

Introduction: This is a short paper I wrote for a summer class in August 2003. It speaks to some of the problems I see in society, government, education, and some problems in teaching bike skills and advocating for cycling.

I am hoping that a cycling instructor, in the land of automobiles, can be excused for developing a narrow view of society's ills – especially transportation issues – how those views manifest themselves within society and how to help re-mediate them. On my mind, and broadening it, have been Paulo Freire's book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, bell hooks' book, *Teaching to Transgress* and Charles Taylor's *The Malaise of Modernity*. I think any teacher would be hard pressed to live up to the ideals of these three books. The set of them shook what I knew about government and education and turned my thoughts upside down to let the small change of those institutions fall out of their pockets and be counted. The fallout is that government and education do not cause much change. In fact, it seems the livelihood of both institutions depend on controlling the purse strings, keeping the wallet closed and secure, with all the currency of change in a pocket close to the butt – as far away from the heart and head as possible.

Until recently, I did not think I was part of that system but when I suddenly realised I was, I tried to deny it, I fought with it, I called it a liar, but having gone through all the steps of grief, I have

to admit I have not been trying to free people, I have not been trying to help people understand their point of privilege, and I have not been articulating what I think are some fundamental problems with our society in regards to transportation. I have not been helping people to reduce automobile use – I have been helping to incarcerate cyclists in automobile traffic.

I thought and acted like a good soldier for the cause of cycling. I felt good that I have helped hundreds of people learn how to ride their bike in traffic. It felt good because that was what they wanted to learn, that is what I could teach, and that is what I thought they needed to free themselves from the car based culture I see as a detriment to our society and environment. But I engaged in all those activities without fully contemplating oppression, advocacy and the causes that brought into being our car culture.

It sounds so noble and wonderful to have helped all those individuals but now I see that all those cycling lessons have not helped create awareness of our car culture. In teaching cyclists how to get along with motorists, I have not addressed the detrimental effects of our car culture; I have made it easier for motorists by teaching cyclists how to get along with them. In contradiction to Freire's thoughts, I have been teaching people how to get along with the oppressor. In opposition to hooks' thoughts, I have not been teaching to transgress. I have been doing the opposite, I have been teaching to: accept the status quo, teaching to the perceived

reality, teaching to get along and not cause problems or help fix them – let alone understand them.

To be sure, the scale of my concern is quite different from all that Freire and hooks set out to tell the world about. However, I think my little example represents a microcosm of what they were both espousing about oppression. Sometimes the oppressed and the oppressor do not realise what they are doing. hook's account of how her associates at the university she was attending kept quiet about Paulo Freire's visit is an example of this. According to hooks, everyone knew she would be thrilled to meet Freire but they were afraid she would dominate (my words) the workshop Freire intended to conduct (p.55). Her colleagues wanted to hear about freedom from oppression, and did not realise their actions to prevent her from attending the workshop was the antithesis of the workshops' intent. They did not think through what they were doing.

One of hooks' arguments, in her series of essays collectively known as *Teaching to Transgress*, is that educators must be ready to break the rules in order to get their message across. The difficulty of embracing transgression in traffic is that it would put people's lives in danger. I cannot encourage a breaking of rules on the road to merely to emphasize how biased those rules are. On the other hand, I would not discourage people from participating in forms of transgression where lives are not at risk. hooks and Freire might be

disappointed to know that I do not take part in confrontational demonstrations promoting cycling because I think I can be more effective in dealing with non-advocates and governments by distancing myself from those disruptive events.

Freire says that the task of the oppressed is to liberate both themselves and the oppressor (p. 44), which is easier said than done but a noble and worthwhile goal. In advocating for cycling, a fairly benign form of transportation, and meeting mostly with opposition to cycling, I have wondered if the subject is much deeper than transportation issues. Is the oppressor in all of us – is it our society? I think I found a partial answer to what bonds our society to cars in Taylor's description of individualism, instrumental reason and, something near but not quite, a cult of efficiency.

In the *Malaise of Modernity*, Charles Taylor describes three problems with today's society. They are: the rise of individualism, the primacy of instrumental reason and alienation from the public sphere. Of these, I shall address the first and second malaises, individualism and instrumental reason as they relate to the microcosm of transportation culture.

There is an Iroquois saying, 'If it is not good for everyone – it's no good (Glenn Patterson, during class).' Though we have lost touch with what is good for everyone, I do not think we have done so entirely maliciously. For instance, the 'fathers' of industrialisation did not know or think what the long-term effects

that pollution would be. Now that we do know, people who choose to ignore gross acts of pollution are acting maliciously and not for the common good. Why do they do that? Individualism – a belief in the sovereignty and priority of the individual in society (http://www3.baylor.edu/~Scott_Moore/handouts/E_A1.html).

It seems to me our society conceives of ‘time’ in only two ways. Either as something that can be saved – banked, or as something irreplaceable – not to be wasted. Both are commodity viewpoints, not experiential, views of time. For the people who conceive of time as money, the efficient use of ‘time’ equates to the efficient use of money – time is bankable. It seems to me that the cult of saving time is North American society’s primary concern. ‘Saving time’ is a phrase that infers a choice of options where the goal, or destination, can be reached sooner using one option over another, and therefore that time saving option is credited with being the better option, (i.e. it is quicker for most people to drive to the university than it is for them to bicycle). For people who conceive of time as irreplaceable, the efficient use of time is paramount. The instrumental use of time prioritizes the individual in society, and helps define individualism.

Before I go on, I need to elaborate upon what I see lacking in the Taylor text. Taylor defines instrumental reason as, “the kind of rationality we draw on when we calculate the most economical application of means to a given end (p.5).” He further explains that

cost/benefit analysis is being applied to things that it ought not be applied to (p.5). I do not think this is entirely the case.

I believe that cost/benefit analysis is not being applied to the economic efficiency of the automobile, but I think the wide spread use of the automobile is due to a contextual or qualified instrumental reasoning. Automobiles can move people quickly but the rationales regarding their economic efficiency lead me to think there is either a mass conspiracy regarding the true cost of automobile use or that ‘time’ appears to be so important that it outweighs economic argument.

The cost to individuals – car, gas, insurance and maintenance – plus the cost to society in pollution and associated poor health, the land needed to host cars, the demand that those areas be paved and the infrastructure of paved roads, total a phenomenal cost that cannot be rationalized in many countries. According to a Greater Vancouver Regional District report, private automobiles were subsidised by 2.7 million dollars in 1991 (http://www.best.bc.ca/_etc/pdfs/Transportation%20Facts/automobiles_fs.pdf). As a society, it appears we are valuing something more than money.

In North America, because the car can ‘save a person time,’ it is deemed as worth the cost. That is not to say everything efficient is acceptable. Bicycles are the most efficient form of transportation ever invented; what I mean is that the malaise of the

primacy of instrumental reason, defined as a cost/benefit analyses, does not adequately describe how people in this society make choices. I believe individualism prevents us from examining the real costs and options in transportation, and that instrumental time saving is the ultimate goal of our society. We need a modifier to explain that instrumentalism is more than a cost/benefit analysis. Perhaps rationalized, or culturally acceptable, or dominant ideology affecting instrumentalism will help.

Taylor makes no mention of cultural need, bias or inequity in his three dimensional discussion detailing the malaises of modernity. Perhaps my view from the transportation world skews Taylor's argument regarding cost/benefit analyses but it appears that instrumentalism, as I understand it, is not entirely centred on efficiency after all – it is centred on time and individual needs.

Inevitably, in publicly expressing my opinions about transportation, I come across the arguments in favour of money and time. There is the case of the salesperson that must drive all day. The argument is, if salespeople had to ride bicycles, they would not see as many clients and would not make as much money – see definition for individualism above.

The time argument I often hear is about the parent whose daily routine is driving kids from where they can afford to live, to where they can afford daycare, to where they found a job.

I previously considered the second argument a 'lifestyle' issue, but by reading about feminist theory, I have had to confront an aspect of cycling that I have overlooked – that of privilege.

Through hooks I came to think of two things: privilege and income. The people who take the cycling courses I offer are generally older than 20 and gainfully employed. They are bicycling because they want to, not because they have to.

White feminist cyclists, hooks would not be surprised to find, advocate for safe routes so they can ride without fear of being mugged (or worse) on some lonely road or after dark. They advocate for secure parking in monitored areas because of, again, concerns for their personal security. Lastly, they advocate for lockers, washrooms, showers and blow dryers so they do not have to look like they just bicycled in. Is there something wrong with that? Not really, any cyclist would want those things and, to be honest, it isn't just white feminist cyclists advocating for all those facilities. But all these are things that hooks would say are not on the agenda for women of colour. Women of colour might not advocate for those facilities because they would have trouble fitting the time and expense of cycling, or the time to advocate for more than some basic needs, into their day. In a nutshell, it appears there are more important things on the mind of women, and women of colour, than riding a bike to work. Important things like getting a job, or an education, or taking care of family members before and

after work. The moment of enlightenment provided to me by hooks is that I advocate from a point of privilege and not from the point of need. I have to keep those thoughts in mind when I speak or set my thoughts on paper for the public.

I thought I was the liberator, but now I see I was a de-liberator. Well, not a major oppressor, more like oppressor 'lite.' I come back to Freire once again, that the task of the oppressed is to liberate both themselves and the oppressor (p.44). My pro-cycling arguments have been a little dismissive of the constraints people feel and have in their lives. I still think that cycling is a healthy thing to do and, if more people cycled, advocates could argue more successfully for better facilities, so more people could cycle. Eventually the air would be cleaner and people would be healthier. Though I will still advocate for cycling, I must now consider that the reasons not to ride include more than laziness or lack of will and lifestyle.

Departing from the realm of the individual, I believe the reason more people do not ride is related to the rewards and drawbacks of our capitalistic society. I may be half right in asserting there is a conspiracy to keep people in their cars. We have a society of people racing around trying to, and in many instances having to, accomplish many things in a few waking hours.

The concept of the rat race or treadmill is not a new one, but reading the three texts mentioned has made me more aware of why

and how people are caught up in it. hooks writes about versions of oppression still found in North America, racism, misogyny and an epidemic misapprehension of privilege. Freire writes about oppression in South America, a lot of it generated by greed and capitalism. There is a different kind of oppression in North America. I think many people do not realise how closely their lives are tied to production and consumption. Taylor comments, near the end of his introduction to the second malaise (instrumental reason) that some people find themselves doing things they do not want to do, but they do them because of 'market' reasons. Weber called these reasons, 'the iron cage' (p.8). Automobiles literally and figuratively fit the image of an iron cage.

In reading hooks, Freire, and Taylor, I have contemplated what is driving our society, and through doing so, developed a better understanding of society and myself. But how can a person enact needed changes? Taylor, like Freire and hooks, believes that institutional change is needed to cure the ills of modernity. Taylor writes:

There is a point to deliberating what ought to be our ends, and whether instrumental reason ought to have a lesser role in our lives than it does. But the truth in these analyses is that it is not just a matter of changing the outlook of individuals, it is not just a battle of "hearts and minds," important as this is. Change in this domain will have to be institutional as well, even

though it cannot be as sweeping and total as the great theorists of the revolution proposed (p. 8).

This quote speaks to the optimism I share with Taylor. I think things can be changed and I think people can change too. I know they can. Institutions, like government and education, can change too. Whether or not the change will be ‘sweeping,’ only time will tell.

What change can we ask of government and education? I think it is essential to stop the transportation madness and the demands on people that it causes. I think it is imperative we seek ways to reduce the economic need to transport ourselves, especially by automobile. That can mean working from home, or living closer to work, or using more readily available family care. I am sure there are lots of ways to disconnect transportation of individuals from market forces.

I also think Education should not concentrate on students as potential workers and taxpayers. Education must not be the pawn of government instrumentalism. Education must free citizens to be all they can be, where they live, not cooped up in large centralized locations directing them through some government creed of greater good. Education must help eradicate useless energies devoted to prejudice and privilege. In short, the sort of change government and education must bring to society is big change. A big change in attitude is needed regarding the worth of citizens and their lives.

That attitude adjustment starts with me – one little citizen – and I look forward to writing more than letters to the editor.

References

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