



ONE LESS CAR

BICYCLING AND THE POLITICS OF AUTOMOBILITY



ZACK FURNESS

ONE LESS CAR

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Zack Furness is Assistant Professor of Cultural Studies at Columbia College Chicago and a member of the Bad Subjects Collective.

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*For Pea,
Who continues to tear up my maps*

Those who have swallowed the cycle will not strain long at the Automobile; and after the first decent show of apprehension has been disposed of, the obvious exhilaration and novelty of the exercise begins to exert a charm. For there is joy in going quickly and in doing no work. . . . It is probable that in a year or two every one will be wanting to drive without horses, and to scour the open country at sweet will in a vehicle that can match the bicycle for lightness and for speed, while saving the superfluous element of labor. In other words, there is no reason why, within a decade at most, we should not see considerable changes in our present modes of traveling.

–Harry C. Marillier, “The Automobile,” *The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature*, 1895

I don't think it's unpatriotic to use so much gas. It's very patriotic. It's our way of life.

–Sue Smith, Chevy Tahoe owner, quoted in Neela Banerjee, “Made in America,” *New York Times*, 2001

If a man feels that he can easily afford the expense of keeping a car and enjoys its use, there is no mode of recreation which, when properly indulged in, brings in more thorough enjoyment and benefit to the entire family. The speed maniac is passing, engine breakdowns on the road are practically a thing of the past, the era of hysteria has been replaced by an era of common sense, and more and more the automobile will become a delightful and useful adjunct to our social life. Here's to its golden future! Long life to the motor car and health and happiness to its swelling army of votaries!

–W. F. Dix, “Motoring for People of Moderate Means,” *The Independent*, 1911

Get off the fucking road, asshole!

–Pittsburgh driver to the author, 2005

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CHAPTER 1

Introductions and Intersections

Two-Wheeled Conventions

In the week preceding the 2004 Republican National Convention (RNC) hundreds of thousands of activists from around the United States converged on New York City to demonstrate their collective dissatisfaction with the George W. Bush administration and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Protesters arrived with handcrafted banners, makeshift signs, elaborate costumes, musical instruments, bullhorns, giant puppets, and droves of literature. Some people even brought their bicycles. For this latter contingent, the eight days surrounding the demonstration doubled as the Bike National Convention, a series of events hosted by New York City's direct action environmental group, Time's Up! Bicyclists both organized and participated in free bike maintenance workshops, direct action planning sessions, a bicycle carnival, and various group rides, including a scenic jaunt through the city's parks, a "dumpster diving" tour of Lower Manhattan, and radical history tours of community gardens, squats, and famous protest sites dotting the Lower East Side.¹ Before the start of the Republican convention, the visiting two-wheeled politicians joined bike riders from the five boroughs to take part in Critical Mass, a monthly bike ride/ritual held on the last Friday of every month in cities throughout the world. Originating in San Francisco in 1992, Critical Mass was conceived as a group bike ride and a leaderless celebration that ultimately grew in both size and popularity as a response to the continued marginalization of bicycling and non-motorized transportation in modern cities. Each

month cyclists taking part in this “organized coincidence” try to fill the streets with riders to demonstrate their collective solidarity and send a message to the public: “We are not blocking traffic; we *are* traffic!”²

On Friday, August 27, more than five thousand cyclists swarmed the streets of Manhattan and brought auto traffic to a grinding halt on parts of the island. It was a tremendous display of pedal power and antiwar creativity, and by far one of the largest rides in the event’s history. Equally historic was the staggering display of police force used to arrest 264 bicyclists, some of whom were not even on the ride. In addition to brutalizing a number of (unarmed) cyclists, the New York Police Department (NYPD) illegally seized 338 bicycles as part of their arrest evidence, going so far as to forcibly remove bicycles from nearby fences, bike racks, and signposts by cutting through locks with high-powered saws.³ In the ten days surrounding the Republican convention, nearly four hundred bike riders were arrested, including Joshua Kinberg, the inventor of a bicycle that prints text messages sent from Web users directly onto the street in water-soluble chalk. Under the moniker “Bikes against Bush,” he planned to use the device as an interactive performance art piece during the RNC and his arrest is notable because it took place live on national television while he was being interviewed (about his bicycle) on MSNBC’s *Hardball*.⁴ Without making a mark on the street or possessing any spray paint, Kinberg was charged with criminal mischief and his possessions were seized as evidence: his cell phone, chalk printer, and laptop computer were illegally held for more than a year and his bicycle was never returned.⁵ Just two days prior to his arrest, Kinberg demonstrated the device in another televised interview, leaving an emphatic, if not ironic, message chalked on the sidewalk: “America is a free speech zone.”⁶

Police continued to arrest and seize the property (bicycles) of hundreds of bike riders in the months following the convention, and in 2005 video evidence and written documents confirmed that the NYPD conducted prolonged surveillance on cyclists and Critical Mass organizers in the period leading up to the RNC protest, even infiltrating a small memorial ride staged in honor of a cyclist killed in traffic.⁷ The city kept bicyclists and judges tied up in court for the better part of the next year, in part because they hoped to shut down Mass by requiring parade permits for roadway processions of twenty or more vehicles or bicycles, along with any processions of two or more people attempting to use the road “in a manner that does not comply with all applicable traffic laws, rules and regulations.”⁸ When the judge dismissed the city’s claims, Sheryl Neufeld, of the New York City Law Department, responded with the unfounded assertion that Critical Mass “continues to be a danger to the public safety.”⁹ Charles Komanoff, an economist, veteran bike advocate, and former head of New York City’s Transportation Alternatives, produced an economic report in 2006 that paints a sobering picture of the city’s crack-

down on bicyclists: it spent roughly \$1.32 million harassing, arresting, and prosecuting people who took part in 24 bike rides between September 2004 and August 2006, the same 2-year period, incidentally, in which the city spent just \$460,000 installing 15.3 miles of bike lanes in the 5 boroughs.¹⁰

The harsh response to Critical Mass in New York and a number of other U.S. cities clearly points to the perceived threat of leaderless public demonstrations just as it validates Dan Rather's prescient observation that "Americans will put up with anything provided it doesn't block traffic."¹¹ But what it fails to explain is why a bicycle ride, of all things, could ruffle so many feathers in cities with complex socioeconomic problems, school budget deficits, crumbling public infrastructures, and a slew of auto-related fatalities and injuries. Such dramatic and costly measures not only call into question the very function of public spaces and whether roads are indeed public; they also prompt a more basic set of questions about how and why bicycling can be simultaneously interpreted as a protest, a parade, a party, a threat to the status quo, and, even more bizarrely, a "terrorist-type behavior."¹²

Riding a bike is, of course, not always bound up with the tensions of police cruisers and undercover surveillance choppers. Millions of people in the United States love to ride bicycles and they do so for exercise and leisure, to visit friends and run the occasional errand, to attend college classes and compete in sporting events, to go camping in the country, and to explore city alleyways in the middle of the night. Bicycling is one of the most popular recreational activities in the United States and becoming a more attractive mode of urban transportation due in part to longer traffic delays, wildly fluctuating oil and gas prices, and the increasing costs of owning and operating a car. Indeed, the number of utilitarian, or utility, cyclists who use bicycles for some form of daily transportation or commuting is increasing sharply.¹³ New York City and Chicago saw 77 percent and 80 percent increases in bicycle use between 2000 and 2006, while Portland, Oregon, a city boasting one of the highest rates of cyclists in the country as well as a vast cycling infrastructure and a vivid culture of bike devotees, witnessed a 144 percent increase in bicycle use between 2000 and 2008.¹⁴ Amid surging gas prices and warm weather, cyclists came out in droves during the spring and summer of 2008, hitting the streets from Philadelphia to Los Angeles and in most cities in between.¹⁵ New York City bike shops at one point had difficulty keeping new bikes in stock, while San Francisco bicyclists occasionally outnumbered automobile drivers on a few busy corridors.¹⁶

Despite these positive trends, the stark reality is that only 1 percent of the total U.S. population rides a bicycle for transportation and barely half as many use bikes to commute to work.¹⁷ If these figures seem extraordinarily low, it is because they are. Less people ride bicycles in the United States than in almost every country throughout Asia and Europe, with the exception

of England, with whom the United States is tied (along with Australia). In contrast, bicycling accounts for 27 percent of trips made in the Netherlands, 18 percent in Denmark, and roughly 10 percent in Germany, Finland, and Sweden.¹⁸ China, despite its staggering pace of new automobile ownership, still has a strong reliance on bicycle transportation, and in Tokyo, Japan it is estimated that more people ride bicycles to local train and subway stations each day—as part of their work commute—than there are bike commuters in the entire United States.¹⁹ John Pucher, a bicycle transportation expert and urban planning professor, best puts the U.S. figure into perspective by noting that Canadians living in the frosty Yukon (adjacent to Alaska) bike to work at more than twice the rate of California residents and more than three times that of commuters in Florida.²⁰ Even the Northwest Territories, just shy of the North Pole, boasts a higher percentage of bike commuters (1.6 percent) than three of the largest U.S. cities ranked among the best in the nation for bicycling, including Oakland, California (1.5 percent), Honolulu, Hawaii (1.4 percent), and Denver, Colorado (1.4 percent).²¹

Bicycling is not only a fringe mode of transportation in a country with more vehicles than licensed drivers; it is a form of mobility rendered virtually obsolete by the material infrastructure and dominant cultural norms in the United States. Navigating a U.S. city by bicycle is for the inexperienced cyclist or casual rider a seemingly daunting challenge if not a completely undesirable task. Of course, people can and do ride bikes in any urban environment, and the health benefits alone far outweigh the actual risks of doing so. But statistics are somewhat meaningless when one is faced with the actuality of sharing the road with an almost ever-increasing volume of automobiles, driven by a growing number of aggressive drivers, with shorter tempers, in bigger vehicles.²² If and when one is capable of assuaging concerns over their safety (real or perceived), there are a slew of other issues for bike riders to contend with, the least of which is simply finding a safe place to park one's bike. For example, outdoor bike racks are generally scarce or inconveniently located, indoor parking facilities are almost nonexistent in U.S. cities, makeshift bike racks like parking meters are gradually disappearing from urban spaces (replaced by digital boxes), and most employers do not allow employees to bring their bicycles inside their place of work, much less provide facilities to shower and/or change clothes.²³ One can add to this any number of issues, including the prevalence of road hazards, a decreasing number of independent bike shops nationwide, and a relatively hostile street environment in which it is not uncommon for male drivers to sexually harass women on bikes and to intimidate, taunt (getting called "faggot" is all-too-typical), and occasionally kill male cyclists.²⁴ Even seven-time Tour de France champion Lance Armstrong is not immune from these general trends; he was threatened and

almost run over by a vengeful driver following a verbal exchange on the road in the late 1990s.²⁵

Whether one chooses to ride a bicycle or does so out of necessity, daily mobility quickly becomes an issue when some of the most mundane, routine experiences one has as a bicyclist are fraught with a degree of hassle that one rarely experiences as a driver. Sara Stout, a prominent bicycle advocate and car-free activist in Portland (Oregon), describes how this everyday sensibility begins to transform one's perspective about bicycle transportation and the need to effect some sort of change: "At first bicycling is utilitarian, it's just how you choose to get around . . . but it becomes political really quickly because it's hard to get around. There are difficulties at every turn, and there seem to be injustices at every turn. There's always a problem."²⁶ The problems Stout hints at, and indeed, the ones with which her activism is so comprehensively engaged, become political not simply because they adversely impact the mobility of bicyclists but because the burdens themselves are a set of restrictions preventing everyone—not just dedicated bike riders—from having the option to easily and safely utilize the cheapest, most efficient, and most practical form of personal transportation for short trips: the kind American drivers take more than 50 percent of the time they get behind the wheel of a car (three miles or less). These impediments, along with collectively poor access to adequate public transportation, high-speed transit, and even the most basic pedestrian infrastructure like sidewalks and crosswalks, also function, conversely, as a set of aids. They make it possible for people to see bicycle transportation as undesirable, dangerous, and/or childish; they make it easy for people in the United States to use cars for 69 percent of all daily trips of one mile or less, and they make it painfully comfortable for Americans to avoid taking collective responsibility for transportation-related pollution and oil dependency. Perhaps most significant, they make it seem natural for most adults to never consider the idea of riding a bicycle in the first place.

Automobility

The historical transformation of the United States into a full-blown car culture is commonly, though somewhat erroneously, attributed to choice or desire, as if the aggregation of individual consumer choices and yearnings necessarily built the roads, lobbied the government, zoned the real estate, silenced the critics, subsidized auto makers, underfunded public transit, and passed the necessary laws to oversee all facets of these projects since the 1890s. One of the primary stories used to bolster this broad-based claim is that of America's love affair with the automobile—a common trope in U.S. popular culture that colors our understanding of transportation history and also buttresses some

of the most partisan arguments posed by the car's vigorous defenders.²⁷ It is unquestionable that many Americans do, in fact, love their cars and cling to the myth of "The Road" with the zeal of Madison Avenue and Jack Kerouac combined. However, the fidelity of the narrative is almost irrelevant when considering how it is put to use and for whom it is made to work. That is to say, while the love affair serves a variety of social and cultural functions in the United States, it is particularly compelling to a relatively small group of free-market ideologues and multinational corporations (particularly oil conglomerates) who largely govern and/or profit from the production, marketing, sales, and regulation of the automobile. Indeed, the love story satisfies two of the most cherished myths of free-market capitalism concurrently: it corroborates the idea that consumer choices equal authentic power (i.e., people vote with their wallets), and it normalizes the false notion that consumer desires ultimately determine the so-called evolution of technologies—a position that ignores the profound roles that material and cultural infrastructures play in the success of any technology, much less the development of technological norms. Such explanations not only are misleading; they also effectively downplay some of the most undemocratic and thoroughly racist decision-making processes at the heart of postwar urban development and transportation policy implementation in the United States, as well as the political influence historically wielded by what could easily be termed an *automobile-industrial complex*.²⁸ This is not to suggest that power is always exerted from the top down, nor to imply that the average person plays no role in the production or contestation of technological and cultural norms. Rather, it is simply a way of acknowledging that technological desires and choices, particularly those concerning transportation and mobility, are necessarily constrained by the profit imperatives of very specific and very powerful institutions and organizations.

These interconnections partly constitute what John Urry calls the "system of automobility": the assemblages of socioeconomic, material, technological, and ideological power that not only facilitate and accelerate automobile travel but also help to reproduce and ultimately normalize the cultural conditions in which the automobile is seen, and made to be seen, as a technological savior, a powerful status symbol, and a producer of both "modern" subjectivities and "civilized" peoples.²⁹ Even in its earliest uses, the term *automobility* refers less to a form of transportation than an ideologically and symbolically loaded cultural phenomenon. A *New York Times* contributor in 1922 writes, "As a rule, automobility implies higher individual power, better economic distribution and a potentially higher social state."³⁰ It is with good reason then that Steffen Böhm sees automobility as fundamentally political inasmuch as it "entails patterns of power relations and visions of a collective 'good life' which are at the same time highly contestable and contested."³¹

The “good life” that Americans learn to associate with automobility is partly due to the way in which driving is so tangibly employed in the construction of American-ness itself: it is a de facto expression of citizenship in the United States and a means by which one becomes part of the national “imagined community.”³² Benedict Anderson argues that one of the ways people participate in something as politically and geographically disparate as “the Nation” is through a shared, mediated ritual, and he points to the rise of print media—or what he calls print capitalism—as the basis for modern nationalism inasmuch as reading the newspaper is an “extraordinary mass ceremony” in which individuals engage in an activity that is simultaneously repeated by millions of other people, at the same time, every day, throughout the entire year.³³ Of this practice, Anderson asks, “What more vivid figure for the secular, historically clocked, imagined community can be envisioned?”³⁴ If one takes Anderson’s question seriously, then with respect to the United States, the present-day answer to his rhetorical question is arguably quite simple: driving.

Driving, and more specifically the act of driving to and from work, is not only an integral part of American life, it is one of the most ritualized tasks performed by the largest number of U.S. citizens each day: roughly 120 million commute by car, including 105 million who drive alone.³⁵ This solitary/collective practice is a key practice in defining what it means to be American, or more accurately, what it means to *do* like an American. Thus, instead of imagining the nation through print capitalism, as Anderson argues, one might say that Americans imagine the nation through mobile capitalism or *auto capitalism*: a process wherein the United States is habitually reconstructed as a “republic of drivers.”³⁶ Within this republic, the “gauge and emblem” of freedom is not the sovereign state, as Anderson suggests, but the gauge itself, which is to say the speedometer mounted on the dashboard of every one of the 250 million vehicles in the United States.³⁷

The automobile resides at the core of the post–World War II American dream and it functions as both the literal and symbolic centerpiece of a narrative equating individual mobility with personal freedom. As William F. Buckley Jr. puts it, “The *right* to drive a car is the most cherished right in America, of special, sizzling importance to young people.”³⁸ Thus, it is hardly surprising that Americans tend to shrug off the negative aspects of driving despite its obvious hazards (roughly 6 million crashes, 2 million injuries, and 42,000 deaths per year in the United States alone) or the multitude of environmental, social, health, and economic costs associated with automobility.³⁹ Nor is it surprising that critiques of the automobile are taken quite personally in the United States, often condemned as symptoms of a fringe ideology or manifestations of “cultural elitism.”⁴⁰ Within this prevailing cultural context, driving a hybrid vehicle can just as easily signify smugness as the seemingly