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### Squeaky Gears: Bicycling, Dissent, and Political Innovations

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*Pitzer College*

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2014  
Claremont Colleges Library  
Undergraduate Research Award

Junior Award Winner

**Braden Bernards**  
**Pitzer College**

Reflective Essay

## Reflective Essay: Political Innovation Research Reflection

To be faced with a final research paper and total freedom of topic can be an exhilarating or dragging experience. Thankfully, the class was “Political Innovation,” at HMC, which broadened the field of political science in exciting ways. Inspired to attempt the same with my research, I chose to study bicycling and dissent.

My first experiences of biking literature were depressingly stale—with an emphasis on technical infrastructure and mobility preferences. A survey of the surface literature using Academic Search Premier was like putting a stick in between my spokes—I felt my excitement drain and my progress stopped. I wanted to write on the political innovations, dissent, and public sphere behind bicycling—not the color of bike lanes or road width. After chatting with a research librarian, I began orienting my search towards urban spatial analysis, reading books like “*City of Quartz*” and “*Variations on a Theme Park*.” These classics of the field reframed what once seemed banal—city planning and the allegiances of space—into exciting topics. Still, little of bicycling-specific literature dealt with these bigger geographical anthropology/urban studies issues. My curiosity gripped me, and I began changing my search terms—instead of looking for research that confirmed what I wanted to write about, I began looking for broader work that could relate. This marked shift in approach towards my research proved key. Rather than weave together sources just on bicycles, I started applying broader theories on urban mobility, politicized technology, dissent, etc., and see how they fit into the fascinating story of bicycling politics. With the help of RefWorks, I began tagging documents and chronicling their approaches. I emerged with more questions, but also a deeper understanding of the path through which bicycling traversed all of them.

A main change in the development of my paper was the shift from being on Portland, OR, to using Portland as an example in a broader analysis. Coming from Portland and being a student of urban politics, I had always wanted to combine the two. Yet, my scholarly research on Portland biking policy did not deliver. Just earlier last year, I bought a book on cycling from a favorite political reporter in Portland, *Pedaling Revolution: How Cyclists Are Changing American Cities*, which used Portland to tell the national and global story of bicycling. Unlike the famous author, I faced limitations in that my paper dealt with a recent topic, bicycling is generally

thought to be ‘understudied,’ and I did not have the time nor resources to conduct first-person interviews of those at the forefront of bicycling politics. Thus, with limited options for studying the present policy world, I began exploring the history, which added nicely to, and forced me to adjust, my narrative of mobility, dissent, and the social production of space. Alongside this shift, I abandoned trying to show a neat and clean policy relationship between dissent and cycling. Instead, I began thinking more critically about what cycling means for the flow of a city, where it fits in the long-term trends of city life, and how too often space determines available actions, when action should determine the utility of space. Professor Steinberg is big on examining the unspoken “social rules,” that dominate our daily lives, leading me to look at the ways bicycling disrupts and offers an alternative to many rules.

Building off my previous experiences with theories of the public sphere from a class called The City at Pitzer, I developed a short reading list of critical urban theorists. Soon, I outlined a paper that spanned the gamut of thought from classic perspectives on urban life through Walter Benjamin, Henri Lefebvre, and Gilles Deleuze to the modern bicycling work of Jeff Mapes, Zack Furness, Steven Johnson and Rachel Aldred. Unlike usual, I did not just cherry-pick out of journal databases, but began going from issue to issue of journals like *Social and Cultural Geography* and *Theory in Action*, which helped me learn the vocabularies and context of my paper. While reading particularly relevant articles, I would check their citation pages to see further work. This process yielded a paper well-grounded in its subject, yet not limited to a certain discipline.

My research approach for this paper was unique for me. My paper changed drastically from the beginning to the end. At first, I aimed for a hard-political and policy driven paper that showed how government action fosters bicycling. After disappointment with the literature, dissatisfaction with the answer, and encouragement from Professor Steinberg, I focused on the bicycle itself—how it is subversive and how it has a history as being a radical technology. This grew into bigger questions on how urban mobility connects to issues of capitalism and the state, and how the dedications of space play into culture, society, politics, and economics. Leading me full circle, I followed my interest in modern debates over public space, surveillance, and urban planning to show how the bicycle fits into a framework of protest, and how its use as an object of dissent leads to the hard policy changes I, at first, intended to write about. Furthermore, while I

am pleased with the thoroughness of analysis in the final product, I have a lot more loose ends and lingering questions I want to pursue. My paper, in some ways, tries to do a lot in a little space—I wish I had had more time to really unwrap the social production of space in everyday life and how it relates to mobility preferences, and I wish I had more time to fully understand the ins and outs of relations between urban politicians and bicycling advocates. My research journey led me on a roundabout tour of many fields and perspectives, and how I approach research, and bicycling for that matter, will always be better off because of it.

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**Pitzer College**

Research Project

“Squeaky Gears:  
Bicycling, Dissent, and Political Innovations”

# Squeaky Gears: Bicycling, Dissent, and Political Innovations

*Submitted to:*

Dr. Paul Steinberg  
Political Studies

Harvey Mudd College, Claremont, CA  
13 Dec 2013

*By:*

Braden Bernards  
Pitzer College

***Abstract.*** The ascent of bicycling in the past decades has been the concerted result of political innovations. Cities across America have begun repurposing space to accommodate the bicycle. In examining this social trend and its impetus, this paper locates dissent as the primary vehicle of transit change in favor of bicycling. Contextualizing the bicycle in urban theory, critical spatial analysis, and its own history of being a radical technology, the paper provides an acute explanation of how the bicycle is a subversive technology, and why the movement has proved effective. Portland, OR's history of political innovation and dissent drives the concluding analysis—illuminating the role of dissent in the bicycle movement. The paper's implications inform the work of community groups, planners, policy-makers, and dissenters alike.

Erik Wilder left the suburban high-school graduation party early in mid June, 2013. A man of stature in the community, a successful real estate broker and longtime Portland booster threw an old bike in an even older truck, and raced downtown to the Portland Art Museum. There, he donned boxer shorts, long gym socks, and white tennis shoes, joined thousands of naked or scantily clad retirees, students, artists, baristas, financiers, and people from all walks of life in the annual World Naked Bike Ride. Swerving through the streets, the thousands celebrated civic life, revived public space, friendship, spontaneity, diversity, and other tenets of the urban experience. Indeed, on that cool summer night in Portland, the body politic triumphed.

Following decades of urban decay, American cities began thinking strategically about the future of urban life in America in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The school of urban planning now labeled “New Urbanism,” began to push ideas emphasizing mobility, density, mixed-use buildings, and strategic public, open spaces. Within this timeframe concepts such as smart growth, streetlife, community, and the democratic public sphere loomed large as ultimate guiding lights (Passell). The nexus and partial realization of these concepts can be seen by Wilder’s late-night, naked ride through the City of Portland. The New Urbanism, dissenting from the status quo of flight and sprawl, showcased the possibilities for normative urban planning triumphing rational and traditional planning.

Long have dissenting ideas and characters at the margin informed American political discourse in both sexy and unsexy ways. From the grandeur of large-scale marches and protest, to small individual actions—counter-culture has yielded profound innovations and behavioral changes. At the confluence of a broader New Urbanist trend



and dissent rests the re-appropriation of a radical technology fundamentally reorienting cities: the bicycle. Across the country, major cities are recognizing the potential of the bicycle and pushing for innovative growth, transit, planning, and infrastructural policies. Yet, there is a trend to trivialize the bicycle—a child’s toy, a greenie’s love, a poor man’s car or a hipster’s pretention. In this, the act of bicycling’s utility as an intentional and dissenting political act emerges.

This paper will interrogate precisely this connection between dissent and the rise of urban bicycling. Firstly, the paper will survey the existing literature on biking’s ascent in the United States and the accommodating policy innovations. Moving forward, the paper will locate the impetus for bike-dissent in critical spatial analysis, social structures, and everyday mobility, positing that biking is an expression of demand for public space and is a new form of the commons. The use of physical space, strategic planning, and urban theory are key in understanding both how the bicycle is a radical political technology and how it has led to political innovation. The modern biking movement will be profiled as a movement of dissent with a normative agenda, and explained via the history of bicycling and the role of committed actors. Furthermore, the paper will zoom in on the rise of cycling in Portland, OR, and show that innovative bike policy spurs from dissent. The paper concludes having discussed concepts that appeal to policy-makers and the citizenry alike—the effective use of space, the radical nature of the bicycle, the link between dissent and progress, and, at the end of the tunnel, the link between behavior and policy through the contextualized story of modern bicycling. Bicycling has seen a massive uptick in cities due to specific policy innovations, and, ultimately, these policy innovations stem from the bicycle’s use-value as a tool for and goal of dissent.

## Review of the Literature

Research on public policy and biking generally focuses on commuting preferences for bikers, the existence of accommodating facilities, and the popularity of public funding for alternative transportation. The research in cycling focuses on the material-level and demand-side components nearly exclusively, often ignoring larger cultural contexts and the political backstory. The tradition of public opinion polling on bicycling is rich and oft used to explain the rise in biking (Dill). In a seminal study, McDonald and Burns used data from the National Bicycling and Walking Study to find commuters adjust their routes to use existing infrastructure—showing infrastructure investments are prudent. Others have rejected the results as being too narrow, and employed other explanatory variables such as temperature, rain, terrain, and student populations (Nankervis, Nelson and Allen). Most all variables offered up as explanatory proved to be insignificant in the long run. The aforementioned examples that all focus on citizen behavior pay testament to the absence of critical, long-term perspective on the rise of cycling. Somewhat differently, John Pucher, the nation’s foremost expert on cycling, has found that “pro-bicycling policies have the potential to increase bicycling almost anywhere,” which confirms the efficacy of pro-bicycling, prescriptive policy, but has no implications for the impetus behind such policy (Pucher, Germany).

Overall, experts in the field have lamented that cycling is “remarkably unthought” (*Cycling*). And, in particular, there is a dearth of intellectual wrestling with the notion of cycling being more than a physical action, but instead being an intentional and meaningful action in life (Spinney, Aldred). As touched on in the previous paragraph, the

heart of literature on cycling rests in technical explanations—offering plenty of advice to policy makers eager to increase cycling, but failing to provide the necessary understanding and context that makes policies possible. The technical explanations range from separated bike lanes to greenways, increased policing to street color, and have all been studied thoroughly and vetted for effectiveness (Pucher and Buehler). Still the question begs, how, and why, did these policies emerge, and what broader lessons on obedience, space, and social change can be garnered. The analyses largely ignores non-technical infrastructural explanations, including the history, the policy process process, political culture, those who risked political skin, and the role of opinion-leaders and non-state actors in creating windows for innovation and executing.

### **The Tragedy of the Commons, The Importance of Mobility**

Long have urbanists marked with dismay the decline of vibrant public life and the withering public realm. The notion of a democratic, Habermasian public sphere and urban form is inseparable, as historically, “the ‘town’ was the life center of civil society not only economically; in cultural-political contrast to the [authority], it designated an early public sphere in the world of letters whose institutions were the coffee houses and salons” (Habermas 30). In this, Habermas locates the public sphere as sovereign from authority and being inseparable from urban life. Habermas asserts that an unbridled public sphere is essential to maintaining a healthy democracy. Yet, in recent years, the hands of public authority and privatization have strangled the public sphere to a gasp (Davis, Sorkin). Public authority has used regulations to exclude individuals, limited public assembly, and monitored communications, while private forces have used gated developments, quasi-public corporate plazas, and semi-private public spaces such as

shopping malls or sports arenas to stifle the uncertainty of truly public space (Stangl 2). In addition, urban design has intentionally discouraged public engagement, further exacerbating the trend (Davis). Cities have always been lauded for their reflection of social order in urban form, and today's city maintain this, but as a theme park—presenting a “happy regulated vision of pleasure—all those artfully hoodwinking forms—as a substitute for the democratic public realm” by “stripping troubled urbanity of its sting,” namely being the poor, the dirt, and labor (Sorkin xv). Out of this myriad of contested space, democracy, and public life emerges biking and mobility as protest—as a refutation of the norm, a demand for authenticity and improvement, and an action fighting the trend lines.

In the context of thwarted public space and urban privatization, mobility and space become politicized and meaningful. In the face of the restructured American city—favoring capital over democracy, theme parks over authenticity, and exclusion over inclusion—the desire still persists “to command public urban space.” The desire to command space “expresses the demand of many urban groups and institutions to...convey messages forcefully,” in the public sphere, because it is the “all-important public space which lends its iconic value to those who occupy it, *even briefly*” or fleetingly (Goheen 484). Within the frame of a critical relational geography, urban flow constitutes meaning and mobility as an everyday practice, as “ideas of the ‘good city’ hinge not only on mobility as a public good,” but also that spaces of flow and transit are politically meaningful (Jenson 150). In his brief and seminal *Postscript on the Societies of Control*, Deleuze identifies historical cities as controlled by enclosure and concealment, but on the contrary, in modern ‘societies of control,’ power expresses itself

by issues of mobility and perception of place and identity. Untangled from a literal public plaza, Deleuze's analysis illuminates movement, transit and flow as being politically meaningful—and often subversive to forces that constitute the built environment. With the built environment under the influence of heavy privatization and growing governmental rules and surveillance, movement among the space becomes paramount. That movement, both paramount and politicized, in cities, assumes various forms: the automobile, the bicycle, public transit, or walking, all on public thoroughways, above or below ground.

Politicized mobility furthers the conversation on public space as it represents both a point of departure and dissent from planning and the built environment. However, the idea of political mobility has deep roots—dating back to German cultural critic Walter Benjamin in the mid-1800s. Benjamin's concept of the street and character of the 'Flaneur' hold legendary status in urban literature and inspired the situationist movement. Benjamin's 'Flaneur' is a drifter who aesthetically sees the city, but is subversive in his mischief, anonymity, and ability to disrupt commerce. Benjamin describes a street with rudimentary and consumer foot-traffic as an arcade, with no juice and civic aspiration flowing. The 'Flaneur' then enters, and "sabotages the traffic" because the "person who travels a street...has no need of any waywise guiding hand" (Benjamin 519). The street then becomes more than a utilitarian channel of goods and people, but a site of meaningful social interaction. Or, as Benjamin would say, "streets are the dwelling place of the collective," and the collective is an agitated being that disrupts, and by doing so, "reveals itself...as the furnished and familiar interior of the masses" (Benjamin 879). Benjamin's earlier ideas on politicized mobility and the streets as cultural and social

mechanisms themselves mesh well with modern analysis. A city is oft-defined by its enclaves—fixed and bounded sites—and its armatures—linear systems that channel flow and link nodes. Benjamin’s analysis of the street problematizes the simplicity of enclaves and armatures, because people “not only observe the city whilst moving through it, rather they constitute it...” (Jensen 140). Thus what are politicized armatures—or streets/areas of flow—can be understood as sites of dissent, social interaction, and democracy among the collective—historically but particularly in the present.

This theoretical framework provides context for the connection between bicycling and dissent. Through situating the bicycle within a critical spatial context, the bicycle’s role as a political technology becomes a critique of the automobile, urban culture, and trends in planning, but also broader themes of capitalism and surveillance. The decimation of public space in the face of security and capital has fundamentally changed the meaning of mobility and interactions within the built environment. Like Benjamin’s ‘Flaneur’ being both subversive and joyful, the modern bicyclist enjoys what is commonly referred to as the “chills and thrills” of bicycling through the modern city of arcades bustling only with commerce and security (Jones). The bicycle as protest against urban design, neoliberal political thought, and atomized modern life is effective because it forces a re-thinking of physical space. The act of bicycling is a physical manifestation of a vision of what streets could be—which both upsets and challenges, the modern city’s fundamental infrastructure of enclaves and armatures. This strikes on a fundamental level, as the great Aldo Leopold wrote about the outdoors, but what can be applied prudently to urban life as well: “To change ideas about what land is for is to change ideas about what anything is for” (Gottlieb 35).

Of facets of modern life dependent on ideas of land's utility, culture perhaps is the most underthought, yet pertinent. Physical layout and space define the bounds within which culture can occur, Culture is reactive compared to the culture shapers—those who control the space and determine the potentialities, or the boundaries, within which urban culture can occur—namely, real estate developers, city officials and the forces of capital, consumption, and political state power (Kearns). The culture shapers who define the possibilities possess tremendous power, and concerning mobility, have fostered an indefatigable car culture. The implications have been severe for urban life—transforming urban space into “a mere conduit for the automobile,” that destroys “the possibilities for an authentic, non-consumer social spaces” (Furness 412). A situationist architect writes direly, “The city is losing its most important function: that of a meeting place. It is highly significant that the police try to justify their measures against ‘happenings’ on the public thoroughways by arguing that such manifestations impede traffic. This is an implicit acknowledgement that high-speed traffic is king of the road” (Nieuwenhuys 168). Working in a dominant car culture, dissenters then had to challenge not only the physical level, but also the aforementioned forces that determine how citizens expect to interact with certain space. In analyzing social change and the socio-technical city, Elizabeth Shove writes that human understanding and conceptualizations of space make for difficulty in change because obduracy and embeddedness is not only in the physical space, but longstanding cultural practices (Shove). This obduracy rests at the confluence of interdependent elements such as infrastructure, city policy, design, capital, and culture. Through this, the bicycle becomes an appropriate technology—one with a rich history of cultural dissidence, broad spatial utility, low-barriers of entry, and sheer practicality.

### **A Politicized Technology: The History of the Bicycle**

Since the invention of the bicycle, it has been politicized as a tool of critique. Opposite of skiing, bicycling began as a sport and evolved into a means of transit. In the late 1800s, those riding bicycles were “young men of means and nerve,” who faced criticism and judgment from both authorities and the populace (Pinch 41). Initially, the bicycle was priced out of reach of the middle-class and working-class, was severely unsafe, and marketed towards only the elite upper classes for sport. Soon, a change in production and design allowed for a safer bicycle to be manufactured for cheap, providing all strata of society with access to newfound mobility, speed, and livelihood. This change was not subtle—even causing the 1896 *Scientific American* to proclaim that “as a social revolutionizer [the bicycle] has never had an equal,” because with human race on wheels, all the ordinary processes and methods of social life changed (Smith 112). The possibilities were infinite.

The popularization of the bicycle began the politicization of the bicycle, and indeed, “history . . . reveals the degree to which bicycles have never been an apolitical, or neutral, technology” (Furness 403). Bicycling gave the masses a profound new tool of political mobilization, eliminating the barriers of mobility that had previously been exclusive to the elites. Early feminists used the bicycle to critique social norms; labor used the bicycle to disperse literature, help workers organize, and reach disenfranchised communities. The bicycle had a decentralizing effect on political organization. The use of the bicycle historically for political action “set the trend for other individuals to appropriate the bicycle for political and cultural purposes,” (Furness 406). The history of the bicycle identifies a clear trend: that of straddling both personal empowerment and



broad political change, mirroring the cyclist movement itself, which involves everything from lone cyclists to group protest rides. Early feminists began using the bicycle for purposes of individual mobility, but also to push social norms on clothing expectations, marriage, exercise, and individuality (Marks 184). Similarly, the bicycle meant emancipation for the working man as well—broadening his options for work, allowing for new forms of political mobilization, easier access to union meetings, and, really for the first time in industrialized history, separating mobility from capital. Bicycle historian Pryor Dodge tells of the German Workers Cycling Federation who organized parades of pamphleteering with supporting bicycle shops, factories, and a bi-weekly called *The Worker-Cyclists* (Dodge). Spanning collective action and individual empowerment, feminism to the proletariat, the bicycle is political. And, in the context of earlier discussion of urban space, culture, and environmental concern, well-positioned to serve as a modern vehicle of protest.

### **Dissent Driving Innovation: The Portland Case**

That dissent is a noble form of patriotism is an oft-mentioned cliché. And while such clichés often suffer academic disregard and trivialization, dissent as patriotism has deeper underpinnings that express a truth. Relatedly, the great writer Neil Gaiman once posited in *The Guardian* that literature breeds discontent with the surrounding world, and that “discontent is a good thing: discontented people can modify and improve their worlds, leave them better, leave them different” (Gaiman). That dissent stems from discontent seem both banal and obvious. However, extrapolating one step further shows how discontent has roots in a vision that the world could be better, and the proceeding logical next step when a person is armed with an inspiring vision is action: to forge the

world into something both inhabitable and pleasurable. Political innovations have spurred from a belief that the world could be better, and dissent often becomes the mode of change. Dissent—either individual or collective—drives political innovation. Armed with an a profoundly politicized technology, clear problems, and a vision of an alternative world, activists and urbanists leveraged dissent to drive political change. Indeed, in militarized urban space, shrinking public space, perverted democracy and capital-dominated life in the city, discontent was in no shortage. Departing from theory and moving to the micro, this paper turns to the home of American bicycling—Portland, Oregon, to examine the efficacy of this hypothesis.

It is all a bit odd. With over 150 rainy days per year, Portland nonetheless is the unequivocal vanguard of American bicycling. The weather is only one obvious factor though. Situated among hills, ridden with train tracks and narrow winding roads, crossed by slippery grated bridges with untimely risings, and populated by an un-uniquely car crazed population, Portland is confusing. Objectively, one would expect Los Angeles—with its iconic wide boulevards, flat layout, temperate climate, and obsession with health to be the nation's leader. The relatively stagnancy of Los Angeles in bicycling is a testament to the inferiority of the obvious and intuitive factors, and the importance of policy, culture, and governing. In fact, in most every academic study, technical factors have been found to be secondary to politics, because unfortunate technical factors (weather, hills, grates) can be shortly mitigated or overcome, bad political climates take years to change (Pucher, et al.) Recognizing, but not exploring the technical factors, this paper will examine Portland's ascent in the movement and attribute it to the institutionalization of dissent and the subsequent political innovations.

From 1990 to 2011, bicycling increased in Portland by 443%, compared to 37% nationally, 78% in the seventy largest cities, 47% in all of the United States, and 128% in Portland's equally wet and bridge-laden cousin, Seattle (American Bicyclists). In numbers, this means the bicycling share of commuters has increased from 1.2% in 1990 to 6.3% in 2011, and up near 9% in 2013 with no clear end in sight. However, the story of political innovation is about more than percentage increases, it is about broader culture and political action. Politically, Portland has influential bike-lobbies, decades of leadership at City Hall, and Portland's own "quixotic" Congressional Representative Earl Blumenauer even started the Congressional Bike Caucus (Dean). Culturally, Portland also maintains legendary status as being bike-friendly, despite over 71% of the region's workers driving alone to work (Rose). Indeed, while rates of bicycling have grown amazingly, the cultural representations have grown even faster. The bike-craze profiled in *Portlandia*, pieces in numerous national media outlets, AAA offering bike-repair only in Oregon and Washington, and the abundance of material representations such as clothing or stickers have all cemented this cultural trend, perhaps prompting *USA Today* to somewhat absurdly claim "many Portlanders go about their daily lives in ways that would be unfamiliar to most Americans" (Weise). Indeed, the identity of Portlandites has become indistinguishable—voluntarily or involuntarily—with the bicycle. *Bicycling Magazine*, after again affirming Portland as the bike capital of the nation, summed it up best in an illustrative anecdote: "even our city's non-cycling Lotharios know it is a deal-killer to ask, at the end of a sprightly first date, 'Can I throw your bike in my car and give you a lift home?'" (Donahue). The renaissance of the bicycle has seeped into Portland politics and culture.

But this was not always so. Portland has a long, albeit interrupted, history of thoughtfulness when considering issues of space and mobility. The early work of planners John Olmstead and Edward Bennett brought Portland into the progressive urban conversation. Soon, however, urbanist Lewis Mumford visited the City Club in 1938 to remark on the city's future, and proclaimed, "I have seen a lot of scenery in my life, but I have seen nothing so tempting as a home for man as this Oregon country... You have here a basis for civilization on its highest scale... Are you good enough to have this country in your possession?" (Lewis 201). Unfortunately, the verdict to the question soon came after: a resounding, but temporary, no. Following the Second World War, Portland abandoned planning principles set forth by Olmstead and Bennett and furthered by Mumford in exchange for the mega-development plans of Robert Moses, the legendary bureaucrat from New York. His plans informed the city's growth from the post-war period until the mid 1970's, replacing historic downtown with freeways, installing massive bridges and suburban parks, and pushing out growth from the city center. Indeed, his plan "Portland Improvement," not only is the fulfillment of Henry Ford's wildest dreams, but also characterizes Portland's character as being "a conservative town," hoping to maintain smallness and avoid becoming a metropolis—thus informing his prescription of suburbs and connections. He "projected a Portland with a 'great heart pumping fast-flowing traffic in all directions'" (Johnson). While his characterization of Portland's conservative roots is not wholly off-kilter, his ignorance in the face of massive post-war growth, which mandated a true metropolis, proved fateful (Bianco). In her comparison of Mumford's and Moses' influence on the city over the past century, urban expert Martha Bianco marks a point of departure in the 1970's with the rise of new

political actors—more progressive, more daring, more quality of life driven, and less auto friendly—in essence, more Mumfordian.

As the land-use traditions began changing in the 1970s, the Oregon legislature passed a law mandating 1% of road monies be spent on accommodating cyclists or pedestrians. This complimented the cycling boom of the 1960s that arose in response to the first Arab oil crises and the awakening of an environmental consciousness. The first Bicycle Lobby began in 1968 under the leadership of unorthodox Portland State Creative Writing Professor Sam Oakland. The group regularly rallied to demand bike lanes, parking, public transit accommodations, and mandates for future construction (Mapes). In an event of unparalleled brilliance in hindsight, the 1971 Bike Lobby rally chose Portland City Commissioner Neal Goldschmidt to lead—who eventually became one of Portland’s most beloved mayors and civic leaders. As Portland became inundated with freeways and suburbs, the rallies changed expectations of space and the lifeless, dead nature of streets. Dead space, a term coined by urban sociologist Richard Sennett, is more than just missed opportunity; rather, it carries implications for politics and civic engagement, something bike activists in Portland realized (Aldred 37). The Bike Lobby expanded their work through rallies all the way to Salem, where the first policy innovation occurred—the Bike Lobby recruited a powerful Southern Oregon Republican who felt nostalgia for his childhood to push the 1% transit requirement. This act of coalition building—and finding the right messenger—enabled a first-in-the country, progressive bill to pass a relatively conservative legislature.

In response, the City of Portland drew upon a deep tradition of neighborhood councils and direct democracy to create a citizen committee led by advocate Sam

Oakland, business leaders, advocacy groups, students, housewives, educators, etc. That radical, bearded individuals talking theory, public space, classism, and environmentalism were institutionalized into the city's decision apparatus is a testament to the importance of dissent. Unfortunately, the engineers were less excited, which, in turn, solidified biker's reputations as cantankerous. The primary driver of conflict was the bicycle's status as a credible form of transportation, which engineers vehemently fought (Birk). A lukewarm compromise was reached and Oakland soon returned to other political engagements. The rest of 1970's dissolved into bureaucratic confusion over bike policy and "cheap gas and big SUVs, which multiplied faster than the McMansions being tossed up on the suburban fringes, made the streets busier and meaner" (Mapes 148).

Meanwhile, in the halls of power and backyards of activists, the fights continued: with pressure and the eventual founding of the Citizens' Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee charged to transform the conversation from recreation to transportation. The election of bearded and eccentric pub-owner Bud Clark to the mayor's office punctured the stagnancy of the late 1970s and 1980s by the occasional "news photos of Bud cycling around the city, looking like Hollywood's idea of a French provincial mayor," but failed in concrete political change (Mapes 149).

This same time frame saw the decline of traditional civic institutions and a Dahlsian rise of popular pluralism—causing instability, but accommodating new ideas and interest groups. During the same time the Bicycle Transportation Alliance, the most influential bike lobby in Portland, informally began organizing, the civic vernacular of Portland morphed. In his review of Portland civic culture, Steven Reed Johnson writes that during this era, "Instead of talk about fashion shows and dance benefits, citizen

activists discussed vigils, teach-ins, sit-ins, marches, strikes, mobilizations, protests, resistance, rallies, encampments, boycotts, activities that traditional civic organizations did not have in their repertoire” (Johnson 190). These collective efforts by local groups resulted in the late 1980’s seeing the resurgence of anti-auto activities and the physical manifestation of the city today—the abandonment of a large highway project mid-way through construction, the creation of a riverfront park and bike path, and the change in destiny for Portland’s living room, Pioneer Courthouse Square, once destined to become a parking lot (Johnson 197). Behind these widespread changes in Portland were disruptive non-profits and committed local actors who saw the value of streets and mobility—as they are the primary public land in neighborhoods. Still, despite the changes, bicycle policy itself had come to a halt. By 1987, only 9 out of the 22 proposed corridors had been completed, and the efforts at city hall were fledgling (Johnson 228).

Citizen activists were angry. In the fall of 1990, Rex Burkholder went to a small community meeting focused on reviving bicycling. The meeting was decidedly dissent focused—on both environmental and war fronts, and the attendees were “beginning to grasp what [they] saw as a dangerous new folly: fighting for oil to fuel behemoth automobiles” (Mapes 150). The political energy in the room inspired Burkholder to self-finance the group (The Bicycle Transportation Alliance), and soon, the BTA successfully sued the City of Portland over not including bike lanes in new development. Shortly thereafter, transit coordinator Earl Blumenauer hired Mia Birk—an intense and uncompromising fighter, perfect for taking on the engineers in city hall. Birk reflects on her legacy at City Hall by saying, “We had two mottoes that guided us in those days. One was, go like hell until you cant go no more, and the other was, it was easier to ask for

forgiveness than to ask for permission” (Mapes 154). Meanwhile, the BTA continued exerting pressure—continually advocating for ‘building a better way of life,’ and talking broadly about principles of dissent: mobility, elitism of automobiles, and the environment. However, while BTA’s role in bringing the bicycle to Portland cannot be underestimated, more alternative groups such as Critical Mass also emerge in the mid 1990s. That Critical Mass was a political force is no accident: they had shelter from the BTA. Politics is relative, and without BTA pushing the conversation in favor of bicycle, there is no room for the fringe (Johnson). Both the BTA and Critical Mass/other groups, which some have likened to being respectively like the Sierra Club and Earth First, together pushed bike policy in complimentary ways.

What *Oregonian* longtime politics reporter Jeff Mapes calls “disparate strands” in his landmark book *Pedaling Revolution*, really entered the scene in the early 2000s. While both Professor Oakland’s Bike Lobby and the BTA represent critical forms of dissent in their own way, the often unaffiliated community activists represent more traditional ideals of dissent: bending rules, countering law-enforcement, life at the margins and thoughtful eccentricity. Disparate strands are seen anywhere from Critical Mass and other organized social movement rides, to Portland’s Naked Bike Ride and zoo-bombers. Mapes profiles a character called Rev. Phil, and tells of a time at the end of Bike Summer 2002 in Portland, when the afterparty turned into “tons of beer and a lot of sexy bikers,” who stripped down to go for a ride (Mapes 156). The inherent disobedience of nudity, coupled with the intentional repurposing of space through bicycling brings meaning to an intentional act of disobedience. This event spawned the annual World Naked Bike Ride—arguably the heart of Portland biking culture that serves as a political



function, membership drive, and party for the more alternative bicycling groups (Mapes 157). Indeed, less than the BTA, bicycling is about individuals like Rev. Phil—the iconoclast rebel in and out of jail, bike-pornographer, and the “one-man tour of the counterculture bike scene” across the country (Mapes 106).

There are numerous groups outside of the BTA and Critical Mass that influence the Portland bicycling landscape. C.H.U.N.K. 666 is a bicycle/chopper club and civic betterment society that follows principles of radical biking and alcohol, all dedicated to their vision of a post-apocalyptic society without oil. C.H.U.N.K. has gathered a cult following in both Brooklyn and Portland by their daring activity and commitment to fun—including pyrotechnic bicycling, exploding bicycles, recruitment of youth, and insistence on thoughtful challenging notions of urban security, public space, obedience, and fun (Hansen). Similarly, the Zoobombers are infamous Portland youth who race children’s bikes through Portland’s affluent, East-egg Arlington Heights neighborhood downhill to downtown. They stash their bikes on a biking monument in the heart of Downtown Portland, a tribute to the City of Portland institutionalizing dissent (Mirk). Taken together, the BTA, Critical Mass, C.H.U.N.K. 666, the Zoobombers, and countless other peripheral groups make up the heart of Portland bike culture—culminating in a nighttime celebration of nudity each year. Indeed, these groups—through inspired dissent, thoughtful appropriation of technology and space, and humor—have pushed Portland spatial representations and assumptions, which, in turn, has been the primary driver of transit oriented political innovations.

People in Portland are using the bicycle to rethink everyday notions. While all the aforementioned groups are active on listservs and forums debating, discussing, and

driving bike policy reform, everyday individuals are also out in the community where it matters. Mapes details the constant “bike-moves,” that draws hundreds of individuals moving chests, drawers, couches, all via bicycle with a community feel that planners once dreamed of for the suburbs. While, like the Naked Bike Ride in its simplicity on the surface, bike moves are a strongly political act that undermines so-called dependency on fossil-fuels. In the French theorist Henri Lefebvre’s critique of everyday life, he posits habits form at the meeting of everyday physical and social factors—and the true way to revolution is to upset these habits, because they are essential to capitalism itself (Lefebvre Critique). Furthermore, in his *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre details the layered meanings of space in our experience, and how both everyday experience affects conceptions of space, and how conceptions of space affect our everyday experience (Lefebvre). The social space forged by consumption, fossil fuels, ease, and automobiles can be seen in nearly every street around the country—thus even banal actions such as riding, particularly if naked or moving a couch, upset the everyday resource heavy patterns of mobility. Coupled with Deleuze’s analysis locating power in mobility and fluidity in societies of control, it can be arrived at that: space is socially produced, and bicycling as everyday habit undermines the process of production and consumption, thus unraveling the status quo and forcing change.

The paper has shown direct action, changing in spatial orientations and cultural dissent via the bicycle exist in Portland. However, these principles of space, appropriation of technology, and radical action exist elsewhere. Portland is unique in cultivating a home conducive to the application of such energy, in both political and cultural ways. The City of Portland, often joked about as “The City that doesn’t work,”

instead of their motto, “The City that works,” has been successful in integrating dissent. Returning to the story of Mia Birk—the ambitious first bicycle transit planner under Blumenauer’s office as Transit Coordinator—the concept of institutionalized dissent unfolds. Birk quickly developed a reputation as a fighter, eager to take on the automobile, and the century of social engineering dedicated to it, and do so she “mobilized citizen support that led the city council in adopting a bike-network plan“ (Peterson 375). Birk entered her job with an entrepreneurial focus, and forever changed the city by her advocacy—working collaboratively with whoever would listen. Recalling the incredible difficulty of fighting a system ridden with inertia, Birk laughs of the historical forgetfulness: “People think Portlanders just drank some microbrew one night and started riding bikes in the morning. Not the case at all” (Dundas). Even the city’s pre-eminent daily *The Oregonian* decried her first major accomplishment, Portland’s loved Springwater Corridor, as “just a noisy new pencil thin park” (Birk). With conventional transit folk, the city’s most influential paper, and the pulse of the city against her, Birk looked to her strengths: thousands of energetic bicyclists eager to serve as culture jammers. The 1990s saw increasing amounts of public rides, and the increasing diversity in forms of representation: direct action groups; anti-automobile, public space groups; community bicycle collectives; zines, documentaries, and art; and individuals (Furness 402). The individuals bicycling in this time applied principles of the European avant-garde group Situationist International—who believed individuals can re-define and construct their lived environment to inject more passion, desire, and spontaneity into everyday life. These combustions of energy and Birk’s approach in ‘begging for

forgiveness instead of asking for permission’—in the face of dead streets, faux public spheres, and environmental concern—ultimately triumphed.

Although Birk has long left City Hall, the ethos remains—action at the margins and those willing to fight, inform and mandate innovation. Portland’s government listening to advocates, and often hiring them, becomes the bridge between dissent and innovation. Filling Birk’s role are people such as Rex Burkholder, once founder of BTA and longtime Metro Regional Councilor and City transit gurus Greg Raisman and Mark Lear. Together, they have launched programs such as Sunday Parkway where streets are closed, Women on Bikes to equalize gender participation, Portland by Cycle to bring local business into the fold, in addition to their continual work creating greenways, bike paths, fighting for safety and a better future. Fostering the organic connections between economy, neighborhoods, and bicycling has made all difference—the tree that is bicycling now has deep roots via commerce, dining, school partnerships, and annual events that feed it. Lear and Raisman, speaking together to advocates in Seattle, attribute their success to bicycling being an extension of the city’s culture, forming extensions off of that, and ensuring the public investment (Lear).

### **Conclusion**

Biking is in vogue across the world. From rural Nepal to downtown Manhattan, communities are talking the benefits of bicycling: health, environmental, civic, and fun. The “chills and thrills” of biking keep the movement lively, and often cantankerous in their demands, but this is precisely the strength of the movement: certain restlessness, a vision of the good, and an insistence on shifting the gears of policy (Jones 813). In this, Portland remains a shining example. Many cities have relied too heavily on technical

discussion and investment—and end up with ‘White Line Fever,’ a product of ignoring social ties, messaging strategies, coalition building, and community consultations. Indeed, while governments are the ultimate change agent at the end of the line, they are the tip of the iceberg, the visible and representational part of the hulking mass of energy invisible to the common observer. This explains the failures of top-down bicycling measures (Vreugdenhil). Policy makers can learn lessons from Portland that translate well anywhere. Firstly, that bicycling is a radical change—not merely individuals on metal frames on the side of the road—but a systemic shift in how the city is seen as a sociotechnical entity, how class affects mobility, how sterile the life of the street is, and how its built-environment reflect culture. Secondly, bicycling innovations nearly always comes from dissent—that Oakland organized rallies and rides instead of council meetings, that Burkholder saw the bicycle as fundamentally anti-system, that Birk turned to the radical public instead of City Hall allies, that life at the margins of the movement quickly becomes mainstream (Furness “Critical Mass”), and that those pushing the conversation dare to imagine a different city, a more human city, all prove this. And lastly, that bicycling policy innovations are not accidental—they are the concerted byproduct of intentional social and ensuing technical factors. Unlike everything else in Portland, the rise of cycling was not organic.

Dissent leads to bicycling political innovations. Bicycling challenges the social production of space, and the production of space constitutes the base for ideas about the economy, the state, and social relations. Bicycling—as individual or collective act—forces a reconceptualization of space, and has been a primary player in liberation politics for over a century. In the face of a strangled public sphere, the atomization of society,

society-wide environmental and health concerns, dead and sanitized street life, bicycling began demanding to be taken seriously as a transportation option. The journey of Portland, OR from the 1970s onward elucidates the primary role dissent plays in forcing a government to listen and act. The unique balance of protest, political action, and theory within Portland's coalition groups should serve an example to 21<sup>st</sup> century drivers of social change—particularly those looking to use technology as a tool of resistance and liberation. Linked to broader anti-capitalist and anti-state ideals through both the politicized bicycle itself and the influential marginal characters, the bicycling movement has continually challenged and upset the status quo. Yet, the bicycle movement found equilibrium—undeniably radical on end, on the other they found pragmatic individuals with a keen eye for entrepreneurship and hard political battles. The resulting balance yielded a movement both institutionalized and subversive. Maintaining that balance into the future will be a great task, but one that ultimately has the power to shape the world, itself. When considering the great debate over space, society, and politics, it is worth remembering, “The effort to reclaim the city is the struggle of democracy itself” (Sorkin xv).

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