magazine* 62/63 (2004): 34-37.

community, men must learn how to be self-reflexive about issues of gender and they need to listen to women who consistently deal with challenges that male cyclists do not face: “biking *is* different for us women, from trying to get respect as a mechanic or even as a customer in a bike shop, to being taken seriously when we apply for jobs as messengers, deliverers, or in shops as mechanics, and even (surprisingly in this day and age) how we dress on bikes.”³⁹¹

6.4 CONCLUSION

As a vital part of the emerging bike culture in North America, community cycling organizations serve a number of important functions. At the most basic level, these groups develop creative, pragmatic, and effective ways in which to promote cycling, teach maintenance/repair and make transportation options accessible to anyone who wants to learn. Through the proliferation of recycled bike/EAB programs and women’s mechanic workshops, cyclists have not only developed unique ways in which to educate youth, address gender issues and empower economically disadvantaged peoples, they have done so with the use of materials that would otherwise serve as fodder for dumpsters, landfills, and incinerators. Moreover, the participatory dynamics fostered by these community projects demonstrate the capacity for people to create non-hierarchical, ‘Do It Yourself’ organizations that put the ethical and political dimensions of cycling into practice.

Many of these groups are explicitly political, and their support for foreign cycling programs, local community initiatives and youth education reveals the extent to which they contextualize bicycle as part of a wider critique of car culture, oil-based technologies, and the

³⁹¹ Shelly, *Chainbreaker #2*.

profit incentive of capitalism. But even in cases where organizations are not overtly political, their agenda implicitly critiques the wastefulness of consumer culture and their support for cycling helps to promote cycling as a pragmatic and enjoyable alternative to unsustainable modes of transportation. In many ways, even the most politically benign community cycling projects do a better job of utilizing resources, empowering people, and communicating across race and class barriers than most overtly political organizations of similar size—especially those of the radical Left. Race, gender, and class are frequently lauded as relevant issues by radical Leftists despite the fact that the movement continues to largely attract people who are white, male, young, and middle-class. This is not to disregard the efforts of the radical Left, but merely to point out how seemingly ‘apolitical’ community projects can potentially build bonds with communities that might serve an important political function in the future. To put this another way, those who desire true revolutionary change must first learn how to communicate and cooperate with people of races, classes, and genders that are different from their own. The development of ‘hands-on’ community programs and participatory cultural spaces—like the ones I have just described—are progressive ways in which to work towards such goals.

7.0 CHAPTER SEVEN: BIKEFEST AND BEYOND

*“...and that’s why bikes are cool.”*³⁹²

In June 2005, cyclists in Pittsburgh held BikeFest, which was a ten day series of independently-hosted bicycling events throughout the ‘Steel City.’ BikeFest was modeled after Bike Summer, a month long (roughly) festival of bicycling events that has been hosted in a different city each summer since 1999, including San Francisco, Chicago, Vancouver (Canada), New York City, Washington D.C., and recently, Los Angeles. Like Bike Summer, the goals of BikeFest were to raise public awareness about cycling, bring the cycling community closer together, and get beginner cyclists out on the streets in order to have fun and feel comfortable on their wheels. Some of the events planned were a moonlight scenic ride, an “alleycat” race, a women-only ride over various Pittsburgh bridges, a group ride to a Pittsburgh Pirates game, a radical history tour, an outdoor screening of *Pee Wee’s Big Adventure*, a tour of urban farms, and various repair workshops at Free Ride! Despite being busy with this project, I was excited about the event so I agreed to co-write the press release and do some basic public relations work—and I happily volunteered to lend local bands my PA for the party that was planned for the night of Critical Mass. During the organizational meetings that preceded the event there was a lot of enthusiasm about the fact that this type of event had never happened before in Pittsburgh’s history. There

³⁹² Hilary Buttenfield, from a conversation with the author.

was also a level of underlying anxiety about whether events would be attended, whether there would be unforeseen problems (such as bad weather, problems with police, etc.), and whether people in the general public would even notice our increased presence on the streets.

On the first night of BikeFest I went to the screening of two films; the recently debuted, *Still We Ride*, and a short 'in house' film produced by New York City's direct action environmentalist group, Time's Up! (which was accompanied by a talk from one of Time's Up!'s coordinators). The night went off without a hitch and the 30 or so people in attendance got to experience a glimpse of the excitement, frustrations and challenges that face bicycle advocates in New York City. As I walked the few blocks home from the screening, I remembered conversations that I had the previous summer with cyclists who had attended the massive Critical Mass ride that took place during the Republican National Convention. They had told me about the ride, and I had also read a number of articles about it on IndyMedia, but none of these accounts were able to prepare me for the scenes in *Still We Ride* that showed thousands of elated cyclists taking over the streets of Manhattan in celebration and protest of the RNC, "Dubya," and the war in Iraq. Similarly, nothing could have braced me for the sight of police swarming and physically accosting cyclists, seizing bicycles from arrestees, and literally *sawing* through locks in order to steal bikes that were not being used by anyone on the rides. I thought about the lunacy of seizing 338 bikes for "evidence" and how the 264 people arrested that night (one of the biggest mass arrests in New York City's history) must have been asking themselves the same question that propelled my interest in this project: why is my presence on the street such a threat to other people? There are a host of poorly argued reasons that one could use in order to justify these arrests, regardless of whether one described the ride as a celebration of bicycling or as a peaceful expression of democratic dissent. Either way, those cyclists had the right to be on the

street and the police used both unwise judgment and criminal tactics in their disruption of an event that had taken place for ten years without such unnecessary confrontation. The judge who presided over the ensuing court cases agreed, and he sided with cyclists who were unjustly arrested and had their property stolen without provocation.³⁹³ More importantly, the judge refused to grant the city's appeal for an injunction against Critical Mass and ruled that cyclists did not need a permit in order to ride.³⁹⁴

As I thought about the issues raised in the film, I wondered about the prospects for cyclists in this city and whether BikeFest would prove to be a success. But as I evaluated the situation, I became incredibly aware of how the very existence of BikeFest was a success in and of itself. The success of the event could not be measured by the numbers of people at specific rides or by the amount of media coverage garnered, rather, it was successful because of what was taking place on even the first night. Cyclists in this town, who even 5 years ago were scarce, were becoming aware of themselves as a community of people with common interests that transcended their mere love of bicycles—they were engaged with issues that pertained to political activism, the public sphere, and the ability for people to use bicycles as something more than a form of transportation. Through the films, cyclists from other cities were communicating with cyclists in this region and as a result people were become educated, inspired, and eager to *do something*. In chapter four, I talked about how media can have this exact effect on communities of cyclists and I was not only experiencing that through the film screening, I also experienced it when one of the directors of *Still We Ride* gave me a copy of the zine he had worked on, following a brief conversation that we had about community bicycling programs. As

³⁹³ United States District Court Southern District of New York, Rebecca Bray, Thomas Stephanos, Justin McSimov, Dan Fennessey, and Allen Regar (plaintiffs) vs. The City of New York, Raymond Kelly (Police Commissioner of the New York City Police Department), New York City Police Department, October 28, 2004.

³⁹⁴ The permit issue is still tangled up in court and is especially problematic for *any* New York City residents who choose to demonstrate their dissent in public—not just cyclists. For more details, see *Still We Ride*.

it turns out, that zine helped me get in touch with other cyclists throughout the country and it greatly supplemented my research for chapter six—providing information that I was unable to obtain through numerous searches and interviews. In turn, this project will undoubtedly shed some light on particular issues for another cyclist who is motivated to *do something* with that knowledge. However small it may be, this emerging network of people who are involved with bicycles and alternative media are evolving into something larger, more complex, and more motivated to start community bicycling programs, host bicycling events, produce media, stage car-free demonstrations, and/or promote cycling in whatever capacity they can.

On the day of Critical Mass, I blew out my tire and tube on the way to the ride, so I borrowed a car in order to bring my PA to Free Ride! for the party that would take place later in the day. After leaving my home a while later, I was at a stoplight on the corner of two of Pittsburgh's busier streets (Penn and Fifth), thinking deeply about the irony of my life, when all of a sudden a flood of cyclists began to emerge from the side of my view. I saw lots of my sweaty friends cruising by, and I saw just as many unfamiliar, smiling faces that comprised the dense mass of over 250 cyclists—which made it the largest Critical Mass in Pittsburgh's history. The whole scene did not last that long, but in that time, I had the chance to look around at the faces of drivers that surrounded me. Aside from a few visibly upset faces, most of the drivers looked confused, uncertain, and/or pleasantly surprised. Oddly enough, being in a car gave me enough distance from the pack in order to watch everything unfold, and that experience—being a driver in the midst of Critical Mass—allowed me to watch other cyclists transform that space from a notoriously dangerous intersection to a mobile celebration, an experiment in living. I wondered how many onlookers on the route saw bicyclists in a different light that afternoon, or how many cyclists in that crowd would have their view of the city forever changed. Most of all,

I wished that I was in that pack instead of being stuck in a car, contemplating the politics of space from a safe, enclosed distance.

The reason I bring up a few of my experiences with BikeFest is not only because it serves as a nice chronological bookend from the events of 1890 that I described in the introduction, but also because the event helped to give this research a tangible referent that is often lacking when one engages in a year long computer sitting marathon. More importantly, I call attention to this topic because events like BikeFest and Bike Summer are excellent examples of how DIY ethics can be utilized in order to raise consciousness about issues that affect everyone (such as transportation and the environment) and to create opportunities for communities to emerge and/or develop in ways that are not dependent upon consumption. While this might seem like a banal or insignificant point to cynical readers, I think it is an extraordinarily important factor to consider within the contexts of ideology, culture, and political mobilization. To put this in terms that would make Guy Debord proud, we have underestimated the effects of the capitalist spectacle to such a degree that we are almost incapable of recognizing how few of our engagements with people and our material environments are not dictated by its ideology.

Whereas our survival in a capitalist society has always been based upon our forced compliance with a system in which we collectively rent out our time, bodies, and labor in exchange for money, we have only recently (historically speaking) begun to experience a way of life in which our labor, our leisure, *and* our distinctive cultural practices have been commodified and absorbed into the spectacle of capitalism. As I mentioned in chapter three, this situation is compounded by the basic lack of space that people have in order to congregate, communicate, and create with one another. The preservation and/or development of cultural practices requires spaces that can be catered to the specific needs of a group and it also requires spaces that are

non-exclusive, democratic, and free. I am not suggesting that we need to return to the ‘good old days’ when there was an all-inclusive, democratic public sphere that produced vital political discourse and civic culture, because not only did it never exist, the perpetuation of such discourse feeds into neo-conservatives’ misguided nostalgia for a fictitious past where the town square was thriving, men were men, women were silent, poor people were crazy, and black people shut the hell up.³⁹⁵ What I am suggesting is more in concert with radical criminologists, Marxist geographers, architects, urban critics, and anti-globalization activists who all point out the ways in which both public spaces and “*subaltern counter-publics*” that foster localized or radical cultural practices—such as show spaces, political meeting houses, and community gardens—are being systematically marginalized, policed, and eradicated.³⁹⁶ Rather than focusing our efforts on the preservation of public spaces and counter-public spheres, we now have an influx of corporate coffee shops, urban malls, and commercial properties that are as about as inclusive to ethnic, radical, or localized cultures as suburban country clubs are to Muslims. Without non-commercially oriented spaces in which to congregate, where do people develop their cultural practices and identities...the mall? Starbucks? And without these shared cultural experiences, how can people even begin to find common ground on political issues? Furthermore, without social space in which to communicate about ideas that are liberal, ‘alternative,’ or radical, how do Leftists politically mobilize? Interestingly, the religious, radical Right does not have this problem for two reasons; the first is that their morals and cultural practices are the standards by which ‘normal’ is measured, and the second reason is because they have effectively utilized churches in order to develop cultural practices/identities and politically

³⁹⁵ Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” in *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 69-98.

³⁹⁶ Fraser, 81.

mobilize. I give them credit for this achievement, but I also recognize that it is very difficult to shut down a church or arrest a Christian activist for breeding radicalism, but it is all too easy to incarcerate a Leftist activist or shut down a public space, meeting house, music venue, or urban garden for the same reason.³⁹⁷

One of the reasons I have thus privileged the ‘bicycling counterculture’ in this project is not only because it has an astute analysis of the relationship between space, culture, and ideology, but because their ethics, tactics, media, and organizational structures are either informed by, or analogous to, the politics of the radical Left and the attitude of the largely underground, DIY community. Within these interrelated communities, I have found (in both this research and in my life) a necessary spirit of adventure, a healthy distrust for authority, a creative form of pragmatism, an intelligent critique of capitalism, and a sense of hope that is sorely lacking in contemporary politics. As a result, I have ultimately privileged not only the bicycling counterculture but also the larger DIY activist/artist community, and I would like to reflect on why I made those decisions.

7.1 REFLECTIONS ON DIY POLITICS AND ACTIVISM

According to Stephen Duncombe, “people become political through a socialization process....there is such a thing as a deviant political career and underground culture can be a stage in it.”³⁹⁸ I would go a step further and suggest that underground culture is often a *crucial* stage in one’s political development. This is not to say that people who never identified with

³⁹⁷ If certain spaces cannot be effectively policed or shut down, the occupants of such spaces are often subjected to the fullest brutality of the authorities. The bombing of the MOVE house in Philadelphia is a perfect example of this tactic. For more on this, see MOVE, *25 Years on a MOVE* (Philadelphia: MOVE/First Day, n.d.)

³⁹⁸ Duncombe, *Notes*, 181.

underground culture are any less knowledgeable about the politics and methods embraced by the underground. Rather, people who participate in underground culture are often exposed to different political ideals, lifestyle practices, and DIY ethics that are not usually advocated by schools, parents, politicians, or the mainstream press. In addition, through the promotion of DIY, participatory ethics and anti-authoritarian messages, underground culture provides an important alternative to the passivity and malaise encouraged by both consumer culture and the corporations that target young people with reptilian tenacity.

With the exception of children who are raised in progressive schools or reared by liberal parents, there are an increasing number of young people in our country who are not taught anything substantial about class struggle, sexism, homophobia, corporate greed, or military conflict. This is especially true for White people who are raised in suburban bubbles where ‘problem’ teachers are fired, ‘inappropriate’ materials are banned from the curriculum, history is presented as a conflict-free continuum of random events, and people are more worried about football than the legions of privileged children that we set loose after high school who both lack the ability to understand their position of privilege and/or have no realistic knowledge about the problems that face most people in the world.³⁹⁹ Underground culture is certainly not a cure for such nurtured ignorance, but it is an important avenue for such people to get exposed to issues and ideas that would normally exist outside of their paradigm. I raise this point because cultural critics often point to White (also read bourgeois or elite) culture as being the breeding ground—if not the source—for heteronormativity, racism, ethnocentricity, and classism. If these claims

³⁹⁹ Henri Giroux, “Schooling and the Culture of Positivism: Notes on the Death of History.” *Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope: Theory, Culture, and Schooling : A Critical Reader, The Edge, Critical Studies in Educational Theory* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 3-34.

have any merit, and I would argue that they do, then we should encourage everything and anything that initiates a break with those paradigms.

Like Duncombe, I am weary of the capacity for alternative media to “sublimate anger that otherwise might have been expressed in political action.”⁴⁰⁰ Many facets of alternative media and underground culture unfortunately reproduce some of the worst consumer-oriented, egocentric values perpetuated by the mainstream culture industry. Political lyrics can easily become a substitute for political mobilization, zines can become just another form of passive communication, direct action can be self-congratulatory, and countercultural ethics can become interchangeable with the slogans produced by advertising agencies. However, we also need to recognize the fact that political action results from political consciousness, which ultimately stems from education, experience, communication, and most importantly, a break with the apolitical, ideological norms of capitalist society. As a result, we cannot afford to dismiss underground culture as a mere distraction, because the artistic, musical, and activist communities that comprise this culture have produced many leaders and participants of today’s burgeoning social movements.

Cultural and political critics often scoff at the influence of underground culture on activism, and worse, many of them condemn such activities as mere bourgeois decadence. The problem is, you cannot criticize people for being privileged and ignorant and simultaneously criticize some of *few* avenues by which the same people can become self-reflexive, conscious, and empowered. To use economic terms, it is almost as if cultural/political critics expect tangible political returns on the subcultural or countercultural investments of our youth, lest they be deemed failures. When we begin to exclusively value cultural practices based upon their

⁴⁰⁰ Duncombe, *Notes*, 190.

perceived level of political relevance, we are engaged in an “instrumental” approach to culture, which Jonathan Sterne identifies as being problematic because “it carries with it a reactive notion of politics and a deferral of social and political imagination. It reduces what ought to be to what is.”⁴⁰¹ Just as I believe that it is irresponsible for academics and activists to implicitly praise the efforts of people involved in underground culture, I also think it is wrong to metaphorically cut off the arms of people who we perceive to be patting themselves on the back. Rather than wasting our time berating the depoliticized aspects of underground culture, we should acknowledge the positive influence it can have on activism and community involvement. More importantly, we (scholars, activists, and teachers) should figure out ways to in which to help such links develop and evolve.

7.2 THE PROSPECTS FOR RESISTANCE

It is important for academics and activists to continue studying and *producing* discourses of resistance that challenge injustice. In doing so, we must transcend the reductive binary that positions *action* on one side and *reflection* on the other. People contribute to such discourses and narratives not because it is an easier task than engaging in “*real*” action, but because narratives and discourse serve a very *real* function—they are educational, inspirational, and they help to transform identities within an ideological field where signs “can be discursively re-articulated to construct new meanings, connect with different social practices, and position social subjects differently.”⁴⁰² The production of dialogue and media allow activists to assert collective

⁴⁰¹ Jonathan Sterne, “The Burden of Culture,” in *Aesthetics of Cultural Studies*, ed. Michael Berube (Forthcoming from Basil Blackwell), 82.

⁴⁰² Holly Kruse “Subcultural Identity in Alternative Music Culture,” *Popular Music* 12, no. 1 (1993): 34.

identities with people in their own community and in communities that they are physically or ideologically distanced from. While these sorts of identity and understanding do not necessarily precede collective forms of resistance, they are integral to the establishment of organized political momentum. In other words, the development of collective identity—even in small groups—is sometimes misinterpreted to be the end all, be all, goal of political discourse. While we obviously need to find communities that we can call our own, we must also mobilize with others who may differ from us in terms of their interests, dispositions, or person. In this regard, communication is crucial, as are local struggles and engagements with issues that affect our everyday lives—such as transportation.

Contemporary political analysts in both the activist and academic communities have developed such nuanced and abstract vocabularies for analyzing issues that they tend to ignore basic, everyday aspects of life that can greatly shape one’s relationship to their community, their city, and their culture. In response to this scenario, I think we should pay more attention to activist communities that address immediate, everyday needs while they simultaneously address wider political issues. The Black Panthers understood these dynamics in a profound way and the community programs developed by the Panthers, including free health clinics, free food programs, and their famous school breakfast programs, catered to the immediate and urgent needs of their community—needs which were described by Huey Newton as implicitly political: “The people have been very aware of the true definition of politics: politics are merely the desire of individuals and groups to satisfy first, their basic-needs—food, shelter and clothing, and security for themselves and their loved ones.”⁴⁰³ In addition to the Panthers, the anarchist

⁴⁰³ Huey P. Newton, *To Die for the People* (New York: Writers and Readers Publishers Edition, 1995), 89. Also see JoNina M. Abron, “‘Serving the People,’ The Survival Programs of the Black Panther Party,” *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Charles E Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998).

community's development of Food Not Bombs is another excellent example of how people can simultaneously advocate their politics, address the urgent needs of a given community, and do so without governmental support or a large amount of resources. Community bicycling programs have shown how transportation can fill a similar void in the lives of poor people, and like FNB, they do so through the use of materials that would otherwise end up in landfills. The ability to address these very human, very basic needs is what will ultimately separate effective activist movements from those who hold naive stock in the coming bounties of the revolution.

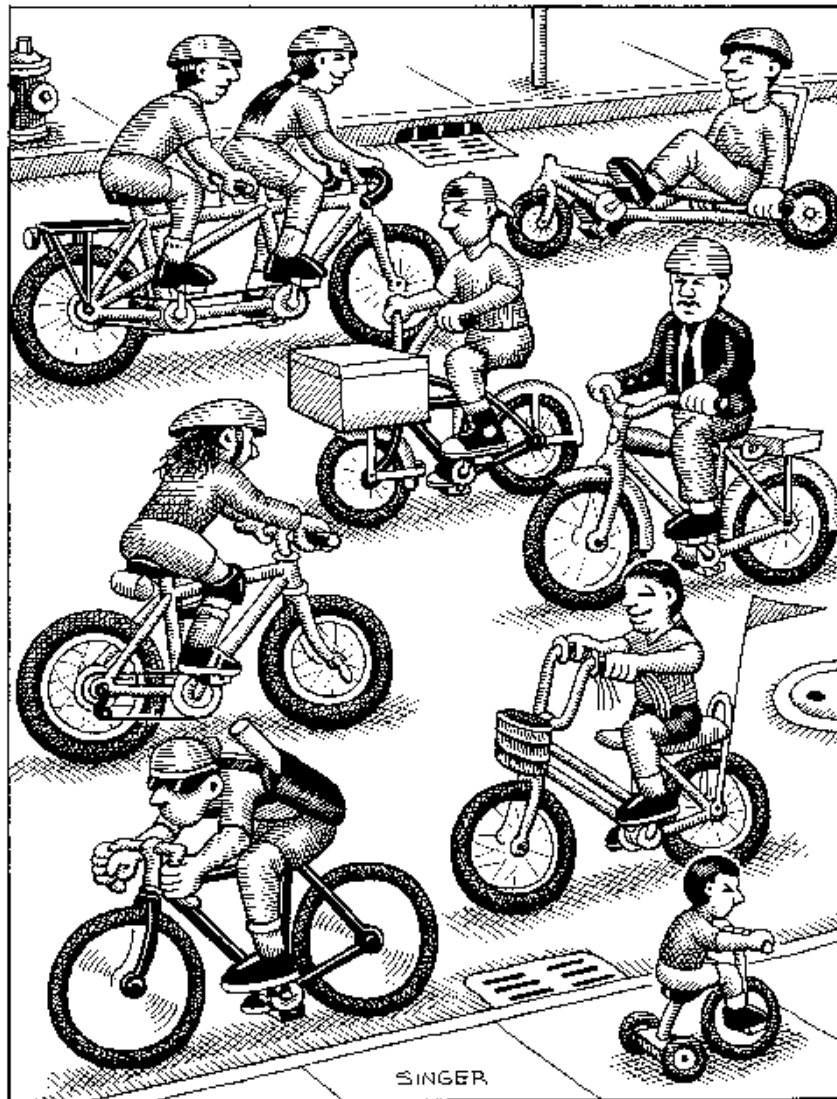


Figure 19-All Shapes and Sizes (artwork by Andy Singer)

The development of sustainable communities requires us to rethink urban planning, consumerism, and transportation. Bicycling plays a role in this development because communities directly benefit from the implementation of bike lanes, bike-only spaces, and the integration of bicycling with public transit. One can look at town like Portland, OR as an example of how bicycling can serve a vital role in both the transportation infrastructure and cultural fabric of a post-industrial city, and one can also see how cities such as Chicago and London are recognizing how bicycling can be fostered in order to help alleviate problems such as pollution, gridlock, and overcrowded transit systems. We need to work towards these extremely modest goals and we must refuse to accept unsustainable transportation options as our *only* options in the 21st century. Along the same lines, we should use bicycling as a way to engage in dialogue about the relationships between technologies and democracy, because as it stands, we are collectively at the whims of corporations that use economic influence in order to secure the rights to emerging or existing technological infrastructures. As a result, we have little say in what types of technologies that we would like to use, and there is virtually no rational discussion taking place about what the ultimate goals of technological use should or should not be.

We can no longer postpone serious debates about transportation technologies because such delays only increase the amount of time that we invest into a costly, dangerous, and unsustainable technological infrastructure. We cannot afford to defend Western culture's sacred cow—the automobile—from intense scrutiny, because we are currently engaged in a war that is inextricably tied to our need for Middle-Eastern oil. There are dozens of resources that discuss the United States' motivations to secure oil rights through their invasion of Iraq, but these accounts pale in comparison to the first hand accounts of soldiers that have recently returned

home from the war. In a recent story featured on *Alternet.org*, an Army medic named Zechariah describes how he became skeptical of the military's motives following his arrival in Iraq:

Within days we had seized all of the oil fields in northern Iraq and our primary mission was to protect them. Bush had said this war wasn't about oil, but there I was defending oil fields at all costs in the middle of Iraq. A lot of the piping and workings of the fields had been destroyed by the fleeing army and before we even started to help the people by fixing the power or water supplies, they had construction crews trying to get everything up and running on the oil fields.⁴⁰⁴

Personal accounts like these indicate the not-so-hidden agenda of the Bush administration, and it is our responsibility to engage the public about how our unjust foreign initiatives are directly related to both our unsustainable sources of energy and the corporations that ultimately profit from such arrangements. For those who doubt the economic, political, and cultural influence wielded by automobile and oil corporations, I would advise you to keep a close eye on recent developments in China, where the government has recently initiated restrictions and bans on bicycling in major cities such as Shanghai—no doubt a gesture used in order to appease corporations who now recognize the full potential for the Chinese market: “Every year, we keep saying, ‘Well, there’s no way we can have a repeat performance of last year,’ and every year we’re wrong...we’re seeing the beginnings of a car culture.”⁴⁰⁵ Despite the warnings provided by any critical analysis of the United States’ transportation system, the Chinese are similarly being sold on the idea that cars can provide freedom, stability, and reprieve from the city. This

⁴⁰⁴ Celina R. De Leon, “A Soldier Speaks: Zechariah,” August 4, 2005. Accessed through *Alternet*, <http://www.alternet.org/waroniraq/23882/>.

⁴⁰⁵ Phil Murtagh, head of General Motors Corporations’ operations in China. Quoted in Peter S. Goodman, “Car Culture Captivates China: Sales Boom Along With Potential Problems,” *The Washington Post*, 8 March 2004.

process is yielding corporations an obscene amount of money and it is radically transforming life in that region:

Cars are refashioning China's cities, now choked with traffic. Bicycles are being gradually banned from Shanghai's larger streets to make way for the automobile, and old houses torn down to make space for wider roads and parking lots. Cars are changing how people shop, enabling the proliferation of big-box retail stores while expanding the confines of an enduring real estate boom. They are making life more dangerous, generating an alarming spike in fatal traffic accidents. Above all, the car is intensifying China's search for new sources of energy at a time when the needs of the world's most populous country are outstripping supply.⁴⁰⁶

In addition to the situations in Iraq and China, we should also learn valuable lessons about the problematic nature of gasoline and oil reliance that became evident during the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, where both commodities became scarcer and more expensive. More than the shortages and price increases, the event demonstrated how our entire energy infrastructure and by default, our entire economic infrastructure, is built upon a house of cards that can potentially be blown away by the tidal winds.

⁴⁰⁶ Goodman.

7.3 FINAL COMMENTS

Capitalist/consumerist ideology is a powerful force that must be reckoned with in every way possible. At the same time that we must re-learn how to mobilize large segments of the population around ‘big’ issues such as reproductive rights, racial equality, environmental health, and economic justice, we must also embrace the efforts of those who confront the logic of capitalism through everyday practices that allow people to recognize—of their own fruition—the links between ideology and the material world.

In this project, I have described a disjointed community of people who not only believe that bicycling is one of the sparks that creates such consciousness, they have experienced it firsthand. In the 1890s, bicycling served as the impetus for women to make a break with the patriarchal norms of Western culture, and in certain examples, women such as Elizabeth Cady-Stanton used bicycling in order to further critique the religious ideologies that kept women in line. In the 1960s, the Dutch Provos used bicycling as a way to critique the logic of capitalism and the misuse of space in the city of Amsterdam. Beginning in the 1990s, Critical Mass cyclists have used bicycling in order to call attention to the dangerous proliferation of car culture and the related problems associated with non-convivial technologies, sprawl, oil-reliance, and consumerism. Throughout the 1990s and into the 21st century, cyclists continue to address these issues through the production/circulation of independent media, the process of foreign aid, and the creation of community cycling programs. Through these outlets, cyclists not only bolster the claims made by previous generations of political bicycling advocates, they have also developed important discourses about bicycling within a context where issues of race, class, gender, and resistance are taken seriously.

Cyclists remind us how small changes in our everyday lives can deeply impact the ways in which we relate to our environments, our cities, our communities, and each other. In addition, they teach us that such transformations can ultimately shape the political and cultural geographies of the West. Perhaps most importantly, they remind us that this process is empowering, rewarding, and incredibly fun.

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