

Bikesheviks: cycling for freedom

Militant cyclists have shut down bridges, disrupted auto-shows, and organized urban "die-ins." By Bob Silverman.

The bicycle is a vehicle for revolution. It can destroy the tyranny of the automobile as effectively as the printing press brought down despots of flesh and blood. The revolution will be spontaneous, the sum total of individual revolts like my own. It has already begun.

—Daniel Behrman in *The Man Who Loved Bicycles, the Memoires of an Autophobe*

The velorution has started. That's the message of radical bicyclists organizing and gaining strength all over the world for a bicycle revolution.

They believe that bicycles, when conceived as daily urban transport, are instruments of profound social change. The cyclists' daily confrontation with automobiles for the use of street and parking lot space induces a changed consciousness, they say.

For the bicycling militant, or Bikeshevik, the urban bicycle is the revolutionary's best friend.

Why? Because it permits individuals to take transport into their own hands, enabling them to bypass the *auto-necessity* constructed step-by-step by the giant car and oil monopolies and the governments who operate in their favour. Bicycling is accessible to virtually every healthy person and its advocates maintain their movement will gather irresistible momentum in the deteriorating Eighties.

Existing groups, like Le Monde a Bicyclette in Montreal, are calling for the velorution, and their methods and social theory are profoundly anti-authoritarian with conscious anarchists involved in the struggle to overthrow the *auto-crazy*.

Already militant cyclists have shut down bridges, disrupted autoshow, organized urban "die-ins," and begun redesigning urban transportation schemes outside government channels. What's more, they've been successful in implementing many of their aims.

However, the velorution is far from over and the huge automobile interests have barely begun to fight. To understand the scope of the velorution it is first necessary to understand the profound socio-economic forces it threatens to topple.

Automobiles have been with us for so long many people, including radicals, view them as "normal," taking their necessity for granted. But normality is little more than accumulated economic interest and the private car is the supreme economic interest in the world.

The ten largest companies in the world are all producers of cars or oil. General Motors (GM) and Exxon both have sales far in excess of Canada's budget. And the car/oil multinationals have molded the world to suit their interests. Urban geography reflects the stamp of auto-necessity. And their billions have corrupted everyone's heads and value systems.

How did it all happen?

The automobile can be compared to the amoeba. They have multiplied and multiplied. First mass-produced and mass-consumed in the United States, they are now produced and consumed throughout the world. In *Running On Empty*, a book assessing the future of the automobile, the authors point out, "cars have assumed a major role in the lives of millions of people and in the aspirations of millions more. Automaking has become the world's largest manufacturing industry. More than 300 million passenger cars are now travelling the world's roads, and some 100,000 new ones roll off the assembly lines each working day."

Clearly, the automobile became the chief motor of capitalist growth in North America. Its attraction to a frustrated and alienated people was immense. For workers disliking their jobs, feeling powerless, the auto had a great appeal, promising to finally put them in the driver's seat of life. It offered them status and identity, and a tangible, visible justification for their labour. Owning a car actually gave meaning to life.

From the beginning the car created and attracted fellow travellers. Oil for cars, steel for cars, glass for cars, rubber for cars, cement for roads for cars, highway bureaucracies and police forces for cars. And every year these forces, both capital and



continued from page 12

labor, called for more roads to accommodate even more cars.

Kenneth Schneider, an expert on the subject of cars vs. people, writes: "Their variety is bewildering, and they infiltrate virtually every realm of industry, service, and government. Behind auto-making are machine tools, steel, rubber, glass, lead, lacquer, plastics, chrome, copper. Behind gas and oil lie exploration and drilling equipment, refining equipment and its machinery, pipelines and tankers. Behind highway, bridge and parking development lie construction machinery, cement, asphalt and steel."

In the mid-thirties, three of the principle auto-concerns, GM, Standard Oil of California and Firestone Tire Company, started to buy up and destroy the streetcar systems of North America in order to eliminate an impediment to expanded auto sales.

In 1974, Bradford Snell, before the U.S. Senate Committee on Monopolies, traced how GM annihilated all the alternatives to the car and "built the auto-necessity."

"General Motors is a sovereign economic state," Snell wrote in "American Ground Transport," "whose common control of auto, truck, bus and locomotive production was a major factor in the displacement of rail and bus transportation by cars and trucks." He notes, moreover, that these displaced methods of travel were energy-conserving, dependable, economical, safe and environmentally compatible. His conclusion: the monopoly in ground vehicle production has inexorably led to a breakdown in North America's ground transportation.

The economics are obvious, Snell continued, "one bus can eliminate 35 automobiles; one streetcar, subway or rail transit vehicle can supplant 50 passenger cars; one train can supplant 1,000 cars or a fleet of 150 cargo-laden trucks. The result was inevitable: a drive by GM to sell cars and trucks by displacing rail and bus systems."

"Nowhere was the ruin from GM's motorization program more apparent than in Southern California. Thirty-five years ago Los Angeles was a beautiful city of lush palm trees, fragrant orange groves and ocean-clean air. It was served then by the world's largest electric railway network. In the late 1930's General Motors and allied highway interests acquired the local transit companies, scrapped their pollution-free electric trams, tore down their power transmission lines, ripped up their tracks, and placed GM busses on already congested Los Angeles streets. Largely as a result, L.A. is today an ecological wasteland: the palm trees are dying of petrochemical smog; the orange

Cyclists have become frustrated and angry. They see that cars have all the road space, pedestrians have the sidewalks; cyclists have nothing. In short, cyclists are suffering from cyclo-frustration.

groves have been paved over by 300 miles of freeways; the air is a septic tank into which 4 million cars, half of them built by General Motors, pump 13,000 tons of pollutants daily."

In another transport area General Motors and its allies succeeded in destroying intercity train and bus transportation. Greyhound was established by General Motors to replace inter-city train travel. They succeeded. Similarly, using its position as the largest shipper of freight in the country, GM imposed its diesel railway engines on the railways which shortly afterwards went bankrupt. At the same time railways in Europe and Japan converted to electricity and are still widely used both for passengers and freight.

In June 1932, Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., president of General Motors, organized the National Highway Users Conference to combine representatives of the Nation's auto, oil and tire industries in a common front against competing transportation interests. Its announced objectives were dedication of highway taxes solely to highway purposes, and development of a continuing program of highway construction.

During the succeeding 40 years, the National Highway Users Conference has compiled an impressive record of accomplishments. Its effect, if not purpose, has been to direct public funds away from rail construction and into highway building. At the state level, its 2,800 lobbying groups have been instrumental in persuading 44 of the nation's legislatures to adopt and preserve measures which dedicate state and local tax revenues exclusively to highway construction. By promoting these highway "trust funds," it has discouraged governors and mayors from attempting to build anything other than highways for urban transportation.

Auto-cracy Damage

Subway and rail transit proposals have had to compete with hospitals, schools and other governmental responsibilities for funding. By contrast, highways have been automatically financed from a self-perpetuating fund which was legally unavailable for any other purpose. From 1945 through 1970, states and localities spent more than \$156 billion constructing hundreds of thousands of miles of roads. During that same period, only 16 miles of subway were constructed in the entire country.

Likewise, at the Federal level this organization has been very successful in promoting highways over rail transportation. The National Highway Users Conference managed to persuade Congress to adopt the same trust fund arrangement which it had successfully promoted earlier to the state legislatures. The impact of the Federal Highways Trust Fund on transportation spending was similar to that which occurred at the state level. While urban rail proposals were forced to compete for funds with dozens of Federal priorities including national defense, health, and social security, thousands of miles of highways were built automatically with gasoline tax revenues unavailable for any other purpose. From 1956 through 1970, the Federal Government spent approximately \$70 billion for highways; and only \$795 million, or one percent for rail transit.

America and much of the developed world lies prostrate before auto-cracy.

In America public transport has been so thoroughly destroyed that 63 million American workers (87% of the workforce) are forced to commute by car. In many cities like Los Angeles and Atlanta over 60% of the total land area is allocated to streets, parking lots, and autoroutes. Vast sections of urban inner cities have been annihilated for parking lots. 55,000 Americans die every year in car crashes while the world figure is 200,000. Since the turn of the century 27 million human beings have been killed in cars. Air pollution causes countless cases of lung cancer, asthma, and other bronchial disorders. In Montreal alone, 25% of the inner city population suffers from lung diseases. Not to mention that automobile noises disturb the peace and tranquility of bicyclists, walkers and neighbours.

Schneider writes: "America is a corporate society. A corporate society is based upon corporate values like money, hard values like steel, operating values like production and consumption, human values like employment. Ever since the second decade of this century the corporate world has realized that there could never be a better vehicle to advance corporate values in the whole society than the automobile."

So, what's so special about bicycles? Are they not a commodity just like any other? Capitalists invest money in bicycle factories, workers are exploited in them and bicycles are sold in the market place like televisions, automobiles, pants and skis. It's all true, but in 1980 bicycles are becoming a unique commodity for a very important reason. Unique not because of how they are made, marketed or advertised, but because of their capacity to change users' consciousness when conceived as daily urban transport.

When viewed as daily urban transport, the bicycle becomes a tool of economic and social

One audacious velorutionary disrobed down to his underwear & mockingly made love to the car thus satirizing the auto-show's use of half-dressed women to sell their deadly commodity.

change. It becomes a means of bypassing the "official" transports and a way for cyclists to refuse the manipulations of the auto-cracy.

On an economic front you can't beat the bicycle. After four months of steady bicycle commuting the cost of a bicycle is paid in full, with saved expenses. However, the non-monetary benefits of the cycle are even greater. In a city, the bicycle is simply the best transport. Cyclists get to their destinations just as quickly as motorists and much quicker than the public transportation. Cycling advocates point out, "It is great fun. Your mind and body get stronger every day. It's a transport you can see and understand. It is a transport you can repair yourself. On a bicycle you become virtually an urban geographer. Just going to your destination you discover previously unknown neighbourhoods that you now find interesting. You observe the architecture more closely. You have daily random encounters with friends. You get door to door service. You can place your transport in your home."

The list goes on and on.

Bicycle Benefits

In the two decades before the turn of the century the bicycle was very prominent. It was the first personal transport. It gave women a tool which eventually permitted them to leave their homes unchaperoned and to wear pants (bloomers). The League of American Wheelmen, founded in 1880, quickly became the biggest lobby in the United States and succeeded in getting the streets paved for the first time.

At the turn of the century the mass production of the automobile gradually displaced the bicycle from the streets which the bicycle had paved. And bicycle technology stagnated for 60 years.

This all began to change in the 1970's. The development of the ten-speed bicycle made bicycling easier for people in hilly cities and for longer distances. Slowly, throughout the decade and in all the cities of the developed world bicycles began to make their comeback in greater and greater numbers. For the first time in years bicycles outsold cars in the U.S., Canada, France, England, Germany and Japan.

Although the number of cyclists keeps growing, the facilities for bicycles haven't. Cyclists have become frustrated and angry. They see that cars have all the road space, pedestrians have the sidewalks and cyclists have nothing. They want to ride to work, to school, to market and to friends in perfect safety. They want to be able to park bicycles without worrying that they will be stolen. They want to be able to cross over or under all tunnels and bridges. And they don't want hassles on buses and trains. In short, cyclists are suffering from cyclo-frustration.

Cyclo-frustration

The urban cyclo-frustration has resulted in the creation of bicycling organizations to improve the cyclist's lot. In many cities, groups developed when the number of cyclists became sufficient to support an organization. Montreal's group, Le Monde a Bicyclette (LMB), began in April 1975. By 1979 similar organizations had sprung up in more than 90 cities throughout the world.

The programs of the various cycling groups are virtually identical, for similar realities engender similar responses. The cycling groups all demand:

1: A complete network of bicycle routes and paths so that a ten-year-old child could go any-

where in the city in perfect safety.

2: Safe bicycle parking at all cyclists' destinations: all schools, public transit stops, factories, office buildings, major stores, apartment houses, theatres, restaurants and bars, etc.

3: The integration of the bicycle into the public transport network. Bicycles must be permitted on all metros, on city busses by the installation of rear end bike racks like those in San Diego.

4: Access to all bridges and tunnels.

5: Showers at work places.

6: No dress code in offices so as to be able to work in your bicycle commuting clothes.

7: Bicycle education, both mechanical and signaling, throughout the school system.

8: The compensation of employees using their bicycles for work at a rate presently paid out to cars.

And, in the case of more radical groups like LMB in Montreal, 100,000 community bicycles to be placed in depots throughout the city.

Who would think that something so positive as encouraging bicycle commuting would or could lead to confrontations with the State? After all, don't high government officials in environment, health and energy fields take out expensive ads suggesting the public bicycle for health, energy saving and ecology?

In reality, however, governments have chosen to give the car most of the transport budgets and virtually all the street space. They have constructed bicycle-throttling bridges and tunnels on which only automobiles can travel. In fact, the main cyclist-State confrontations have taken place on bridges.

Confrontations with the State

One could say that bridges and tunnels built since the Second World War, which limit access to automobiles only, are a metaphor for Western society. People just don't count in their planning. All of the bridges built since the last war over the St. Lawrence River in Quebec have omitted facilities for bicyclists. And the four bridges involved include both those constructed by the government of Canada and the government of Quebec. The two rivals seem to be able to cooperate well when it comes to helping the auto/oil industry. Even worse, in Montreal things are actually retrogressing. The hundred year old Victoria Bridge was renovated to eliminate sidewalks in favour of two additional car lanes.

And it's the same all over America.

In Boston a tunnel divides two highly populated parts of that city. Cyclists can't use it and must take a thirty minute detour. In New York they built the Verrazano Bridge, the largest suspension bridge in the world. This bridge has 16 lanes and replaced a ferry boat. The ferry boat took bicycles. The Verrazano Bridge bans bicycles and pedestrians. It cost about \$600 million.

In Philadelphia, no less than four bridges crossing the Delaware River have no bicycle access. One such bridge is named after Walt Whitman, author of the *Open Road*. And it's the same unbelievable situation with bridges over San Francisco Bay.

Bridge inaccessibility brings out the most acute cyclo-frustration. For the other hassles, like lack of urban bike paths and safe parking, are only inconveniences. Cyclists can cope with them by being careful and by buying theft-proof personal bicycle locks like Kryptonites and Citadels. But they often can't cross over to the other side of the water.

Under pressure, in recent years, transportation authorities have made some concessions. In San Diego, California, busses are equipped with rear end bicycle racks. The PATH Subway system uniting New York with New Jersey under the Hudson River accepts bicycles at non rush hours. The BART subway in San Francisco also accepts bicycles at non-rush hours. During the morning and afternoon rush hours Caltrans, California's Transport Ministry, has provided cyclists with a bicycle shuttling service on the Oakland/San Francisco Bay Bridge. Cyclists pay 25 cents.

In New York City, the 12 lane Queensboro Bridge used to have no bicycle access for the 4 million people who live on both sides of the East River in Queens and Manhattan. Last year militant cyclists from Transportation Alternatives and the Bicycle Commuters of New York organized several illegal rush hour crossings. In July 1979 the City of New York announced the opening of a lane for bicycles on the Queensboro Bridge. The cyclists' struggle paid off.

In Montreal, Le Monde a Bicyclette in conjunction with Velo-Quebec, the Quebec Government financed cyclotouring association, stormed the renovated and de-biked Victoria Bridge last August. Two baton wielding bridge police failed to stop the 40 cyclists. After the illegal ride, the cyclists were offered an escort if they phoned in advance. After crossing the bridge the protestors headed on to the Streetcar Museum to mark the 20th anniversary of the elimination of Montreal's streetcars.

continued on page 28

