Michael William

Bicycles and Civilization

1992

The Anarchist Library

Before moving to Montreal in the '70s I drove a car for about a year in Ontario, the province next door. In the areas I moved to close to downtown Montreal, I found that I could walk to most of the places I needed to reach on a regular basis. That, plus a variety of other frustrations related to driving, induced me to avoid thinking about using a car in Montreal.

My problematic relationship with the automobile may have been a harbinger. But in the '70s and into the '80s I was basically pro-tech. Not that I was fervent, a proselytizer. I simply took the techno-structure as a given like almost everybody else. It certainly seemed completely normal, basically healthy, and after a century and a half of techno-optimism and non-stop industrial expansion, to be unshakeable. The very materials, the steel and massive slabs of concrete, exuded a solidity, a triumphal permanence. Although they had only been around for a short period of time, it was as if they had always been there.

After years without any form of personal transportation, toward the end of the '80s I discovered the bicycle. By this time my outlook had changed considerably. As an apparently ecologically sound antidote to the automobile, the bicycle seemed to fit in perfectly with my by now anti-civilization outlook.

I used my bike almost every day. I explored distant and unfamiliar areas of the city, saved bus and metro (subway) fares, could get to where I wanted to go faster and was able to expand the number of places I could comfortably reach. I used my bike right through January and February (many people are unaware that a bike can be used all winter, even in an icy city like Montreal. It's only slippery during and just after a snowfall. On the other hand the salt on the streets has a very corrosive effect and tends to wreck the bike).

Having used my bike on a regular basis for several years, however, I am now thoroughly fed up. Whenever possible I avoid my bike and walk. Whereas I previously saw bikes as at least a" partial negation of civilization's worst aspects, they now appear to be an integral part of the megamachine. Each day more and more of the surface of the earth is gobbled up by streets and highways. Uprooting everything in its path, this onslaught replaces the irregular, spontaneous, unpredictable surfaces of nature with the flat surfaces, the 90-degree angles, the monotonous predictability of the rhythms of the megamachine. When the asphalt crumbles from the constant pounding, and shoots of nature reassert themselves through the cracks, they are crushed and obliterated by cars and trucks until a steaming layer of asphalt 'disappears' them and the cycle begins anew.

Cut into rectangles and squares, space in the city is proportioned for specific uses. Bicycles, which require a lot of room, are not enough of a priority so they are shunted into the space reserved for motor vehicles. The congested inner city streets where I use my bike are a zone of constant vulnerability. At any moment a car? can come zooming up from behind without my noticing, a parked car can start up and plunge out in front of me, or kids can leap out from behind parked cars. But if there are very real risks which can be calculated and taken when I use my bike, the scope of these challenges is very limited. These are not the kind of risks which are taken in order to unlearn our domestication and go wild, to confront the demons within and surrounding us. The risks involved in bike riding are simply a question of calculating how many corners you are going to cut safety-wise, which often boils down to how much you're willing to stick your neck out to get somewhere faster: speed is the essence -of civilization.

Walking is a time to daydream, to analyze, to people-watch. But when I'm

on a bike it is almost impossible to let my thoughts and emotions flow because I have to constantly monitor the activities of the metal monsters surrounding me. I could simply ignore them, but that would quickly become fatal. Not that this monitoring activity requires a lot of conscious effort, nor am I usually in immediate danger. But it remains an ongoing irritation because it is constantly intruding. Like an omnipresent pollution, it makes bike riding *unpleasant*.

As well it's hard to have other than an alienated relationship toward people driving cars. Especially at night you can't even see the drivers and passengers properly because they lurk in the shadows, distorted by rapidly moving shapes on curved glass surfaces. Driving transforms the personalities of motorists, who take on its frustrations while at the same time exercising the power it conveys. Bicyclists are intruders, an irritant, and the scarcely-veiled hostility of motorists makes bike riding all the more disagreeable.

Like a moth to the light I get drawn toward the sidewalk, where I can bike along without thinking about cars, at least until I get to the end of the block. But here an inversion takes place: on the sidewalk I become towards pedestrians what cars are towards me on the streets — a physical menace and a general pain in the ass. Since I'm not interested in plowing into kids and little old ladies clutching grocery bags, I usually avoid the sidewalks and end up back on the streets.

Not that I obey the rules, as I was reminded by an ad in a local bicycle-oriented tabloid which featured a number of safety tips: "obey traffic signals" (I don't); "wear a helmet" (I don't); "ride with the traffic flow" (I don't on occasion); "be visible" (I frequently wear dark clothes at night). If I arrive at an intersection and there are no cars coming I see no point in waiting until the light turns green. Industrial civilization has created a labyrinth of absurd regulations, which I attempt to outflank when possible. On the other hand my erratic moves contribute to the bad rep bicyclists have earned with motorists, who in a sense are justifiably exasperated by our antics. Although I am always cutting corners, I contradictorily expect cars to obey the rules, because whimsy and spontaneity on their part rapidly becomes deadly.

However my regulation avoidance, such as it is, has little impact on what happens in the streets: cars and trucks control the space, do what they like, and bikes are ultimately irrelevant and can only adapt. But if the world of cars-speed, power, alienation and pollution-is synonymous with civilization, bikes are not as detached from or hostile to this world as might first seem the case. Since we are constantly interacting with cars, we internalize their rules and logic. But bikes also resemble cars in the sense that, though engineless, they are composed of many of the same materials. Which implies the mines to extract the metals, the factories to process the rubber and plastics and to assemble the bikes, trucks to transport various materials connected with the production process, and the bikes themselves when they are assembled. Not to mention the shops devoted to retailing and repairing bikes, where we run into more boring jobs, commodity relations as usual and a plethora of accessories and gadgets, implying more mines and factories and more boring jobs processing, transporting and selling the stuff. Take a bike, follow it back to where it comes from, and you end up recreating the mega-machine. With the contradictory — or hypocritical — note which often creeps into our relations with our street co-occupiers, bicyclists complain about trucks but tend to forget that we're dependent on them as well, as long as we're in an urban environment and unable to provide food in order

to create the material basis for self-sufficiency.

If bikes are constantly adapting to the language of cars, cars are an essential component of the larger entity which imposes its needs and logic: the city-state. Streets are the circulatory system, the hardened arteries of the mega-machine. They occupy an enormous amount of space because an enormous number of people have to go often considerable distances as directly as possible on a daily basis. In the city, efficiency and utilitarianism rule (or rather an ideology of efficiency, since something as bureaucratic as a city is highly unlikely to function in a sensible way).

But transportation cannot be detached from where we're going and why: boring jobs, empty entertainment, mindless shopping, etc. Bikes are a scaled-down version of a need to get somewhere — or nowhere — fast; a coercive rhythm which is internalized and continues to function on automatic outside work-related activities.

Today, when the city has taken center stage in much of the eco-anarchist milieu via Murray Bookchin's "libertarian municipalism," questioning the city as such becomes all the more apropos. Using the Athenian polis as an inspiration, Bookchin's updated version features a triple whammy of municipality worship, electoral politix and high-tech fetishism. "Obviously very wonderful opportunities" gushes Book-chin when asked about the opportunities he sees in the "mass technology of the so-called information age": "I believe that science and technology should be used in the service 'of refurbishing and rehabilitating a new balance with nature." But Bookchin's vision of a high — tech apparatus passively "in the service" of humanity — a discourse he shares with all the technocrats — denies the qualitative leap, the autonomization of technology which occurs with the implementation of mass techniques in the metropolis. Later, Book-chin backhandedly acknowledges this autonomization, when the underlying techno-determinism of his discourse makes "sophisticated technology" a universal given: "...the very things we are using presuppose a great deal of sophisticated technology. Let's face the fact that we need these technologies."* Rather than presupposing a great deal of sophisticated technology, isn't it more appropriate to question "the very things we are using?" When Bookchin says "we need" these technologies, he is speaking only for himself.

Questioning bikes will be heretical for some, no doubt. But questioning everything, if offering no guaranties, at least allows the possibility of creating situations which are truly different. For now I continue to use my bike and mass transportation but walk whenever possible. Only when walking do you have time to really look at things, or to think about things in the most uninterrupted, spontaneous way.

Author: Michael William
Title: Bicycles and Civilization
Publication date: 1992

Originally published in *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* #33 — Summer '92.