‘Outlaw’ Bicycling

CHRIS CARLSSON

[In] this bike subculture there’s no person who is the best, who is winning, or getting the most money. It’s a pretty equal community in that everyone can excel, but not have to be the top dog...

(Robin Haevens)\(^1\)

A funny thing happened during the last decade of the 20\(^{th}\) century. Paralleling events that transpired a century earlier, a social movement emerged based on the bicycle. This so-called movement is far from a unified force, and unlike the late 19\(^{th}\) century bicyclists, this one does not have a ready demand for “good roads” to rally around. Instead, “chopper” bike clubs, nonprofit do-it-yourself repair shops, monthly Critical Mass rides, organized recreational and quasi-political rides and events, and an explosion of small zines covering every imaginable angle of bicycling and its surrounding culture, have proliferated in most metropolitan areas. Month-long “Bikesummer” festivals have occurred in cities around North America since 1999, galvanizing bicyclists across the spectrum into action and cooperation.

This curious, multifaceted phenomenon constitutes an important arena of autonomous politics. The bicycle has become a cultural signifier that begins to unite people across economic and racial strata. It signals a sensibility that stands against oil wars and the environmental devastation wrought by the oil and chemical industries, the urban decay imposed by cars and highways, the endless monocultural sprawl spreading outward into exurban zones. This new bicycling subculture stands for localism, a more human pace, more face-to-face interaction, hands-on technological self-sufficiency, reuse and recycling, and a healthy urban environment that is friendly to self-propulsion, pleasant smells and sights, and human conviviality.

Bicycling is for many of its adherents both a symbolic and practical rejection of one of the most onerous relationships capitalist society imposes: car ownership. But it’s much more than just an alternative mode of transit. A tall, rugged blonde man in his mid-thirties, Megulon-5, an inspirational character in Portland, Oregon’s CHUNK 666 group, declares, “We are preparing for a post-apocalyptic future with different laws of physics.”\(^2\) It sounds off-kilter at first, but there is a rising tide of local activists in most communities who accept the Peak Oil\(^3\) frame of reference. Many are already organizing themselves directly and indirectly towards a post-petroleum way of life. It may not alter physics exactly, but it certainly implies a radical change in our relationship to energy resources and ecology.

This explosion of zany and whimsical, practical and political self-expression via bicycling comprises a deeply rooted oppositional impulse that challenges core values of our society. The bicycle has become a device that connotes self-emancipation, as well as artistic and cultural experimentation. The playfulness and hands-on tinkering in the subculture is spawning new communities, gatherings that can be framed as potential sites of working class re-composition.

The “outlaw” bicycling subculture has no hierarchy flowing from wage differentials and ownership because most of the culture takes place outside of monetary exchange or the logic of business. Instead, these bike hackers are all about doing, tinkering with the discarded detritus of urban life, inventing new forms of play, celebration, and artistic expression. Theirs is a culture that is reproduced in action, not affirmed in acts of passive consumption. Not just an isolated geek culture, it exists in real spaces and brings people together across age, class, race and gender boundaries.

I call it an “outlaw” bike subculture because it goes against the kind of ‘good behavior’ norm that a lot of mainstream bicycle advocates promote. The outlaw subculture is not particularly concerned with wearing helmets (or even safety in general), having the latest gear, following traffic rules set up for cars, or seeking approval from mainstream society. A 2003 Christian Science Monitor article described a “mutant bike” culture. Critical Mass rides have been important arenas for staking out these counter-norms in the bike scene. Crucially, this counter-sensibility has attracted legions of youth, and is eroding the nerdy image that has helped reinforce bicycling’s reputation as unhip (recently emphasized in the film “40 Year Old Virgin”).

It has long been a curiosity that mainstream, “middle-class” bicyclists have been obsessed with law-abiding behavior and have been so quick to denounce other cyclists for flouting their sense of propriety. Mainstream bicycle advocates maintain that cyclists as a group must demonstrate angelic behavior, in order to reinforce the self-congratulatory fantasy that bikes are angels in the transit universe, compared to the (automobile) devil... Once again, even among bicyclists, we run into a neo-Christian moralism that seeks to impose a black and white, good and bad dichotomy, warmly embracing those who shop and ride correctly, and casting the rest of us into a purgatory of illegality and disrespect. It’s reinforced by an ideology called “effective cycling” developed by a Stanford rocket engineer (and bicycle enthusiast) that essentially advocates bicyclists should strive to behave like cars on the streets of America.

The bicycle has been enjoying a resurgence in the past 15 years. Daily bicycle commuting has expanded dramatically in San Francisco, New York, Chicago, and other cities where the monthly seizure of streets by bicyclists known as Critical Mass has opened space and imaginations, and given people a safe and enjoyable way to reconnect with urban bicycling before venturing out on their own. For most of these new bicycle commuters, the choice is self-reinforcing. Once tried, bicycling is much more pleasant than sitting in traffic in a car. Moreover, it is much cheaper. Meditative, physically engaged cycling to and from work also improves mental and physical health.

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Underneath this broad move towards bicycling is a burgeoning subculture that is reaching down to kids and teens, welcoming and embraced by women, and making bicycling and things bicycle-related hip in unprecedented ways. This subculture is largely a do-it-yourself (DIY) phenomenon, based on word-of-mouth, homemade zines, informal parties and events, and a deliberate sharing of basic technical know-how. The zine explosion, a quintessential DIY movement based on increasingly available reproduction technologies in copyshops and at corporate jobs since the mid-1980s, was crucial in spreading the new bike subculture.

Robin Haevens moved to San Francisco in 1996, knowing no one and not yet a bicyclist. But thanks to her roommates she found herself immersed in the bike messenger scene, and before long she was publishing her own occasional zine, Rip It Up!, about “bikes, beer and boys.” Eventually she became a bike mechanic, founded a bike repair workshop for kids in San Francisco’s Hunters’ Point, and now teaches bike repair as part of a public high school curriculum. She declares,

“...The underground bike subculture represents self-sufficiency, self-sustainability, and responsibility... [qualities that] could definitely be attributed to other kinds of ecological activism, e.g. community gardening. I also think that the bike or the garden culture (really healthy cultures) allow for a kind of giving and receiving that you can’t get in the broader society... It breaks down the anonymity of the city.⁶

The mental space opened up is one of bicycling’s best kept secrets. For many, choosing to bicycle is a public act of individuation, reinforcing a self-reliant and critical mentality. Often it is the most individualistic cycling “rebels” who invest the most time and effort in new communities and institutions.

Jessie Basbaum of San Francisco’s Bike Kitchen says,

Riding a bike is a very independent act. Just riding your bike around fosters a lot of self-reliance and comfortableness being alone. Riding by yourself gives you a lot of time to think, to look at things around you, so in that sense it’s going against the grain a little bit.⁷

Ted White, long-time bike activist and “bikeumentarist” says,

People who are into bikes tend almost always to be in some way independent thinking and self-sufficient... I think bikes are a positive response to almost everything that is wrong with American mainstream society today. Bikes are cheap, simple, and democratic and sexy in a very different way than riding around in a car. Bike transportation is about individuality but not about excess. Bikes are congenial and social. Bikes force us to be in our bodies and help us to know and love our bodies as they are.⁸

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By contrast, there are glossy magazines and plenty of upscale marketers selling bicycles and *frou-frou* lycra clothing, helmets, bike accessories and all the things you would expect a prolific consumer society to promote. But that mainstream bicycling culture is largely separated from the grassroots upsurge, even if there are crossovers aplenty in the form of messenger bags, headlights, and other mass-produced accoutrements that trickle through the permeable membrane between the two worlds. As Stephen Duncombe eloquently put it, “Contemporary capitalism needs cultural innovation in order to open new markets, keep from stagnating, invest old merchandise with new meanings, and so on. Far from being a challenge to The Man, innovations in culture are the fuel of a consumer economy.”

Chicago’s “Rat Patrol,” a self-described “anarchist group,” articulates the subcultural rejection of commodification and marketing, and with it, underlines the outlaw assault on marketing efforts to co-opt the bike culture:

The pathetic sports junkie on a bicycle is no more free than a motorist trapped in an SUV in a traffic jam... There is a void of self-doubt which athletes attempt to cover with spandex outfits and titanium objects of veneration. The sporting goods “user” is compelled by nervous guilt to look down upon those who do not ride as fast, or as far, or as often. Persons exhibiting the following behaviors are best regarded as covert operators of the capitalistic conspiracy to further co-opt and defuse non-fossil-fueled transportation movements:

* Abnormal concern with perfect finish and perfect operation of the bicycle
* Keeps glossy bicycling magazines under the mattress
* Suggests you should buy new equipment instead of repairing old bicycle
* Always rides in superhero tights
* When riding, is more concerned with speed and distance covered than scenery or places visited
* Unable to hold a conversation unrelated to bicycles or biking
* Paranoid delusion that he/she is being persecuted for his/her hobby
* Speech is sprinkled with component brand names
* Constant desire to witness to bicycle’s transforming power in his/her own life
* Believes that biking is a morally superior choice, therefore befitting a morally superior attitude
* Attempts to bring bicycle-related issues into every conversation
* Awkward duck walk caused by wearing cleated bike shoes into roadside businesses
* Easily impressed with expensive equipment and celebrity endorsements
* Wears helmet even when not on bike

As you can see, these easily-identifiable symptoms of sporting goods addiction are identical to the symptoms of capitalist-driven automobile addiction. They are caused by the fetishization and worship of lifeless objects. What was once viewed as a useful tool, a means to an end, becomes the end in itself.

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Should your comrades seek to impose these dangerous ideas on you, or should you find yourself believing them, stay on your guard, and remember that these innocent-sounding ideas are in actuality part of a sinister plot to coopt the velorution. Do not let the greedy multinationals once again derail progressive attempts to save our Earth from global warming and environmental disaster!10

The outlaw bicycling subculture is distinctly anti-consumerist. It is a tinkering culture that spontaneously re-uses and recycles in ways environmental advocates of recycling can only dream about. It is a culture that often merges bicycles with art and performance. Portland’s CHUNK 666, an exemplary and probably typical group of bicycle hackers, “acquires whatever bicycles we can ethically without spending, [or] spending as little money as possible. We cut them into pieces and weld them back together again in different configurations.”11

In the first issue of the CHUNK 666 zine, a feature on one of the legendary early groups, the Hard Times Bicycle Club in Minneapolis, described how it has no dues, no regular meetings or rides. “Part of the HTBC aesthetic is anti-money and anti-retail... A mechanic and artist, 38-year-old Per Hanson, is president of the HTBC... He lives ‘minimally,’ having few possessions and no real job.”12 The Hard Times Bike Club spread the word that they would recycle used bike parts and as a result, parts were dropped off at their garage regularly.

Martin Leugers founded Chopper Riding Urban Dwellers (CRUD), a San Francisco-based group that also puts bikes back together “artistically”.

I like the punk rock ethics of not wanting to make money from my art... I decided I’m going to make money at my job, and I enjoy what I do (industrial design), though it’s not my perfect ideal. But it gives me the ability to make crazy bikes that basically nobody wants. The bikes I make I view as a kind of sculpture... It’s my totally creative outlet where I don’t have to worry about selling them.13

Class doesn’t often enter into the identities being created in these new subcultural spaces, and yet, a resilient anti-capitalist instinct runs through much of it and gets expressed in various ways. Echoing Leugers, a recurrent theme is the refusal to allow the wage-labor relationship to define one’s engagement.

Jessie Basbaum (25 years old, works as a private investigator) and Catherine Hartzell (24, immunology lab researcher) co-founded San Francisco’s Bike Kitchen in mid-2003. The Bike Kitchen quickly became a favorite haunt adjacent to Cellspace in the Mission District (It has since moved to Mission and 9th Streets near San Francisco’s Civic Center). Covered in wildstyle graffiti, the Bike Kitchen sits in a former truck rental facility surrounded by asphalt, and on weekends, a neighborhood flea market. It’s an all-volunteer space and deliberately refuses to provide paid services. “It’s part of our policy not to do repairs for money... we’re here to show people how to do it,” says Basbaum. “It’s definitely not a job,” emphasizes Hartzell. In fact, if it were to become a job, Hartzell wonders “how I would feel. I don’t think I would love it as much. When it’s required of you, and you’re not making the decision, you lose some sense of enjoyment.”14

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Basbaum described a cultural critique of wage-labor without naming it as such: "[People have] this idea that you have a job, but whatever you really care about should be your hobby, it shouldn't be your job, because then it becomes more mundane."

Bicycling subculture activists routinely work long hour hours for free. But they also see wage-labor's reduction of their full engagement with work as an oppressive and unfortunate distraction from their "real work." Ben Guzman, co-founder of the Los Angeles Bike Kitchen (no direct relation to the San Francisco Bike Kitchen, but the same name), works on television commercials for a living. But

...my work the last few years has just been a way to get to be able to do the things I want to do... all my jobs, are just a means to get back to doing what's important. While I'm at work I'm taking a pause from the rest of the stuff I'm doing.15

Robin Haevens explains how doing her teaching job, even though it's similar to what she was doing before for free, changes the nature of it.

If you're somehow making enough money to live, it's easy to use your extra energy on these projects, whether it's writing a zine—where I didn't make any money—or starting a bike program in Hunter's Point. ... I started that with no feeling that I needed to be paid for it. Just a feeling that there were kids out there that would like to work on bikes, that had NOTHING else going on, and really needed to be doing something. But after a year, I was broke! The fact that it's my primary source of income and that I'm being paid a teacher's salary, puts extra pressure on it. It makes it different from just doing things because I want to do them and I see a need. It's no longer me independently doing something that I can change at will.16

Rides

...all you habitual motorists are suckers. You've been hoodwinked. Your automobile is expensive, annoying, and anti-social. My bicycle is cheap, fun and at times, a traveling party." —Resist #42

The bicycling subculture is action-oriented. A lot of energy can go towards fixing and acquiring bikes, but finally it always comes down to riding them. There are countless recreational bicycle clubs around the United States but those clubs have been remarkably apolitical, except for occasional forays into lobbying for a rare road closure for a race or ride. Moreover, their members are not famous for hanging out together, working together, or having any other existence together beyond the club rides themselves. But the outlaw bikers have forged
new communities out of hundreds of theme rides, “derbies”, races, rodeos, even bicycle polo and bicycle ballet in San Francisco. Messengers in New York and San Francisco spontaneously asserted their strength in large group rides in the late 1980s to avoid municipal regulation and harassment.

The New York Independent Couriers Association swung into action in 1987 when Mayor Koch announced a 90-day experimental ban of bikes from central midtown Manhattan. Groups of 30-400 messengers organized ‘work to rule’ rides up 6th Avenue and down 5th. These courier rides took place fifteen years after large rides in 1972 demanding the elimination of cars from Manhattan, in the first late 20th century upsurge of bicycle activism.

In San Francisco the 20th anniversary of Earth Day was celebrated in 1990 with a big ride through the city, under the slogan “Bicycles Aren’t In the Way, Bicycles Are the Way!” Months later cyclists converged on the big anti-Gulf War marches in January 1991, acting as scouts and roving bands of cycling protestors. A group of 50 cyclists even rode 65 miles from Santa Cruz to join in. Later that year the Bay Area Bike Action Winter Solstice People-Powered Parade rolled through Golden Gate Park on Dec. 21, protesting the prevalence of auto traffic in San Francisco’s premiere public park. Cyclists have been campaigning for over fifteen years now for a Park and against a Parking Lot.

Critical Mass erupted out of this years-long climate of politicized bike rides and direct action. The first “Commute Clot” took off from the foot of San Francisco’s Market Street on September 25, 1992, about 50 riders strong. After a couple of months of the “organized coincidence” growing steadily, riders dubbed it “Critical Mass” after a comment in Ted White’s “bikeumentary” Return of the Scorcher. It has since spread throughout the world and has appeared in over 400 cities on five continents. It is still a magical monthly occurrence in San Francisco, routinely drawing over 1,000 riders, and sometimes several thousand.

The full history of Critical Mass has been told elsewhere. Among the different threads of the outlaw bicycling subculture, Critical Mass represents the most public demonstration of the subculture’s existence, and its most overtly political expression. The monthly drama of a mass seizure of the streets by bicyclists is unique in many ways. It has no official organizers or leaders and thus is a monthly experiment in spontaneous self-management. It has more of a celebratory tone than one dedicated to protest, but both realities coexist. More subversively, it is a prefigurative demonstration; it puts into practice a new type of public commons, created and animated by human conviviality, the kind of life usually promised “after the revolution.” It escapes the logic of commodification entirely. No one has to buy anything to participate, and there is practically no hawking of wares around the event. Rolling down the street in a new mobile community, Critical Mass has pioneered network swarming as a political tactic, albeit a tactic employed to no instrumental purpose. Critical Mass’s amorphous and prefigurative qualities militate against making demands, declaring an agenda or seeking specific goals (at the same time, hundreds of political ideas, campaigns and slogans have been distributed during Critical Mass rides, including e.g. “Bicycling: A Quiet Statement Against Oil Wars”). Instead, an unpredictable
number of citizens come together freely each month in cities large and small to begin living the life they can only dream about the rest of the month.

City life based on bicycles, walking and well-developed public transit is a dream in America, but it’s a dream that becomes real every month during the brief minutes Critical Mass fills the streets. The right to assemble and to engage in free speech also get exercised each month, highlighting a diminishing public life through dramatic public action. Critical Mass exceeds simple civil libertarian behavior though. In gathering dozens, hundreds or thousands of cyclists month after month for over a decade across the world, a social space has been opened up in which further networking has flourished. The bike ride is the premise, but the deeper transformation of imaginations and social connections is hard to measure.

Clearly bicycling is on the rise, and the public manifestation of a grassroots embrace of cycling and a whole range of cultural alternatives is most visible in Critical Mass. But other bike rides have emerged in its wake, as have dozens of new associations and initiatives. In Chicago a campaign to “Depave Lakeshore Drive” bubbled out of the Critical Mass community. Chicago has also staged a “Bike Winter” festival, held annual auto-free art shows, and organized dozens of theme rides, including a lengthy ride along the old canals and railroad right-of-ways. In Bloomington, Indiana, cyclists have held midnight full moon rides over the past few years. “Midnight Ridazz” take over the streets of Los Angeles in the middle of the night, too, on themed rides for more than a year now, slowly mapping the entire city of Los Angeles.

In August of 2002, the New York Bike Messengers Association hosted the first annual Warriors fun ride—all night, from the Bronx to Coney Island. Maggie Bowman described the scene at the beginning of the ride, a rainy night.

The park is filled with approximately 500 warriors, loosely sectioned off by gang, 83 gangs in total... We make our way around the park checking out the competition. The Fearleaders, Los Banditos, the Aliens, the Turk, the Ridge Street Wrenches, the Pelham Park Tennis Pros, the Flatbush Dandies, the Electric Vikings, the Ghost Riders, the Furies, the Killer Clowns, the Riffs, the Rotten Apples, the San Francisco Cutters.20

In San Francisco, inspired by Critical Mass, an ongoing series of Cultural Bike Tours were started in 1993. The first ride visited three-dozen community gardens (out of a citywide 110 or so) in the southeast part of town. After a few more informal tours, the local bike advocacy group began sponsoring them, and has had a wide variety of rides over the past decade, including tours of ice cream parlors, gay history, labor history, a Freeway stump tour, and more. In Los Angeles, a Tour de Tamal took riders to a half dozen tamale parlors around the town. And so on.

Annual Bikesummer festivals in San Francisco, Portland, Vancouver, New York and Los Angeles have brought thousands of people onto bicycles and into contact with the whole gamut of bicycling culture—from mainstream to decidedly “outlaw.” In Los Angeles, some of the Bikesummer organizers put on a
event in March 2004 called “More Than Transportation” which centered around bicycles and DIY punk culture, which in important ways set the stage for 2005’s Bikesummer there.

Zany clubs and their events have created their own cultural whirl. In San Francisco, the motley crew of Cyclecide have developed a full-scale Bike Rodeo, including pedal-powered rides, derbies, races, bike toss, and more. CHUNK 666 in Portland is famous for their Chunkathlon’s, with tall bike jousting and beer-soaked races, while other outlaw cyclists have developed what’s become known as “zoo bombing,” hurtling down a major local hill, often in the dark on various altered bicycles. The wild creativity of the Cyclecide mechanics and their ilk in Portland and elsewhere underscore a profoundly creative engagement with bicycling technology.

Contesting The Technosphere

From the early ruminations on future shock and the problems of too much leisure that would come in the wake of widespread automation, popular culture has tended to treat developments in science and technology as automatic processes, almost natural, that proceed independent of human choice or will. The elevation of expertise onto an unchallengeable pedestal has been an important means by which the juggernaut of capitalist modernization has been imposed on society. Most of us are plainly mystified about science and research and the choices that go on behind the scenes that in turn lead to the technologies that shape our everyday lives. Changes wrought in workplace technologies and entire industries have repeatedly left people unemployed, or at best finding their work much more tightly controlled and regulated.

Ironically, this much-touted modernization has consisted overwhelmingly of a systematic process of deskilling human labor. In pursuit of profitability and competitive advantage, capitalists and technologists have focused their efforts on controlling the labor process, turning living humans into cogs in a much larger machine, and to the greatest extent possible, taking the skills and knowledge out of the workers heads and hands and implanting them into the machines. The time-and-motion studies known as “Taylorization” after their early 20th century inventor, Frederick Taylor, have reached such extremes that labor processes now seek to extract 56 productive seconds of each 60-second minute in the workday. And of course the workday itself has been lengthened in addition to being intensified. During the past 25 years the eight-hour day has been lost to most people.

Humans make the technosphere, of course. Though people may be deskilled on the job and turned into keyboardists and dial readers and "checkers," they retain a great deal of creativity outside of the workplace. Additionally, the
dissemination of practical technical knowledge has become much more widespread with the Internet, and many people are hybridizing and inventing new uses for the detritus of modern life. A key piece of that process is the cultural rejection of expertise that we find prevalent among DiY (Do-it-Yourself) youth. Nowhere is this more apparent than among the outlaw bicycle subculture where the proliferation of skill sharing and repurposing is rampant. Objects made to be used in one way are constantly being re-imagined and re-purposed to new uses.

Eric Welp of Washington DC’s Chain Reaction:

We’re dealing with a self-sufficient, efficient, simple motion machine; not a perpetual motion machine. It’s a pure, simple technology... I appreciate the use of bikes in terms of benefits for the community, human well-being, self empowerment and all that, and those are good values to apply to the idea of technology, but I think that sometimes technology has lost sight of its basic purpose in terms of those values. So the shop is an important reminder of how technology should be.21

In an issue of CHUNK 666, the whys and wherefores of “gear” are addressed at some length. “The corporate slimelordz of America have fixated upon gear as an easy method of sponging money from yuppies and yuppy wannabes.” Though they refuse the marketing juggernaut knocking at the edges of their culture, CHUNKsters have developed their own argument for “gear” that also eschews the total rejection position that some have adopted.

Rising from the homebrew gear kit, we have the refunctionalized gear, gear which has either been adapted to its purpose or which would normally be retired. The majority of headwear fits this category. Garage-sale bicycle and motorcycle helmets, football, army, and construction helmets, and even Viking helmets with added straps have served to encourage dwindling collections of brain cells to retain their coherent mass. Ski or aviator gogs with a handkerchief taped to the bottom protect the sensitive face when diving (or being thrown) through plate glass windows.22

Many of the prominent activists in the outlaw bicycle subculture turn out to be newly adept at working with tools and mechanics. “I didn’t become a mechanic until after I’d become a bike nut,” says Robin Haevens:

Technology can empower people because they can use it as a problem-solving tool. I see technology as being much more useful to me than I did before. When I say ‘technology,’ I mean in a limited sense, I mean tool use and such.23

Ben Guzman tell us that:

it was through bicycling that I developed tinkering. In college I did an art piece about how my father didn’t teach me about cars, because he didn’t know about cars, but how that’s so not-male. But it was through bicycling that I learned how to do things.
Jesse Basbaum has a similar tale:

I was not previously mechanically inclined... to someone who has never put a wrench on a bike, it’s this utter mystery, it’s like magic. But after having some basic skills everything makes sense, it all fits together in a logical way.

In New York, Bill diPaola helped start the bike activist group Times Up! He became a plumber after becoming chastened at his own lack of practical skills.

I realized if you want to do something, you just can’t be sitting in a room and talking about the philosophy of it. You have to know how things work and you have to be able to get your hands dirty. I’m not very happy with a lot of the new activists I see, that don’t really understand mechanics... I’m happy whenever I see a new person in the group who’s got a skill.24

In the dissident subcultures that bicycling touches, there is a common undercurrent of anti-technology ideology. Basbaum explains:

... A lot of the people in the bicycling community and a lot of the people coming to our shop, and who love bike mechanics, really have an anti-technology bent, you know? These are people who don’t like cars, who don’t like television, that kind of thing. [but they] like organic food and all that. It’s healthy technology I guess, to put a term on it. Gardening and bicycling versus automobiles and monoculture. Those are two types of technologies, technology that’s in theory sustainable and environmentally friendly.

But Megulon-5 of CHUNK 666 debunks that idea as simplistic. "It’s a technology that a lot of people don’t see involves steel foundries and rubber plantations and oil extraction." His own experience of the recurrent anti-technology line leads him to argue,

I’m not only pro-technology, I’m anti-anti-technology... I’m willing to make distinctions about the use of technology. I’m willing to distinguish between cutting your tofu jerky with a knife or stabbing me with a knife! That’s technology... Technology is not a thing, it’s a process. And I’m for the development of technology... there’s a lot of people who want to turn to a pastoral, neolithic, paleolithic, level of technology, and they’re “against technology.” But what they’re really against is a certain level of technology... the plow is ok, paper clips are ok, the telegraph maybe, bicycles yes, but no steel refinery. Wooden bicycles are good. They’ve never ridden a wooden bicycle, but they want to... As I got more hands-on I became more realistic. I don’t think of bikes as the cure for society’s ills so much anymore,... everyone’s living in a factory that moves people. So I see bicycle technology as a way to escape, or help escape that...

Technological know-how, and the sharing of information, creates new circuits of knowing, of trusting, of social verification, and finally and most importantly, of self-confidence. In Los Angeles, Ben Guzman had a typical experience with someone who had no knowledge of bike repair, but also felt alienated culturally.

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This guy didn’t want to talk to me, and he didn’t want to really ask me for anything, but he’s like, “yeah man, I need a tool to do this thing,” and you’re like, “yeah, man, well you can come in and do it.” He’s like, “oh man you have to show me...” and I’m like “That’s what we do, come on in.” So he comes in. Once he pulls off the crank arm, he walked outside the door to his friend, and he’s like “Check it out!” Removed his bottom bracket and swapped it. And then he came back the next day. On Thursday he’s back going, “Oh man I want to do this, and I want to do that!” And then what’s cool is you have him interacting with this woman, that he would never interact with, but [now] we’re all buddies because we ride bikes.25

An unexpected, but perhaps unsurprising, result of bike tinkering is the emergence of new communities. One common glue in working class cultures, especially but not exclusively among males, is the ability to engage in tech talk. Bike Kitchen’s Basbaum concurs: “Talking about bikes, absolutely, I’ve made friends through the shop and so have other people, strictly based on bikes. Of course it bleeds into other things. You can talk about bikes for a long time, but eventually it’s like “so, where do you work?”

Eric Welp in DC describes the role of shop talk this way.

Shop talk sort of gives us all a common ground in the shop working with each other... it gives the kids working in the shop confidence to be able to communicate and talk knowledgeably about bikes with these folks who they might not otherwise interact with. It gives them a sense of pride to be able to help other people in their neighborhood with repairs and explain things to them. Self confidence: It’s amazing, you see it everyday working with innercity youth.

For example, Jimmy, he was one of the kids we had in a class. When he started, he was just a really skinny, shy kid. Now, it’s amazing, you can talk to him about bikes and he is actually passionate about it, and he is extremely articulate with customers. I think he’s really developed confidence as a mechanic, so he’s a great example.26

Not content to buy and ride a bicycle, outlaw bicyclists have banded together to reconstruct hybrid bikes in all kinds of shapes and sizes from the junked bikes littering any city. The widespread rehabilitation and sharing of discarded bikes is common in many cities. Bike co-ops have institutionalized outside of economic logic, through skill-sharing, training, and experimentation with technology that have given rise to a whole subpopulation of tinkerers and appropriators. Ultimately their practice portends a practical engagement with the technosphere more broadly, perhaps eventually addressing the shape and direction of scientific research itself.

Autonomous Spaces or Small Businesses?

The new DIY bicycle shops are trying to bridge class and racial divides. Facing

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daunting problems of sustainability they exist on the verge of co-optation. Everyday rent and survival confront DiY bikeshop staffers with the necessity of making money. This in turn pushes them towards converting cooperative spaces based on sharing and mutual aid into small businesses. Even when officially not-for-profit, cash flows inexorably begin to shape decisions and behaviors. Moreover, by providing training and experience to kids (and adults), one of the ironic outcomes is to help them open the door to a “real” job.

Chain Reaction in DC is trying to survive without

becom[ing] a chain with a bunch of locations around the city. I think we’d just like to be stable and not have to rely on any donations or grants. It’d be great to be self sustained and sustainable. We’re not going to save the world with bikes, but we can change it by changing a kid’s outlook. If we can change things to help them better understand the effect of their actions and how they can function in society, then changing our principal mode of transportation is just the beginning.  

Ted White recounts his own experience at the Center for Appropriate Transport in Eugene, Oregon.

When I worked at the CAT we worked specifically with so-called “at-risk” youth. I think most of these kids loved being in our bike workshop--what they did there was tangible, it related to something real. They took metal and rubber and plastic parts, put them together, fine tuned them, and then--voila!-- they had literally made themselves a vehicle for both external exploration and self-discovery.  

At San Francisco’s Bike Kitchen “someone volunteers six hours of time to our shop and they learn, hopefully, a set of basic skills and contribute a little bit to the shop, and then they earn a frame, and build up the bike on their own. ... When someone does the earn-a-bike program in earnest and with enthusiasm I think it’s very self-empowering,” Basbaum told me.

Earn-A-Bike programs are running all over the U.S. Often supported by local governments and police departments, they are widely recognized as programs that help kids learn basic skills and bicycle safety, get involved in their community, and give them a means of transportation they can keep at the end of the program. The Boston-based Bikes Not Bombs is one of the organizations that have done a lot to promote the model, and they make available on their website an Instructor Training Manual.  

In the case of Bicas in Tucson, Arizona, kids who have been arrested can work off their misdemeanors and infractions by enrolling in the Earn-A-Bike program. To fulfill the terms of their “penalty” they must select a broken bike from a room of over 1000 such rusting hulks, and then go about learning to bring it back to life. Once the bike is properly rebuilt, fixed, and tuned up, they have completed their “sentence” and may ride it home.

Chris Carlsson
SF's Bike Kitchen, along with the Bike Hut Foundation and some other San Francisco shops, give kids a chance to earn bikes too, but without the involvement of local authorities. Often enough, once kids get involved with a bike shop experience where they are treated with some dignity and expectations, they come back for more. Viktor Veysey's Pier 40 Bike Hut has been mentoring poor kids for almost a decade. Pedal Revolution in the Mission District started as a bike shop to provide training and work opportunities for homeless and runaway youth. It has since evolved into a more mainstream bike shop, but still has training and job opportunities for youth in need. In all these programs, kids in trouble get to interact with engaged and interested adults and other kids. It doesn't always "save" every kid, but hundreds of youth across the country have gotten a new start thanks to these kinds of hands-on training programs. Often enough, a seriously motivated youngster can learn real skills and go on to find employment in the growing local bicycle repair business, as, for example, DC's Chain Reaction has seen with a number of its "graduates."

The backbone of this network of underfunded, barely sustainable co-op and DIY bike shops is provided by the outlaw bicycle subculture's shock troops—the men and women who find a way to survive on very low incomes, or who work at these shops after (and in addition to) their paid gigs. They are altruistic, politically engaged, and passionate. They challenge the transit and energy systems shaped by capitalism but crucially, they are making connections in practice between race, class, gender and urban life, city planning, technology and ecological re-inhabitation. Ironically, by teaching kids to work for their bikes, these programs also reinforce the core values of a capitalist, work ethic culture.

John Gerken, writing in New Orleans’ Chainbreaker zine, describes why he is involved with the local bike co-op, Plan B (which survived Hurricane Katrina without damage, and re-opened by late October 2005).

This place is a working example of how I think things could be different. It’s a place where people can share resources, skills and knowledge, and not have to pay for every single thing. I think people can help each other out more than we’re led to believe, and it feels good to also learn so much while I’m doing it.

Plan B is the New Orleans Community Bike Project. It’s a DIY bike shop located in a huge warehouse near the French Quarter that also has shows, Recycle for the Arts, trapeze practice, Food Not Bombs, yoga, art shows, and other stuff. We’re all volunteer, and have all kinds of tools and resources for people to use, as well as piles of parts and old frames and bikes... We don’t fix your bike at Plan B—we’re there to help you learn how to do it yourself... A broad mix of people does come in. It’s a measure of success in any community project that gets beyond its own specific community—in this case, for the most part, scrappy young white people... I’m proud that, while it is rooted in the ideals that are formed within my specific community, Plan B interacts with a broad cross-section of New Orleans. Yuppies, college kids, European tourists, homeless folks, and street performers, clowns and circus freaks, neighborhood kids. Really people of all ages and walks of life come in.
There's very little doubt in my mind that the way our society works is dictated by corporations. Ultimately our lives are run by commerce and corporations that drive it, and the politics that shape corporations' behavior. It's all capitalism I guess, it's all an exchange of money... I'm definitely not working class. I mean I work but, I don't work a blue collar job... My upbringing was probably upper middle class. My parents are scientists at UCSF. I don't know what economic class I would fall in. (Jesse Basbaum)

The vast majority of Americans work for a living. But they are divided in countless ways, primarily by race, gender and income. Combined with an amnesiac culture that disdains history, the American working class is unaware of itself as such. In fact, a majority of American workers think of themselves as “middle class” irrespective of the color of their collar or their relative income or security.

This process is further complicated by the fact that there is no desire to embrace being a worker. Self-definition is increasingly established outside of wage-labor, and given the stupidity and pointlessness of a great deal of the work people do as wage-laborers, this is a very healthy response. Instead of looking for a movement to embrace an obsolete and denigrating self-conception of “worker” as a starting point, we might have better results by looking objectively at what people are doing, regardless of how they define themselves in class terms.

The fragmentation of daily life due to workplace and residential transience has been well-documented. Robert Putnam’s Bowling Alone provides sociological evidence for what most of us know in our bones: the fabric of sociability is seriously frayed. The institutions that once knit together communities and daily life in America, from unions to Lion’s Clubs to Boy Scouts and even mainstream religion, have all suffered a precipitous decline in membership and participation during the past 40 years. Activities such as letter writing, participating in local politics, joining with neighbors or other parents at school to effect change, have all dropped dramatically. Most people interact with others primarily through economic relationships (work and shopping), and otherwise retreat into the isolation of family and home.

Leftists and labor organizers have been trying to “organize the unorganized” for decades, but unions are at historically low numbers. A crucial factor underpinning this dynamic is what might be called a ‘rear-view mirror’ conceptual framework. Many organizers and leftists are still committed to political models that depend on steady employment, state guarantees and long-term residential stability. In fact, the bicycling subculture is but one of numerous examples of people assembling themselves into new constellations, creating new ways of associating that escape the familiar bounds of mid-20th.
century, “middle-class” America.

The new bicycling subculture is one of the preeminent examples of the gradual re-composition of the working class in the North America (the emergence of the bicycling subculture is also a European phenomenon, and can be glimpsed in South America and urban centers in Asia too). This claim does not mean that self-aware workers are embracing bicycles as a strategy of class resistance in a capitalist world (although it may be largely true that these are wage-laborers who are deserting the economic constraints imposed by car ownership). What it denotes is a process by which people who survive through selling their time and skills in “normal” jobs are connecting outside of that process through association with the bicycling subculture.

Bike Kitchen’s Jessie Basbaum says

[w]e’ve created a space where all different people come through; people that wouldn’t normally associate with one another. You meet people and other people meet people and friendships are made... we’ve created a space that fosters people helping one another”

Megulon-5: “Everyone in the Chunk 666 community for whatever reason—cheapness or ideals or just bike obsession—has [escaped] being a chump about the car culture. Usually they have the same kind of nonsubordinate [attitude] to [The Machine]. Part of my view of the role of Chunk 666 in the bike community is we do what we do because we love it. Hopefully we can get people together to have a fun time involving bicycles, low technology or high technology, and drinking beer, hanging out on the street. Like the Family Truckster, a long bike with a grill on the back. We'd park it somewhere on the sidewalk and start grilling burgers and drinking beer, and people come over and hang out with us. One of the best things about the Chunkathlon [a zany gathering of bikers on improvised choppers who participate in beer-soaked races, jousting matches, and fire-leaping stunts] is that we own the street. We have a block party to close off the street, but long after our permit expires we are drinking beer around a bonfire in the middle of the street.

Los Angeles's Ben Guzman sees the new community as central.

The community is so much fun. We hosted a Tour de Tamal. Everyone chipped in some money, and we went on a ride and ate tamales all over the place... Riding a bike is part of a community, and you wave hello to everybody you see that rides a bike. It’s the biggest punk rock thing to be a community... The giant city of Los Angeles is saying ‘don’t be part of a community, don’t interact with each other, don’t be happy, don’t commute on a bicycle’... If you do those two things, interact with each other well and ride a bike, those are the biggest extremes you can pull off in LA.

Bill DiPaola of New York’s Times Up! gives community a similar importance.

Community means a lot to me personally. It’s everything. I’m surrounded in

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the East Village... we actually help save the community gardens, and we have community spaces. We are nothing, the bicycle community in NYC, unless we can organize. We cannot organize unless we operate in community spaces. There's a big public space issue in New York, and we're using a lot of the community gardens, the community spaces, the parks, to meet and talk about these things... With class we try to say “everybody is acceptable in our group.” So when I hear the word ‘class’ I think we need to break that down, but not in a negative way.”

As a long-time activist on the left, DiPaola struggles to overcome the baggage of past efforts. He rejects outright the labels “working class” or “middle class”: “Those are just labels that are created by the corporate media.”34 But in the next breath DiPaola quickly agrees that there is a ruling class. For his part, Ben Guzman says:

I’ve heard and seen the statement forever, that ‘there’s no war but the class war.’ In the last six months, I finally figured it out, and it’s TRUE!! I grew up in a middle class neighborhood... I choose to ride a bicycle and then people say ‘oh, you choose to ride a bicycle because you’re allotted the choice to ride because you come from a certain class.’ Everybody in my class is NOT riding a bicycle by choice. Everybody else in my class is driving a car because they haven’t even thought that there’s a different choice... what’s happening with the Bicycle Kitchen, is we’re breaking down the classes. Everybody rides a bike. Or if they want to, everybody CAN ride a bike.

Portland’s Megulon-5 explains why outlaw bicyclists’ values are distinct from mainstream America’s.

Being a bicycle person turned me into the kind of person who saw the value of spending a lot of time doing something I liked, as opposed to spending more money... yeah, it changes what you do, and also it often involves your doing it with your comrades... [it creates] a social process, not necessarily ‘all for one and one for all’... but a competition and cooperation together for resources, mostly cooperation. I’m a craftsman. I think most people are surprised if they meet me in the context of C.H.U.N.K. I’m a very anal retentive, uptight and stable type of person. I’m a computer programmer.

I don’t even know how I define ‘class’ myself, because I’m not much of a political thinker... a lot of the people riding bikes don’t want to be riding bikes. They are not excited about the fact that they’re riding a bike to work. I recognize that it is class that puts them there... [and] that our class is what gives us the opportunity to be Chunk 666. Most, but not all, have an upper middle class background. They all have a comfortable enough life that they can spend time doing this. They can play. They can live in Portland and have jobs that involve riding their bikes to work, for example, or spend time looking for a job that will give them that. Mainly, we’re all just young slackers without kids, so we can mess around. Lots of us are broke, but I don’t think any are poor. Someone might not be able to buy the beer one night. Most of us are living in cheap rooms in rundown houses, but nobody’s worried about being homeless. 35
“grew up really poor and my parents always tried to appear, not well off, but like they had no problems when they clearly had HUGE financial problems. My dad was unemployed most of his life but too proud to ever get public assistance, which they probably could have got, and my mom was a teacher at a Catholic school.” Now Martin is a well-paid industrial designer at a small consulting firm in Silicon Valley and has the freedom to work on bikes for fun. “I avoid any appearance of being wealthy. I definitely do identify as déclassé.”

Jimmy, a young African-American man working at Chain Reaction in DC, explains his own sense of class:

“I’d say I’m probably in the lower middle class. You gotta work, and if you’re makin’ it all right and the work’s not too tough, you’re sorta in the middle. Lower class means you don’t have nothing. And middle class pays the upper class by consuming all the upper class’s goods made by the lower class. But nobody is better than anybody. I don’t think about it at all.”

No one wants to think of themselves as low class. The dignity of being “working class” is a lost cultural concept and no amount of demands for “respect” can overcome the abject stupidity and routinization that has destroyed the dignity of work itself. So first, most workers don’t want to think about class. We each examine our own lot in life and reasonably conclude that we’re somewhere in a sprawling “middle” between Learjet luxury and total destitution. And given the fact that the poorest 10% of Americans are still “richer” materially than two out of three of the world’s population, that idea has some objective truth.

But this so-called middle is in fact a broad working class made up of wage-laborers in innumerable occupations and paid a wide range of salaries and benefits, under many different conditions. The micro-stratification of the U.S. working population puts everyone into the subjective position of being able to imagine falling down or climbing up a notch or two (or several). In that daily life, people see themselves as “middle class” as a way of avoiding the plain everyday truth of living in class society. But the shared reality of wage-labor and basic powerlessness is the overriding truth of most people’s lives. The steady dilution of class consciousness with the successful implantation of the “middle class” idea is part of how people’s identities came to be defined by shopping choices more than occupations. But insofar as people are creating meaning by doing interesting things outside of the job, they are slowly creating new ways of understanding their own lives and the communities in which they are lodged.

The common resistance to thinking about class shows up again and again in assertions that in the bicycling subculture they are “breaking down” class, that “everyone’s welcome” and so on. In fact, the subculture demonstrates a healthy impulse towards free association and mutual aid. Going back to Marx or even Kropotkin, we can see that in a real sense these are the stirrings of individual and social revolt against being reduced to mere ‘workers’, to being trapped in the
objectified and commodified status of labor power.

The invigorated subjectivity of outlaw bicyclists is apparent in their full engagement, their humanity and their urgent need to define their own culture, to make their own lives' meaning directly and cooperatively. From these myriad experiments new ways of living are being created in the here and now, which not only make life better immediately, but in crucial ways are laying the social and technological foundations for a post-capitalist life. Resilient individualism insisting on a cooperative shared future illuminates the subjectivity that might finally overthrow a society that has reduced us all to mere objects.

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Catherine Hartzell, 24, Bike Kitchen, SF, Immunology lab researcher
Robin Haevens, 31, Rip It Up!, bike mechanic, bike repair teacher, public school teacher
Eric Welp, and Jimmy, Chain Reaction, Washington DC bikeshop at Shaw Ecovillage
Ben Guzman, 30, Bike Kitchen, Los Angeles, film editor
Bill di Paola, 30s, Times Up! NYC, political organizer
Jay Broemmel, 30s, Heavy Pedal/Cyclecide Bike Rodeo, SF, metal fabricator
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Notes

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