Shifting Gears: Approaches to Bicycle Activism in New York City

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Abstract

This thesis aims to identify the different mechanisms at play within varying types of bicycle activism in New York City. Through an examination of three case studies – a grassroots group, a non-profit organization, and an institutional program – I demonstrate the dynamics of power within the bicycle activist community and clarify the ways each actor fits into the process as a whole. Theories of automobility and the Right to the City play key roles in informing my analysis and provide a theoretical framework around which I base my three case studies. I contend that the politicization of the bicycle must occur in various forms and by multiple actors in order for activism to achieve meaningful change within politics and the public eye. Bicycle activism thus relies heavily, yet in different ways, upon the formal and informal actors operating at different scopes. I use these conclusions to inform my claim that activism itself is a process, rather than a practice, that necessitates a diversity of entities and actors working in different capacities simultaneously.
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Chapter 1
Introduction: Politicizing the Bicycle

There are very few things in this world that could make commuting less painful. Almost by definition it is a daily drudgery, made worse by forced interaction with other irritable members of the work force. Although I had once accepted this as my post-graduate future, I have come to understand that there are alternatives to this dreary prospect. My father, a Brooklyn-to-Manhattan commuter for over 25 years, recently retired his Metrocard and began bicycling to work. He chose to do so for many reasons, but chief among them was his hatred of crowded rush-hour subways early each morning and late each evening. His newfound twice-daily bicycle commute has made him stronger and healthier, but he also claims that it has drastically improved his day in general. And, on top of all this, he has avoided spending the daily five-dollar subway fares almost entirely, save for the few snowy and very rainy days when he can’t bike. Biking has become a part of his daily routine, and he says he’s never been a happier commuter than he is now.

However, it has become clear to him that New York City policies, infrastructure, and outlooks are working against him. One afternoon, he was biking in a bike lane in Park Slope, Brooklyn, when a woman suddenly opened her passenger-side car door, almost knocking him down, or “dooring” him. Luckily, he avoided the collision. However, when he came to a stop in front of the woman, he was confronted with an onslaught of yelling and cursing. “Are you crazy? You almost killed me!” she screamed. He responded that he had simply been riding in the bike lane, the one sliver of road dedicated for his use; perhaps she should check out the window before opening her door
into that space. “What, should I stop in front of every car I pass?” he said, somewhat sarcastically. To this, the woman, in complete seriousness, replied that yes, he should.

This was just one of many such interactions that happen every single day in New York City; bike lanes have become an all too common site of bike-automobile conflict. This woman felt that, as a driver, the entirety of the street was hers to use. She carelessly opened her door into a bicycle-designated space, but delegitimized it by proclaiming that the bicyclist was in the wrong and needed to yield to cars and their drivers. This speaks to a larger issue present in the urban streetscape: bike lanes, and the very use of bicycles in the public street, are constantly being challenged and opposed by auto-dominance. The bicycle is in this sense inherently political, as it is constantly challenging technological, social, economic, and political powers and thus forces us to rethink the way urban space is used and created.

Stories like this one speak to the prevailing idea that the bicycle is not a serious or adult mode of transportation; at its conception, it was largely regarded as a child’s toy. The bicycle has taken many forms over its lifetime, but it now transcends its physical shape – it has become the symbol of a movement. In the public mind, the bicycle has evolved from a recreational vehicle to a political tool – but how did this come about? I argue that certain actors, both public and private, have harnessed the bicycle and the act of cycling as a focus of activism, using its image as an “alternative” mode of transportation as a platform from which to advocate for equality and sustainability.

The organizations and groups that I examine seek to change the prevailing conception of the automobile as the be-all-end-all of urban transportation by establishing bicyclists as central actors in creating urban spaces and policies. Through an examination
of three different bicycle-focused organizations both formal and informal, I analyze the shifting ideologies surrounding bicycling and explore how they both produce and reproduce one another. What mechanisms do different types of activists use in order to politicize the bicycle? How do these actors and mechanisms work together to create successful activism and achieve real results? And lastly, how do these strategies of activism relate to auto-dominance and human rights? Throughout this analysis I address these and other questions in order to more fully understand the dynamics of bicycle activism in New York City.

These issues have been examined at great length and through a variety of theoretical lenses. This thesis seeks to illustrate how these theoretical perspectives inform and are informed by bicycle activism in New York City, and how differing forms and functions of activism work with and against one another. After studying these theories in depth in the following chapters, primarily focusing on systems of automobility and the Right to the City, I then explore the way they apply to varying modes of activism, using three case studies as a means to cite examples from organizations and groups that are currently undertaking bicycle advocacy.

The politicization of bicycling is in itself socially constructed – the way society feels, writes, and acts towards bikes (and their riders) are what construct and reproduce their meaning and ideas of what their meanings should be (Furness 2010). In this way, we must understand the agency of the bicycle within society, and more specifically among the many actors of an urban built environment and transportation system. This also requires that we examine closely the nature of politicization, highlighting the different ways that actors use their agency in society. Contextualizing the bicycle theoretically and
historically is thus critical to this analysis, so that we can understand the environment within which bicycles are situated.

It is first important to define the terms “politicize” and “politicization,” which are central to my argument. Politicization is the process by which an act or object that is otherwise non-political becomes politically charged. But what does it mean for something to be political? I argue that, in the case of the bicycle, “political” means that an object or action represents a movement against established policies – more simply, that an action or object is focused into an “issue.” The “politicized” bicycle is one that holds a broader meaning – it encapsulates issues of contested space and competing agendas. The bicycle itself is just an individual vehicle meant for recreation or for easy, cheap transportation. However, it has now become a “choice” (to ride or not to ride) that people make to make a statement or adhere to a movement, transforming bicycling into a political, social, and even theoretical act.

The study of the bicycle is critical in understanding the complexities of the modern urban environment; it teaches us about movement, both physical and ideological, by reimagining the city street in new terms. It pulls from a historical narrative that is marked by repression, motivation, and technological progress. The study of the bicycle is in itself integral to the field of urban studies because it represents a rapidly emerging way of navigating built and social environments. The bicycle’s agency within cities is characterized by a unique relationship between the individual and the public sphere in a car-dominated environment – it forces us to rethink the way we operate within the city streets, and poses new ways of conceptualizing personal mobility. The bicycle is thus more than just a frame with two wheels, handlebars, pedals, and a seat – it has come to
embody a movement that seeks to redefine and reorganize urban public space to be less dependent on expensive, polluting machines and thereby less exclusionary. This reorganization speaks to the deeply ingrained and normalized “hierarchy of the street” that exists to construct and reproduce power relations between users of modes of transportation, and more generally to systems of hegemony.

The ideological and political domination that I examine is strikingly tangible in the everyday lives of city dwellers. The inequality that automobility perpetuates has real-time, real-life consequences for New York City residents: drivers, bikers, and pedestrians alike. This inequality informs the ways they choose and are allowed to interact with the urban environment. The car’s monopoly over the city street is played out in daily interactions – a simple trip to the corner deli or in the case of my father, a commute to work. This inequality is experienced on a firsthand basis and is thus crucial in understanding and improving safety, sustainability, and overall quality of life in New York City, and in urban areas more generally. Moreover, as the world becomes more rapidly urbanized (the UN estimates that the global urban population will increase by 72% between 2011 and 2050), working towards urban equality will only become more important (United Nations Economic and Social Affairs 2012).

Despite this, previous literature on the subject of automobility and bicycle activism tends to focus on manifestations and consequences rather than on the process of politicization itself. I use three case studies to illustrate the way certain actors and groups work to employ different strategies of activism to promote and further the process of politicization for social and political gains. Although I take a relatively overlooked
approach to analyzing bicycle politics, understanding the ideas already presented by many esteemed urban theorists is crucial in contextualizing my work.

The majority of existing literature, most notably works by Zachary Furness and Susan Blickstein, examines the bicycle as a “fringe mode of transportation” (Furness 2010, 4). They both connect theories of automobility and regulatory frameworks to the normalization of the inequality of the city street. Barriers are central to their arguments, which focuses their pieces more on the political struggle and the nature of bicycle activism in opposing and deconstructing them (Furness 2010; Blickstein 2010). Blickstein especially focuses on the freedom of mobility, how it relates to modern citizenship, and its relation to policing; she argues that New York Police Department consistently delegitimizes biking as a viable and safe mode of transportation through oppressive and sometimes unlawful police conduct (Blickstein 2010).

Other analysts have taken a more theoretical approach to the issue. Johnathan Urry and Mimi Sheller have written extensively, both cooperatively and separately, on automobility as a transformer of temporal and spatial geographies. Automobility, they argue, centers upon the American fetishization of manufactured machinery and individual consumption, which has resulted in the restructuring of the public sphere. Their arguments thus revolve around the nature of civil society and its relationship to public and private space. Although their work does not directly focus on the bicycle itself, they use it as an example of an alternative to automobility, and argue that bicycles are deeply subjugated in the rapidly mobilizing urban context (Sheller & Urry 2000).

My work in this thesis falls between the two approaches summarized above. I address issues discussed by Blickstein and Furness, especially those concerning the
marginalization and normalization of the hierarchy automobility has created. I link their arguments with the theoretical frameworks that Sheller and Urry, along with other social and urban theorists, provide in their analysis of automobility and urban public space. My study differs from these and others, however, because I look at politicization within varying modes of activism. Through three case studies, I discuss the process of politicization itself, rather than solely the systems and implications surrounding it. By examining this process, I identify the key mechanisms and actors involved in creating successful bicycle activism.

Preceding my case studies, my next two chapters first serve to contextualize the bicycle in New York City, both theoretically and historically. The bicycle cannot be examined on its own – instead, one must consider it within the environment that it operates in to understand the complex dynamics that occur between people, vehicles, and the built environment every time a bicycle is used. Thus, in my theoretical framework, I mainly draw on previous scholarship concerning systems of automobility, looking at what has shaped them, perpetuates them, and contests them, and how they relate to Henri Lefebvre’s Right to the City. These theoretical backdrops allow us to more fully understand the experience and evolution of the bicycle within the larger context of urban mobility and accessibility. I also locate the bicycle historically in New York City, examining the social and political events that enabled and solidified the changing perception of the bicycle. This includes a brief overview of the invention of the bicycle in the mid-19th century, but will focus primarily on the bicycle’s introduction to New York City, and how the nature of that entry has affected it since.
In the fourth through sixth chapters, I conduct case studies dedicated to three different types of organizations that are fundamental actors in the politicization of the bicycle. Through these studies, I highlight and clarify the ways organizations of varying levels harness the bicycle for political progress in strikingly different ways. The first of the organizations I study, the most informal of the three, is the Critical Mass movement, a grassroots organization that physically takes over city streets by amassing thousands of bicyclists to ride together on an undetermined route. The second is a non-profit organization based in New York City called Transportation Alternatives, which seeks to “reclaim New York City’s streets from the automobile” and to promote alternative modes of transportation such bicycling and public transit (Transportation Alternatives 2014). Lastly, I examine Citi Bike, the recently implemented bike-share program in New York City, put in place by the City itself under Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s PlaNYC. Examining the politicization of the bicycle on these three levels (grassroots, non-profit, and institutional) clarifies the process of politicization itself but also brings to light the differing methods, goals, and achievements that exist at different scales of bicycle activism.
Chapter 2
Theoretical Contexts: Automobility and the Right to the City

The bicycle cannot be examined by itself – it must be examined within the framework of urban mobility. In order to more fully understand the inequality of the New York City street, it is first important to take into account theories regarding auto-dominance, accessibility, and equality. I therefore discuss the car at length within my theoretical framework, as it has had immense consequence for society and the political power structure. In contextualizing bicycle activism, I rely on theories of automobility and on ideas concerning the Right to the City. I use this chapter to situate the bicycle within the physical, theoretical, and ideological city street. This gives us a theoretical context into which we can place the bicycle and its advocates, and the opposition they face, so as to more clearly understand the three case studies to follow.

An Introduction to Automobility

The city street is a highly contested and dynamic space that constantly facilitates and disrupts interaction between users of numerous modes of transportation. In New York City, the streetscape has experienced constant change based on current technologies, policies, and social norms. However, what has stayed constant is the systematic domination of the automobile ever since its creation. The theory of automobility seeks to clarify our understanding of why and how the car has become such a dominant force by focusing on the systems that allow such a monopoly. Referring to the car as a central figure in shaping ideas of personal mobility, theorists argue that there exists an “automobility culture” that is so pervasive that it penetrates both the imagined ideas and the physical parameters of urban space (Urry 2004, 25).
The work of Mimi Sheller and John Urry has substantially developed the concept of automobility. Both independently and together, they have studied automobility extensively and have ultimately defined automobility by six key characteristics of the car in society: considering the car as a manufactured object, as a focus of individual consumption, as part of a machinic complex, as a type of “quasi-private” mobility, as an admired aspect of Western culture, and lastly, as a dominant cause of environmental resource-use (Sheller & Urry 2000, 738). Sheller and Urry argue that these six characteristics together produce the “specific character of domination” of the automobile (Sheller & Urry 2000, 737). In simpler terms, automobility speaks to the normalization and resulting domination of the automobile on imagined and physical space. Automobility has formed a more personal, private, and fragmented conception of mobility centered on the automobile and has had an undeniably large effect on the built environment of urban areas.

Zachary Furness also discusses this “ideologically and symbolically loaded cultural phenomenon” in his work *One Less Car: Bicycling and the Politics of Automobility* (Furness 2010, 6). He echoes many of Sheller and Urry’s ideas, but adds that a deeply ingrained normalization and fetishization of the automobile has ultimately created the system that allows for its domination. He says the “assemblages of socioeconomic, material, technological, and ideological power…ultimately normalize the cultural conditions in which the automobile is seen, and made to be seen, as a technological savior, a powerful status symbol, a producer of both ‘modern’ subjectivities and ‘civilized’ peoples” (Furness 2010, 6). In this way, he focuses on the almost cyclical domination of the car: as more and more people value it, it demands more space, time,
and resources; and as its many demands become further normalized, more people come to value it; and so on.

This is in part due to the immense impact of the thriving economic market supporting and supported by the automobile. Ever since it took hold of society, the car has become central to the industrial economy (Urry 2004; Harvey 2003). This has resulted in the creation of a powerful economic juggernaut that has enormous and immeasurable influence over policy. In this sense, the implications of automobility reach much farther than just social factors. In fact, automobility perpetuates and intensifies the privatization of public space and transportation resources through the forces of capitalism inherent in the automobile. This sort of economic hegemony is yet another way that automobility has overtaken the modes of control and equality of the city street.

Before embarking on an examination of automobility as an inhibitor to bicycle transport, as well as to equality more generally, it is important to understand how systems of automobility have gained such momentum over the past decades. From their conception, cars have posed a revolutionary way of conceptualizing personal freedom and mobility (Sheller & Urry 2000). They offer a “seamless” journey from point A to point B, one without a timetable, without potentially uncomfortable social interaction (Sheller & Urry 2000, 745; Urry 2004, 29). As a “quasi-private” mode of transportation, the car reshaped the idealized vehicle into one dependent upon this flexibility and privacy (Sheller & Urry 2000, 739). The car came to symbolize the modern age of technological advancement, of the American dream. Suburban communities became possible as a result of policies supporting the car, as it became feasible, if not valued, to live farther and farther apart from sources of consumption and from each other. Consequently, cars laid
claim to more and more available public space and drivers were given the ability to dictate how space would and should be used and by which users.

**Automobility and Time-Space**

The ideas of Sheller, Urry, and Furness all converge at the argument that the normalization and subsequent domination of the automobile creates a different idea of time-space in the city. Time-space, that is, the way we conceptualize the relationship between the temporal and the physical, is now dependent upon the automobile. Cars have harnessed this newfound idea to create systems that are centralized around themselves, making it so that virtually all of society’s modes of transportation have to work within their established framework. This idea is important to note not simply because it has been created and perpetuated by automobility, but also because it is one of the main factors bicycle activists must consider. The bicycle presents a completely alternative way of understanding time-space in the city – it presents us with an alternative way of communicating with the public sphere and a new way of interacting with space and time in the urban environment. Automobility’s time-space, as Sheller and Urry argue, “dominates how both car-users and non-car-users organize their lives through time-space” (Sheller & Urry 2000, 745). Thus, bicyclists are constantly working within the framework of this dominant conception of time-space, just one of the many imposing implications of automobility on the hierarchy of the city street. Bicycle activism must overcome the prevailing mindset of automobility and its time-space in order to create ideological and physical space for the bicycle in the city street.

Using Sheller and Urry’s ideas as a starting point, Susan Blickstein discusses the nature of automobility’s domination and its effect on equality. She argues that
automobility captures “the individualistic ideal of freedom of movement that has become synonymous with citizenship in the United States” (Blickstein 2010, 887). As a result, she says, automobility facilitates the automobile’s domination and subordination of other mobilities by establishing it as a cultural norm, almost an expectation. This speaks to a deeper normalization than what Furness discusses – she claims it has produced a new type of citizenship “based on the expectation of unrestricted movement” (Blickstein 2010, 888). In this sense, this process of normalization is itself a political process.

Central to Blickstein’s argument is an inherent difference between the acts of driving and bicycling: interaction with the public. A driver is concerned solely with his or her route, a route Sheller and Urry argue that systems of automobility have produced and privileged. However, a cyclist is constantly negotiating with the public sphere, without an imposing metal cage as protection (Sheller & Urry 2000). In this regard, Blickstein calls bicycling “an exercise in geography – natural social, cultural, political” (Blickstein 2010, 888). Through both political and cultural norms, drivers are given rights to the majority of the urban street in order to allow them to travel at fast speeds, a right that automobility and the normalization of flexible and seamless travel have produced.

Blickstein argues that this monopoly over the street promotes a new kind of citizenship dependent upon these exclusionary systems that dominate public space and delegitimize alternative modes of transportation (Blickstein 2010). Blickstein’s discussion of automobility citizenship refers back to the new conceptualization of time-space. The automobile has so reshaped society’s ideological values and norms that the automobile is virtually the only vehicle that can provide what society feels it now needs. This is one of the overarching issues that sets the bicycle apart, making it an “alternative”
mode of transportation – a phrase that encapsulates the very core of the problem with automobility, indicating that any other mobility is an “other” and thereby inferior to the almighty automobile and perpetuating a “car or nothing” mindset.

However, systems of automobility hold more than just ideological implications. The urban environment reflects the influence of automobility in the way it physically privileges automobiles over bicycles, pedestrians, public buses and other modes of transportation. This illustrates how automobility permeates urban policy, an issue that further highlights the importance of examining the politics of the issue. In his independent work, Urry refers to automobility as a “Frankenstein-created monster” because of this extreme influence that the ideological effects have over the physical environment (Urry 2004, 28). For instance, the incredible flexibility that the car provides us makes all other types of transportation mundane or inconvenient. In this way, automobility “coerces people into intense flexibility,” a flexibility that is only possible in the environment that automobility has created for itself to thrive within (Sheller & Urry 2000, 744). The ideological effects of automobility thus affect the spatial layout of the city street, public policy is influenced by what society feels it needs, and automobility makes society feel the need for this intense flexibility.

We can see this by examining the typical New York City street layout. As I examine later in this thesis, progress has been made in designating more public space to pedestrian plazas and to bike and bus lanes. However, the car still demands a significant portion of the existing space. As seen in my father’s run-in with a particularly irate driver, cars are still seen as the dominant force in the road and are physically privileged. Sheller and Urry echo this, stating that “the matrix of automobility undermines other
forms of mobility” (Sheller & Urry 2000, 745-746). Urry explains that this is in part due to the fact that at a certain point, the automobile becomes an extension of a person. Therefore, our road designers and transportation planners privilege a person in a car over a pedestrian or biker, as the car itself denotes meaning and privilege (Urry 2004).

More broadly, automobility has had even more sweeping effects on New York City and countless other cities around the world. Furness discusses the impact automobility has had on the city of Paris, France, noting that after Corbusier linked automobiles to modernization, nearly a quarter of the entire city was destroyed to make way for wider boulevards and car-friendly infrastructure (Furness 2010). A city known for its small, winding, cobblestone streets was partly demolished in the name of the automobile.

Similarly, in New York City, the immense value that was put on car travel resulted in mass construction projects like the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway and the Franklin D. Roosevelt East River Drive. Both projects were incredibly destructive to many neighborhoods and communities, but were carried out because of society’s need for seamless car travel, even in a city with an impressive and extensive public transit system. Robert Moses, one of the most well-known and polarizing figures in the history of urban planning, played an integral role in both of these projects.

Automobility’s effects are thus more than the sum of their parts. Not only has the automobile age transformed the way society values and conceptualizes mobility, it has also affected the physical world we live in and the way our political system operates. Cities have changed drastically since the creation of the automobile, as streets have become less equitable while the car has demanded more and more space and resources.
The car has left its mark, and working to undo or revert that has proved difficult for bicycle activists and alternative transportation advocates more broadly. These activists’ struggle speaks to how deeply ingrained automobility and its systematic domination and delegitimization has become in our “car culture.” They must try to deconstruct the ideological implications of automobility before they hope to change the physical environment, as the root of automobility’s success lays in the normalization and expectation of the car as king. Blickstein cites Lefebvre’s claim that the driver “is concerned only with steering himself to his destination, and in looking about sees only his route, which has been materialized, mechanized, and technicized, and he sees it from one angle only – that of functionality: speed, readability, facility…Thus space appears solely in its reduced forms” (Lebevre 1991, 313). The driver expects the privileges that automobility provides, and combating that expectation of privilege is one of the major obstacles of bicycle activism.

*The Right to the Bike-able City*

Automobility presents a multitude of problems to society, but chief among them is the inequality that the system supports and perpetuates. This inequality lies among the disproportionate allocation of rights – rights that Henri Lefebvre, and many theorists to follow him, have deemed the “Right to the City.” This idea refers to more than just issues of transportation equality, but I employ it to show that the ideological and physical manifestations of automobility systems also result in the marginalization and subordination of certain communities. Utilizing the Right to the City in examining automobility and bicycle activism in New York City helps us to more fully understand the way automobility relates to the larger issue of equality and human rights. This theory
raises many questions about the nature of public space, who it is for, and most importantly, who has the right to occupy a space and shape it. For the purpose of my study, however, I focus these questions more specifically in terms of the city street. These questions are central to my argument that automobility has systematically excluded and prevented people, particularly bicyclists, from shaping and participating in urban space.

Among the many urban geographers and urban theorists who have studied the Right to the City is David Harvey. In his book, aptly named *The Right to the City*, he discusses the interplay between the urban environment, capitalism, and human rights, defining the Right to the City as the “active right to make the city different, to shape it more in accord with our heart’s desire, and to re-make ourselves thereby in a different image” (Harvey 2003, 941). He argues that this ability to reshape our environment and ourselves accordingly is a fundamental human right (Harvey 2003). Another noted urban geographer who approaches this subject is Don Mitchell. In his book, *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*, he defines this Right to the City in similar terms, but cites Lefebvre’s idea of the city as an oeuvre, “a work in which all its citizens participate” (Mitchell 2003, 17). Both Harvey and Mitchell’s discussions and interpretations of the Right to the City shed significant light on the theory’s relationship to automobility and transportation inequality more generally.

Harvey and Mitchell’s ideas regarding the Right to the City explain the theoretical roots of bicycle activism; at its most basic level, it strives to establish bicyclists as legitimate architects in shaping the city. In his book, Harvey claims that a fundamental aspect to achieving the Right to the City is ensuring that all urban dwellers are architects
in this way; all daily interactions, errands, and engagements (social, political, economic, and otherwise) should shape the city in their own way. Harvey argues, however, that privatization of urban space and “destructive Neoliberalism” have abolished this (Harvey 2003, 941). He adds that in order to attain the right to the city for all, we must adopt a new set of economic and political practices and a reordering of rights. This, he says, must be enacted through “the mobilization of sufficient power through political organization or in the street if necessary” (Harvey 2003, 941). This is how bicycle activism fits within the framework of the Right to the City – the groups I study are these “political organizations” fighting for a space to become architects of the city.

Mitchell focuses more on the relationship between the Right to the City and public space. He asserts that that a city thrives in its heterogeneity, and that the diversity inherent in urban life must be present in order for public space to succeed. However, he points to a notable shift that has occurred in the way the city is produced. There has been an “expropriation by a dominant class (and a set of economic interests) that is not really interested in making the city a site for the cohabitation of differences. More and more the spaces of the modern city are being produced for us rather than by us” (Mitchell 2003, 18). In understanding the city street as a public space, it is clear that the dominant class and set of economic interests that Mitchell discusses is the automobile industry and the policies it has produced – or more simply, automobility. These capitalist interests take away the rights to participation and appropriation that Harvey argues are implicit within the Right to the City (Harvey 2003).

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1 Urban theorist Jane Jacobs asserts this idea in her revered book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*: “The ubiquitous principle is the need of cities for a most intricate and close-grained diversity of uses that give each other constant mutual support, both economically and socially. The components of this diversity can differ enormously, but they must supplement each other in certain concrete ways” (Jacobs 1961, 14).
In applying these ideas to New York City streets, we can see how the struggle of alternative transportation is a result of automobility’s suppression of rights. Automobility has made public space less dynamic – the city street is tailored to the needs and demands of cars, their drivers, and the market supporting them. A change to this norm would pose a significant challenge to the lifestyle that society has created to revolve around the car and its expectations of flexibility of mobility.

So, who has the Right to the City street? Who has the right to be in the space and to shape it? To shape themselves? These are the fundamental questions we must address when considering the relationship between the Right to the City and the struggle of bicycle activism. As a result of automobility, bicyclists, and other users of alternative modes of transportation, are not able to access this right. Unlike drivers, bicyclists must fight for the right to be in the city street, and after they receive this right, must fight to shape it to their needs. For bicyclists to exert influence over the public city street, they must fight against long-cemented ideas and values of American lifestyle and infrastructure.

The Right to the City lies at the root of bicycle activism. Although alternative transportation advocates may not refer to the Right to the City explicitly, they are nonetheless fighting for it. All three case studies in this thesis illustrate the desire to exert the right to shape the New York City street, but do so through the use of differing mechanisms and strategies. This central idea links bicycle activism to a common goal (although this goal can take different forms): the ability to claim bicycle-designated space, shape public space, and reshape ourselves through urban cycling. To do this, the close link between infrastructure and lifestyle that systems of automobility have produced
must be dismantled to make way for a more complete, equitable, and dynamic New York City street. As David Harvey argues, “If our urban world has been imagined and made then it can be re-imagined and re-made” (Harvey 2003, 941).

Of course, the Right to the City framework is not without its limitations. It implies that the Right is something that can be fought for – however, not all populations are afforded the opportunity or access to do so. As I propose in the following case studies, the Right to the City should not be taken as a comprehensive approach to activism. Instead, it should be used to inform our understanding of the way different forms of activism have differing devices at their disposition. The Right to the City is in this sense an ideal – a final objective that bicycle activism uses, both intentionally and unintentionally, as a way to question automobility.

Conclusions

Understanding automobility and the Right to the City is integral to understanding the nature of bicycle activism in New York City, because they illustrate the obstacles and the environment that activists are working against and within. The car has created an idealized view of mobility that only the car itself can fulfill. Accordingly, infrastructure has been shaped and viewed as a means of indulging the car and its user, further promoting and propelling the systems that support automobility. The city has been marked by a notable inequality in access to the rights Harvey and Mitchell describe; the city has been shaped by a certain set of people, namely drivers and the automobile industry, while those unable to afford a car or who simply choose not to drive for environmental, social, or political reasons are not afforded the same rights. Even though there has been a shift in urban policy away from Robert Moses’s ideals and towards those
of Jane Jacobs, the infrastructure (and the suburbs) had already been built; when people
demonstrated a newfound desire for a more localized community, it remained clear that
Moses’s projects would still dictate their lifestyles (Harvey 2008).

Consideration of these ideas helps explain the nature of public space in the city.
Cars are fundamental parts of New York City public space, as they take up the majority
of city street space represent the greatest risk to the safety and the lives of bikers,
pedestrians, and others. They are the focus of countless political problems (safety, traffic,
and air quality, among others) and have great power and influence in the political system.
However, all this discussion about cars demonstrates just how pervasive they are in
relation to the overall transportation network – one cannot understand the experience of
the bicycle without first understanding the dynamics of the car.

The struggle against automobility’s suppression of alternative transportation is
therefore where we find the re-creation and re-imagination of space. The struggle itself is
what forces us to rethink the relationship between the individual and the public sphere,
the built environment and the imagined. It is by looking at activism that we see the
interplay between policy, planning, justice, and long-standing norms. This activism, in its
most simple form, strives to give the Right to the City to bicyclists, to give them the
opportunity to shape public space towards their needs and desires.
Chapter 3
Historical Contexts: Bicycles and the City

Since its conception, the bicycle has been set apart as an alternative – economically, socially, and politically (Herlihy 2004). The history of the bicycle is dependent on narratives of timing and technology, bound by significant cultural shifts, and marked by political and social change. This complex combination of infrastructural and psychological structures has positioned the bicycle as a “fringe” mode of transportation. Contemporary bicycle activism is rooted in these experiences – the obstacles encountered, the victories won, and the environments within. It is thus important to understand the historical context of the bicycle through an examination of its initial creation, its arrival into U.S. policy around the late 19th century, and its entry into New York City. In looking at the bicycle through this historical lens, it becomes clear why it has encountered such obstacles in gaining the legitimacy and respect that it needs in order to be a viable, convenient, and safe mode of transportation.

The Creation of Pedal Power

On an early 19th century city street, horse-drawn carts, trolleys, and pedestrians wove slowly yet chaotically around one another, almost like a complexly choreographed ballet (DiFilm 2014). However, this city street would soon be introduced to Karl Drais’s kick-powered velocipede (literally meaning “fast foot”) in 1817 (Bicycle Museum 2014; Nierop, et al.1997). A German inventor, Drais was a key part of the effort towards the creation of a human-powered vehicle; he is said to have given “the search a new direction” and provided the structural and theoretical basis on which the bicycle we have today was confounded (Herlihy 2004, 51). Drais sought to create a vehicle that
transcended class and gender boundaries, a vehicle that could serve as a social equalizer in a rapidly industrializing and fragmenting city. His vehicle embodied the political agenda of the contemporary bicycle – it was accessible, cheap, and convenient, and gave people a new way to interact with urban public space.

The history of the bicycle following Drais’s invention is controversial, as it is not known who the inventor of the modern-day bicycle truly is. However, in his book on the subject, David Herlihy posits that it was in fact a Parisian blacksmith, Pierre Michaux, who introduced the “pedal velocipede” onto the scene in 1867. The public responded positively to this new vehicle, viewing it as a more legitimate vehicle than its kick-powered predecessor (Herlihy 2004). This shift in response is indicative of a mentality that still exists to this day – society prizes vehicles that are more passive, technologically advanced, and require less work, a partial reason for the automobile’s success. Michaux’s pedal-powered bicycle gained more public support because it possessed the vehicle’s newfound personal freedom while still maintaining the appearance of a more relaxed and sophisticated usage. In this sense, this pedal-powered velocipede presented the public with a viable new mode of transportation and would thus soon become more and more popular around Europe, and eventually the United States.

The invention of the bicycle embodied the human desire for personal freedom and mobility. Although the structure itself was initially conceptualized as an alternative to horse-dependent modes of transport, it soon became a symbol for a new, equalizing vehicle on which all classes, genders, and ethnicities could exercise their personal freedom. This newfound idea – that everyone, not only the rich, were entitled to flexible, personal mobility – was revolutionary in that it presented technological, social, and
economic innovations that were hardly known in the 18th century (Herlihy 2004). This emphasis on personal mobility shaped the bicycle historically in physical, economic, social, and even ideological ways.

Bicycles also presented marginalized segments of society with new opportunities. For instance, as the bicycle gained popularity, women began to use it to escape the confinement of their mundane household chores; they went out and bought “bloomers,” which were until then not customarily acceptable for women to wear, escaping the gender roles that were so strict at the time (Herlihy 2004, 4; iBike 2014). Men became weary of this newfound threat of female mobility, claiming it was distracting them from their familial and domestic responsibilities. Some went so far as to assert that the bicycle presented significant health issues for women and threatened their reproductive abilities (Garvey 1995). The bicycle thus served as a means by which women, along with the working and lower classes and other oppressed communities, could escape their roles in society, threatening the existing white patriarchy. The bicycle itself, then, can be seen as inherently political ever since its conception because it aimed to move otherwise immobile individuals through public space in new, alternative, and contested ways.
The Bicycle Reaches the U.S.

By the 1890s, after several iterations, the relatively expensive pneumatic safety bicycle (most similar to the bicycle we have today) was growing exceedingly popular in the United States, despite economic depression and widespread labor unrest (Garvey 1995; Herlihy 2004). So much so, in fact, that many historians deem the decade “the bicycle boom” (Garvey 1995; Herlihy 2004). This boom is believed to be partly due to the “paradoxical attraction of the bicycle – as an instance of inventive progress and as a means of flight from the consequences of such progress” (Taylor 2008). The result was a newfound “wheel crazy” society, and the bicycle manufacturing industry grew rapidly. By 1895, there were millions of cyclists in the United States, women making up approximately one third of that market, and the bicycle was becoming cheaper, lighter, and more widely socially accepted (Herlihy 2004).
The bicycle’s introduction to the United States set a firm precedent for the politicized bicycle we have today; during the bicycle boom, activist groups began to form in large numbers. One such group was the League of American Wheelmen (LAW), founded in 1880 and reaching over 100,000 members at its peak (Taylor 2008; Herlihy 2004). LAW strived to “promote a greater appreciation and awareness of cycling, to encourage cycling-friendly legislation, to stand behind cyclists who felt they had been mistreated by state and local governments or other entities such as railroad corporations, and, above all, to encourage the construction and maintenance of good roads” (Taylor 2008). The existence of LAW is indicative of how significant the bicycle’s history is in its present – politics was always a central aspect of cycling. This can be attributed both to the maltreatment of cyclists by the police and other users since right from the beginning, the bicycle fought for the right to use space. This refers back to the Right to the City, discussed in the previous chapter; LAW’s initiatives sought to attain representation and legitimization for cyclists in both legislation as well as the physical environment. This is reflected in a statement from one cyclist from Indiana: “We are a factor in politics, and demand that the great cause of Good Roads be given consideration” (Taylor 2008).

LAW’s success at attaining political influence illustrates the powerful community-forming aspect of the bicycle. Although American cyclists came from different genders, races, socio-economic statuses, and political views, LAW united them for the cause of Good Roads. These cyclists came from “no particular section of the country, but all sections; no particular occupation, but all occupations; no particular interests, but all interests; no particular rank in life, but all ranks” (Taylor 2008). The early bicycle movement was able to form a “cyclist” identity to unify riders for the
common good: the Right to the City and the right to be represented in politics.

Unsurprisingly, this resulted in a growing interest in bicycling among politicians; after only a few years, politicians began campaigning for the “wheel vote,” appealing to cyclists’ pleas for new legislation and new roads (Taylor 2008). Similarly, bicycling was consistently used to make political statements: many parades and mass rides were organized in order to support or protest certain candidate’s legislation. The rise of the bicycle allowed a broader population to voice their opinions: “Just as bicycle’s critics argued that it distracted wives from their domestic responsibilities, men from their duty to God and family, society from more proper literary pursuits – it clearly also helped others find their political voice” (Taylor 2008).

*The Bicycle in The Big Apple*

New York City is especially interesting when studying bicycle activism because it frequently found itself at the forefront of American bicycle legislation despite the notable absence of bicycle manufacturing within its limits. However, since its entry into New York, the bicycle has been at the center of countless political, social, and economic debates between and among pedestrians, cyclists, drivers, politicians, and planners.

At the height of the bicycle boom in 1894, Brooklyn started work on the nation’s first lane dedicated specifically to bicycles (New York Times 2010). This lane stretched from Prospect Park all the way down Ocean Parkway to Coney Island. At the grand opening of the lane, more than 10,000 riders and 10,000 attended and 60 wheelmen’s clubs from the New York and New Jersey area rode in a bicycle parade with New York City’s bicycle police force (New York Times 1896). The event marked the first instance of bicyclists claiming public space, promulgated the cause, and set the precedent for
many projects to follow. As the 20th century progressed, elected officials began to prioritize bicycle lanes more and more. In fact, later in the 20th century, despite his reputation for advocating for automobile-oriented infrastructure, Robert Moses proposed dozens of miles of bicycle lanes along many of his planned roads and highways (New York Times 1938).

Bicycles remained a main priority until the early to mid-twentieth century, when bicycle sales plummeted as a result of the rapidly growing automobile industry. As cars became more and more in demand, the bicycle manufacturing industry turned more towards the manufacturing of cars, grinding the bicycle boom to a halt. Herlihy attributes this to the fact that “the bicycle could not satisfy the demand which it had created. A mechanically propelled vehicle was wanted instead of a foot-propelled one, and we now know that the automobile was the answer” (Herlihy 2004, 299). So just as the bicycle had gained widespread acceptance, American society began to look towards the newest and
most modern of technology. However, Herlihy also points out that although the bicycle boom did not last more than a decade or two, it succeeded in laying the groundwork for the future of cycling: it proved that the bicycle was practical and versatile, brought its price down significantly, and secured broader social acceptance (Herlihy 2004). Moreover, it created many bicycle lanes that withstood the automobile craze, and still exist to this day (such as the lane stretching along Ocean Parkway in Brooklyn).

Consequently, in the decades following the bicycle boom, the automobile craze took over New York City, along with the rest of the nation. As this craze took its course, bicycling took a back seat in policy and activism but was still sitting on the backburner. However, Europeans followed a different course; a Parisian correspondent to the New York Times wrote at the time: “Is it not absurd, is it not a disgrace to the inventive age we live in to see a man obliged to employ, in order to get through the street, a great vehicle, as large almost as a house? So let us have the velocipedes” (Herlihy 2004). As Europeans strived to make the bicycle more accessible and began putting policies in place to ensure safe practices, Americans were rapidly losing interest in integrating the new mode of transportation into culture and policy (Herlihy 2004, 133). Instead, Americans focused on increasing regulations of the road, understanding that the faster and more individualized mobility that the car provided called for increased supervision. This initial divergence between European and American attitudes towards bicycling can be seen as a precursor to the currently advanced state of European bicycling infrastructure and policy in relation to those in America.

However, as the oil crisis hit the United States in the 1970s, bicycle use and activism was revived and politicians felt pressure to further bicycle-friendly legislation
once again. In 1972, Congress voted to allow the use of federal highway funds to finance bike paths in public parks (New York Times 2010). This marked a significant step in the future of biking in New York City, as it gave legitimacy to bicycles on the national level and prompted discussions of change among planners and policy-makers.

Soon after in 1980, the nation’s first protected bike lanes were installed along 6th and 7th avenues under Mayor Edward Koch, who was inspired by the seemingly advanced bicycle infrastructure he observed during a trip to China (New York Times 2010). Unfortunately, only three months later, Koch was forced to remove the concrete wall separating the bike lanes and replace them with a meager painted line. This was only the beginning of what would become the largely contested experience of bicycle infrastructure in New York City. It became more and more apparent that anti-bicycle opposition, pedestrians and old-school politicians, would fight tirelessly to hinder or revoke bicycle projects. However, 11 years later in 1991, Congress expanded their legislation concerning federal funding to cover bicycle-related projects more generally, instead of projects specific to public parks (New York Times 2010). This allowed New York City’s government significantly more freedom in allocating funding away from cars and instead towards the expansion and enhancement of bicycle-friendly infrastructure.

When Mayor Rudy Giuliani took office in 1994, it was clear transportation would not be a priority. He proposed dismembering the Department of Transportation (DOT) and scattering its employees into various other municipal departments (Transportation Alternatives 2006, 4-5). This proposal thankfully never came to fruition, and by 1997, bicycling in New York City was pushing ahead despite the Mayor’s lack of interest. That year, although the DOT only installed a handful of new bike lanes around the city, the
Bicycle Master Plan was released. This Plan recognized the immense potential of biking in New York City to attain social and economic goals and outlined specific initiatives that could help achieve them. Separated into four sections entitled Encouragement, Education, Engineering, and Enforcement, the Plan included extensive social and economic data, proposals for countless programs concerning policing and accessibility, and stressed that the government should (and would) begin to rethink who the New York City street was made for. More specifically, in recognition of the 125% increase in bicycle usage between 1980 and 1995, the Plan called for the construction of a citywide network of 900-miles, including multiple forms of bike lanes and routes (NYC Department of City Planning 1997). This Bicycle Master Plan laid the early groundwork for the imminent creation of the plethora of bicycle activism groups, because it finally gave legitimacy to the movement, providing groups and organizations with a plan with which they could hold the government accountable for.

*Contemporary New York City Bicycling*

The history of bicycles and bicycle activism following the publication of 1997’s Bicycle Master Plan is a rocky one; bicycle infrastructure was routinely implemented, contested, and then taken away. Although the city indeed saw a net increase of bike lanes, progress was made much slower and more tedious as a result. The Plan proved too ambitious, and bicycle infrastructure proceeded slowly on. Despite this, there were still some success stories thanks to the many groups and organizations dedicated to organizing, protesting, and lobbying for the creation and sustainment of bicycle infrastructure.
A particularly important success was Bloomberg’s appointment of Janette Sadik-Khan, an “avid cyclist,” as the city’s Transportation Commissioner in 2007 (New York Times 2010). She became a strong and influential voice in the movement, and as is evident in my examination of Citi Bike in chapter six, incited major change during her time as Commissioner. She approached her job with a clear vision of what New York City needed to accomplish both in terms of bicycle infrastructure and sustainability more generally. Much of her ideas were influenced by projects undertaken around the world: from the urban bike paths in Copenhagen, to the integrated bike-share network in Paris, to the Bus Rapid Transit system in Bogota. In addition to taking these success stories as inspiration for innovations she spearheaded, she claims that they also stemmed from a sort of “competition among the world’s global cities” that motivated her (Jacobs 2013).

Sadik-Khan’s leadership sparked a new way of conceptualizing the use of public street space in New York City based upon the Complete Street movement, the idea behind which is that “multimodal corridors would become the default mode – and justification must be given when they are not” (McCann 2005). The movement is centered around the claim that urban planners and policy makers should be required to design and construct roads that work for all modes of transportation – motorists, bus riders, bicyclists, and pedestrians, including those with disabilities (McCann 2005,). Instead of focusing on change at a smaller level (i.e. street by street), the Complete Street movement urges a complete overhaul of the contemporary conceptualization of the street: “The Complete Streets concept focuses not just on individual roads but on changing the decision-making and design process so that all users are routinely considered during the planning, building, and operating of all roadways. It is about policy and institutional
change” (Laplante & McCann 2008, 24). This concept was particularly important at the beginning of the new millennium because it sparked a realization that in order for bicycling to be truly feasible in the future for both utilitarian and recreational purposes, there would need to be a change in the entire process of urban planning rather than a renovation of the existing infrastructure.

![Figure 3: A Complete Street plan for Manhattan’s 1st and 2nd Avenues](image)

Additionally, more recently a program called Summer Streets has opened up opportunities for bicyclists in New York City. Proposed by Mayor Bloomberg and Transportation Commissioner Sadik-Khan in June 2008, the program closes a seven-mile
swath of Park Avenue to car traffic and opens it up to bicyclists, pedestrians, roller bladers, skateboarders, and any other type of transportation one may fancy (Office of the Mayor of New York City 2008). Summer Streets takes place each summer on three consecutive Saturdays and draws hundreds of thousands of people to partake in the car-free revelry. From 150,000 in 2008 to over 300,000 in 2013, the crowds have only grown in size and enthusiasm (Pedbikeinfo.org 2014; New York City Department of Transportation 2014). In addition to providing the city with a temporary car-free space, Summer Streets has also been shown to significantly decrease pollution on the Saturdays it is held (Whitlow, Hall, Zhang, & Anguita 2011). The creation and popularity of Summer Streets illustrates the growing prioritization of bicycling (and other alternative modes of transportation) within New York City’s government and general population.

Currently, New York City has 6,000 miles of streets and over 12,000 miles of sidewalk, making up approximately 80% of the city’s public space. Over the past six years, more than 255 miles of bike lanes have been added to the 700-mile network of lanes across the city (Transportation Alternatives 2014). Under Bloomberg and Sadik-Khan, the city has seen a drastic increase in bicycle commuting – the rate doubled between 2007 and 2011 (NYC DOT 2014). Although bicyclists still face countless issues in New York City, it is fair to say that the physical, political, and social environments have made significant progress in the past decade (see Appendix for detailed map of New York City’s current bicycle infrastructure).

Conclusions

The Complete Streets movement and Summer Streets program are just a few of the many bicycle-related changes happening in contemporary New York City. There has
been a recent shift towards more extreme and comprehensive policies and initiatives, aiming to overhaul the current standard of planning at from the very top. Understanding this shift allows us to explore the following three case studies of bicycle activism within the political and social context that they are working within. The three organizations discussed, Times Up!, Transportation Alternatives, and Citi Bike, all must find a balance between being realistic and idealistic, and it is thus important to recognize what their reality and objectives are.

A historical view of the bicycle provides us with an understanding of how the bicycle was politicized from its very conception, and how that fact informs the state of the bicycle today. Its process of politicization is one based on contested space and competing agendas, spaces and agendas that have always been contested and competing in public space. Public space, in this case the public city street, is then an incubator for politicization, as the definition of public is consistently challenged. Public space, then, changes conceptually each time society shifts socially and politically. For instance, when the automobile craze took over American roads, the bicycle was conceptualized differently than it was during the late 19th century bicycle boom. The politicization of the bicycle has thus relied on the changing nature of American public space, since the bicycle itself has remained relatively constant in form and basic function. This historical perspective illustrates the way society has changed and informed the politics of the bicycle. Bicycle activism has thus been occupied with situating the bicycle in an ever-changing society – a society that constantly changes the way urban space is used and contested.
Chapter 4  
Time’s Up! and Grassroots Activism

Through the following three case studies, I identify and analyze the differing mechanisms that are used in New York City bicycle activism. This multi-level approach demonstrates the unity of the bicycle activist community while also highlighting their differences. The analysis also illustrates who has the power to do what – that is, which actors and entities are able or allowed to harness specific mechanisms to produce meaningful change. Through this type of study, we are able to more clearly understand the dynamics of bicycle activism in New York by identifying the methods and devices that prove most effective and efficient.

To embark on our journey through New York City bicycle activism, I start with one of the smaller-scale groups, Time’s Up!. Founded in 1987, the grassroots group set out to educate the city about environmental issues and to empower people to participate actively in working to fight them (Time’s Up! 2012). Since its conception, the group has become more and more focused on promoting alternative transportation, but also frequently teams up with other environmentally focused community groups to raise awareness about other issues. Supported only by charitable donations and membership fees, the group is led entirely by volunteers and runs hundreds of programs each year. These programs range from all-female bike repair workshops to Prospect Park moonlight rides. However, this chapter focuses predominantly on one of the group’s most well-known and controversial events: Critical Mass.
Critical Mass: A “Defiant Celebration”

Critical Mass (CM) is a monthly bicycle ride uniting activists, commuters, recreationalists, and others in the streets of New York City. On the last Friday of each month, hundreds of bicyclists gather at a chosen corner of the city and embark on a ride without any pre-determined route or schedule. CM originated in San Francisco in 1992 as a rush-hour bike ride aimed at increasing the visibility of bicycling (Blickstein & Hanson 2001). However, CM quickly spread to hundreds of cities, and by the mid-1990s, New York City had adopted it as its very own.

It’s quite hard to determine what CM aims to do in specific terms; it is a movement without a leader, without an official mission statement, without rules. Thus, when evaluating Critical Mass as a form of bicycle activism, it is important to understand that what matters most about CM is that it happens. For one person, it may serve as a way to express environmental concerns about cars and traffic; for another, it may be about advocating for a safe space for his or her commute; for yet another, CM could revolve around fighting oppression from police; and lastly, many simply participate because it’s enjoyable. Although it means so many different things to
all its participants, CM takes shape because it unites such a variety of people over one thing – the bicycle. In this way, CM is the epitome of the politicization of the bicycle in that it harnesses the actual, physical vehicle to create a platform on which people can express their political voices.

CM is a unique form of bicycle activism because instead of pushing for certain change, it enacts it. There is a complete disregard for central authority, and instead runs on sheer empowerment and self-organization (Carlsson 2002). This creates a sense that the change they are advocating for is attainable – it’s here. The sheer number of cyclists populating the city street at one time is a demonstration of presence but also makes the ideal real, creating a false reality of a truly bike-able New York City. It shows bicyclists, drivers, pedestrians, and policy-makers that a new way of life is possible. In a book of essays focused on CM, edited by Chris Carlsson, John Jordan claims that CM thrives because “the excitement and danger of the action creates a magically focused moment, a peak experience, where real time suddenly stands still and a certain shift in consciousness can occur” (Carlsson 2002). In this way, CM takes bicycle activism to the extreme, however briefly, in order to open up room in the social and political consciousness.

Understanding why CM does what it does is only a part of understanding its effect as a whole. We must also look at the devices the event employs in order to stay relevant and maintain a steady group of participants. According to Carlsson, CM harnesses “a mysterious but simple and direct social power to invent our own reality” (Carlsson 2002). It functions on empowerment and the innate human desire for “authentic, unmediated community” (Carlsson 2002). It is for this reason that CM claims to be a celebration rather than a protest; the movement is focused on the actual, visceral experience instead
of representatives, governments, or politicians. So, although the event is frequently called anarchistic or chaotic, it seems that this anarchy is more of a method than an ideology (Carlsson 2002).

Another interesting aspect of CM is that it lacks any hierarchical structure as a group. There is no appointed leader, member list, or official mission statement. Rather, the event functions on the aforementioned group empowerment and unregulated nature. This lack of structure indicates that the group’s aim isn’t to formalize their statement – instead, they strive to show that their action is not inherently radical. It is this aspect of CM that allows for such an inclusive atmosphere. It provides a way to centralize around a common goal, forging a “collective spirit” (Carlsson 2002, 76). Additionally, this lack of hierarchy ensures that no single person is held responsible for the event. When police become involved in CM, which happens relatively frequently in most of the cities it’s held in, there is no “accountable” party. This is again indicative of CM’s emphasis on collective, unmediated, liberating, and direct action.

*The 2004 Republican National Convention*

Although Critical Mass had been held for many years prior, the 2004 Republican National Convention (RNC) proved to be a breaking point between grassroots bicycle activists and the New York Police Department (NYPD). On August 27th, 2004, three days before the start of the Convention, Time’s Up!’s monthly Critical Mass ride was scheduled to take place. However, as the ride of roughly 5,000 people commenced, it soon became clear that the NYPD was losing patience with the event (Ferguson 2006). About an hour and a half into the ride, police stretched a net across 7th Avenue to stop the riders and proceeded to conduct mass arrests. That night, 264 riders were arrested and
many were injured. Despite the fact that these types of arrests are usually settled through short desk appearances or summons, some of the riders arrested that day were held for over 24 hours. Many had their bikes confiscated as “evidence,” most of which were never returned to their owners (Blickstein 2010).

Figure 5: NYPD officers arrest participants of the controversial Critical Mass ride in 2004

The 2004 RNC sparked a new trend of arrests during subsequent CM rides. In the next two years, approximately 600 additional participants were arrested (Ferguson 2006). Many of these arrests were made on the premise of “disorderly conduct,” which includes an activity that involves “the obstruction of vehicular or pedestrian traffic” (Section 240.20.5, New York Penal Law; Blickstein 2010). These arrests made clear that the NYPD recognized CM as a threat. In an article on the subject published in the Village Voice, Sarah Ferguson said that police claimed that “‘anarchists’ and ‘extremists’ had hijacked the event and were intent on ‘taking over the city’” and that “the rides create havoc for drivers and pedestrians and need pre-approved routes to ensure public safety”
This feeling on the part of the NYPD indicates a larger trend of a general uneasiness about bicyclists as chaotic and anarchistic. The NYPD’s need to control CM, which is by its very nature uncontrolled, stems from the more general desire to mediate and designate public spaces in accordance to the norms created by the car. This is at the very root of what Time’s Up! and CM seek to dismantle.

The NYPD’s strategic framing of CM as a threat to the public safety of the city refers back to concepts of automobility. Anything threatening the dominance of the automobile in the New York City street is taken as a direct assault to life as we know it. The street is physically and psychologically constructed around systems of automobility and CM’s forces us to rethink that. It is necessary to acknowledge that the idea of bicyclists posing public safety problems is incredibly misguided when we look at statistics concerning cars: during 2012, in crashes involving bicyclists and pedestrians, there were zero pedestrian fatalities (NYC Department of Transportation 2012). In the same year, crashes between cars and pedestrians resulted in 135 pedestrian fatalities (New York State Department of Motor Vehicles 2012). Clearly, there is a large discrepancy between the police’s perception of bicycles and the reality. This is a product of automobility’s pervasiveness and normalization in our society, where automobile-related deaths are all too common yet the bicycle is considered “risky.” It is not truly acknowledged that perhaps the reason bicycles are regarded this way is because the city street is constructed in a way that actively encourages unsafe vehicular use.

**Weighing the Pros and Cons**

Time’s Up! and Critical Mass rides have been met with strong sources of support, but have also faced a fair amount of opposition since the unique form of activism found
in CM has both positives and negatives. For instance, what I argue to be the biggest positive is that the group and ride create and strengthen a cyclist identity. The ride makes participants feel that they are a part of a larger movement and fosters a sense of self-empowerment. Participants are more likely to identify with their choice to bicycle and feel compelled to fight for their rights to safety, respect, and legitimacy. I believe that Critical Mass is crucial to the fundamentals of bicycle activism because it instills the basic desire for change that fuels higher levels of activism. Without the form of grassroots activism that Time’s Up! carries out, organization likes the ones I study later in this thesis would not have the necessary individual and public support to back their programs and initiatives.

Additionally, Time’s Up! and Critical Mass offer the opportunity to otherwise apprehensive urban bicyclists to get acquainted with it in a safer and more communal setting. Biking in New York City is undoubtedly a nerve-wracking experience – cyclists must constantly watch for pedestrians, swerving cars, and the opening of parked cars’ doors. Riding with CM is significantly less scary. Susan Blickstein and her colleague Susan Hanson interviewed various riders in San Francisco’s Critical Mass, and found that 10% indicated that CM prompted them to increase recreational bicycling, 32% said they cycled more frequently for transportation, and 23% affirmed that bicycling had become their primary mode of transport (Blickstein & Hanson 2001). CM thus increases the visibility of bicycling and serves as a reminder of the increasing strength of the bike community.

Despite all these positive aspects of this type of grassroots activism, the negatives still do exist. For instance, as empowering as it is for thousands of bicyclists to take back
the city streets, the fact remains that the ride only lasts a few hours each month. Although CM incites meaningful change outside of the ride itself, its transience limits the extent to which it can truly change the dominant mentality of the public and legislators. Instead, the short but loaded interactions CM has with police run the risk of creating a negative reputation of bicyclists in the eyes of the City.

In this regard, like many other radical political groups, CM does not promote a long-term, sustainable relationship with policy makers and law enforcement. As seen in the debacle surrounding the 2004 RNC, CM’s chaotic nature is undeniably threatening. In addition to the way CM rides take over entire areas of the city, halting automobile traffic and disregarding traffic signals and regulations, participants also commonly make a lot of noise (honking horns, shouting, singing, chanting, etc.). In this capacity, the chaos that CM presents threatens the orderliness that the NYPD is charged with ensuring in the New York City streets. It is thus necessary to understand that the actions of the police during instances like the 2004 RNC were not completely unwarranted (although indeed too harsh). Despite the fact that CM’s loud, unregulated chaos is successful in its empowering and community-building efforts, the chaos also serves to further marginalize itself from the police and the City.

The NYPD are not the only ones who have clashed with CM bicyclists, the New York Post, along with other media outlets like the New York Daily News, has repeatedly published blog posts and printed articles detailing the experiences of the “car-hating anarchists responsible for the Critical Mass bicycle swarms” (Post Staff Report 2010). These not-so-subtly biased articles focus mainly on the group’s attempts to fight legal battles against the City and the NYPD in court, arguing that they’re grasping at straws
and don’t have the right to be there at all (Golding 2010). Not only is this a direct attack on bicyclists’ Right to the City, it is also calling into question the validity and the very existence of the group itself. In one piece, the Post argues that the group is “promoting its agenda without concern for the public welfare or the rights of others” (Post Staff Report 2010). Although this strong opposition in conservative media is undoubtedly misguided in its attacks, it is nonetheless important in shaping an overall reputation of the group, and bicyclists in general, in the eyes of the public.

Another aspect of CM that I call into question is the repetitive nature of the ride. Because it takes place every month on a scheduled day and time, the participants must make sure that CM remains significant; the event risks becoming expected in its repetition. The group must attempt to preserve their somewhat “anarchistic” mood in order to remain relevant. In their Critical Massifesto, participants claim that “many of us who have been ‘massing’ all along occasionally get a bit bored, or wonder if there isn’t something we might do to push Mass to new levels of interest, fun, and even perhaps political contention. But if the development of communal visions is a serious goal, as I think it is for many of us, then we simply have to give it time” (Carlsson 1994). Thus, although the ride has proven to become a bit more normalized than the participants may want, they manage to keep it exciting with the understanding that real political change takes time and requires “long-standing, well-developed, and trustworthy communities” (Carlsson 1994). It is for this reason that the rides are still happening to this day; although the NYPD knows its going to happen before it does, the rides still serve to show that the bicycling community is still, and will always be, present. So, despite the fact that most
CM rides in New York City end in a party at a pre-determined site, the political message of the ride itself has stayed relatively constant.

Conclusions

The role that Time’s Up!, Critical Mass, and other grassroots groups play is clearly vital to bicycle activism. The grassroots community establishes individual, personal involvement in the cause and incites participation. This is necessary because activism at a larger scale (through NGOs and institutional programs) cannot politicize the bicycle on their own, as NGOs and the State are better equipped to work within established structures. Politicization — that is, transforming an act or object that would otherwise be overlooked into a political issue — first occurs at the local and individual levels and then can expand upwards to induce lobbying and actual policy change. Critical Mass has its name for a reason; in order to successfully make the bicycle into an issue – something necessitating inclusion in political discourse – a large number of individuals must make the choice to adhere to the movement and show it.

There are countless other grassroots groups that also influence New York City bicycle activism in similar ways. For example, the Ghost Bike Street Memorial movement, which Time’s Up! is associated with, puts white-painted bicycles in the locations where bicyclists have been seriously hurt or killed by drivers. As of today, there are approximately 116 Ghost Bikes put in place around the city to commemorate 166 deaths (Ghost Bikes 2014). These “viral, spectral memorials” use similar mechanisms to those used in Critical Mass – they use the experience of the individual to publicize and politicize the bicycle more broadly (Stein 2008). When people walk past the white Ghost Bikes, they understand that a statement is being made – a statement that speaks to a larger
trend of unsafe and unfair treatment of bicyclists by police and other users of public space. Similarly, the movement also uses a confrontational approach comparable to CM, hoping to serve as a constant reminder that the bicycle community is united and strong.

An examination of grassroots groups and their initiatives like Critical Mass and the Ghost Bike Street Memorials shows us the importance of the physicality of activism. This evokes the idea of the Right to the City. CM is quite literally a movement to reclaim that right, attempting to fight against the physical and psychological boundaries and limitations automobility has created. But what is most striking about CM’s method is that it tackles political and psychological issues with an incredibly physical approach. The strikingly corporeal movement of hundreds to thousands of bicyclists taking over a city street commonly dominated by cars produces a very tangible, visceral response both from spectators and participants alike. In this way, CM attempts to reclaim the Right to the City by physically harnessing that right. By stopping automobile traffic at rush hour and taking over automobile-designated space, CM participants are making a statement that the reality of the city street needs to change. The event allows otherwise disenfranchised individual bicyclists to exercise their right to shape public space: “Critical Mass cuts through the noise and inertia of the American transportation system and teaches us to carve a wedge of our city for ourselves” (Carlsson 2002, 74). As we see in the case studies to follow, this form of activism that uses physical, direct action is unique to grassroots organizations, as they maintain political power through the solidarity of their opinions and movements.

The fact remains, however, that understanding grassroots activism through the framework of the Right to the City does have its limitations. The theory does not inform
or imply a tactical solution to conflicts that arise within political movements or activism. Achieving the Right to the City is an ideal; it implies that those striving to attain the Right are at a position where they can do so. However, this is not the case in many instances where conflict erupts. In the case of the 2004 RNC, for example, the simple fact that CM participants were attempting to gain the right to shape space did not necessarily allow them to do so – instead, they were forcibly removed from the street through arrests and confiscations of their bicycles. In this regard, the Right to the City must exist as a successful method of questioning automobility.
Chapter 5
The Hybrid Activism of Transportation Alternatives

Continuing along the spectrum of bicycle activism, numerous non-profit organizations in New York City are working to promote pro-bicycle legislation and mentalities. In this chapter, I use the non-governmental organization (NGO) Transportation Alternatives as a case study to identify the mechanisms involved in activism at this scale.

An Introduction to Transportation Alternatives

Founded in 1973, Transportation Alternatives (TA) has become one of the most successful alternative transportation advocates in New York City, one could argue even within the entire country. In virtually every major piece of literature concerning bicycle politics, it is mentioned at least once or twice (if not discussed at length). Although TA is not solely concerned with bicycle activism, it tends to be the organization’s biggest focus. TA’s mission statement says that it aims to “reclaim New York City’s streets from the automobile,” and bicycle advocacy is unsurprisingly central to this fight (Transportation Alternatives 2014). The organization approaches transportation activism comprehensively, with both community outreach and lobbying departments. It is composed of a staff of 43 paid employees, and is funded primarily through membership fees, donor contributions, and government grants.

TA tackles a wide range of issues, from advocating for a progressive congestion-pricing plan for Manhattan’s busiest areas during peak hours to pressuring legislators to approve new bike lanes in accordance with the Complete Street movement. It frequently executes public events, such as bike tours held in each borough that have been revered as
“rides of passage” (Transportation Alternatives 2014). In addition to frequently pushing legislators to be more progressive in their policies, TA has also published multiple documents, reports, and “blueprints” of their own that have served as the framework for actual legislation.

One such report that has since become successful is TA’s Vision Zero campaign. In June of 2011, the organization published the report recommending ways the City could save countless lives by promoting safer streets (Transportation Alternatives 2011). When Mayor Bill de Blasio took office in 2014, his administration decided to adopt the proposed strategies outlined in TA’s report. Ever since, the City’s newest goal has been set to reducing avoidable traffic deaths (predominantly caused by speeding traffic and poorly designed streets) to zero. TA’s report is widely acclaimed for providing the framework for this policy, as even the “Vision Zero” name was adopted at the citywide level. However, not all TA policy recommendations have seen such success. In 2007, TA’s reports detailing the advantages of a congestion pricing system in the city were vehemently attacked and the bill did not ultimately pass the State Senate.

TA also serves as a primary source for data concerning bicycling. Each year, the organization publishes reports containing studies that its own staff has conducted; in 2012, TA put out eight reports, ranging from topics concerning crashes involving children, to speeding patterns on a Brooklyn boulevard, to the NYPD’s lack of regulation of dangerous drivers (Transportation Alternatives 2014). These reports, among the many other studies TA has published, have had an incontrovertible effect on lawmakers’ decisions, as they provided concrete proof of the sharp increase in bicycle commuting and recreational use as well as the rampant injustices facing such users.
Walking through TA’s Manhattan office, it quickly becomes clear by the entire room dedicated to bicycle parking that the majority of the staff commutes to work by bike. Perhaps this is what makes the advocates so passionate about fighting for bicycle rights – biking is their everyday routine, it’s extremely close to their lives. If they’re living it everyday, they feel the injustices more frequently and intensely. As a non-profit organization with thousands of members and 100,000 email list subscribers, TA (and organizations like it) play a crucial, but different, role within bicycle activism in New York. But what is that role? We now know that grassroots organizations like Time’s Up! help to foster empowerment on the individual and community levels by uniting around a physical presence and creating a brief but poignant taste of the ideal. So where do larger, more “organized” organizations fit into the process?

*Hybrid Activism*

Although TA works closely with the City’s politicians and legislators, it also prides itself on undertaking a significant amount of community outreach. I start with its work in this area to show that despite its similarities to the activism of grassroots groups, it is in fact quite different. The community-based aspect of TA is composed of an Activist Committee in each of the city’s five boroughs. These Committees meet monthly, and sometimes more frequently, to discuss how they can contribute to community engagement within various initiatives going on in that specific borough. These range from advocating for the addition or improvement of bike lanes to supporting citywide campaigns at a more local level. These Committees take place within the communities, attended wholly by volunteers and representatives from TA (Transportation Alternatives 2014). However, what makes these committees different than other community groups is
their tie to the non-profit. Although the committees group together people from the community who care deeply about the cause, their link to TA makes the entire process seem more politically legitimate. This creates a feeling among community volunteers and members that they are somehow connected to their representatives at the top; if they are voicing their opinions and concerns to TA staff and activists, they perhaps feel that their voices will trickle upwards and onwards towards lawmakers.

TA is able to create this crucial link because its staff also lobbies both the local and federal governments. In an interview with TA’s Deputy Director Noah Budnick, he discussed what he thinks to be four levels of activism: the first level he described is reminiscent of Time’s Up!, characterized as “anarchistic” and made up exclusively of volunteers; the second level, he said, is more organized (perhaps including some paid staff), but is still out on the “outside” of politics; the third level is similar to the second, but is taken more seriously and is in the “inside” of politics; lastly, the fourth level is an institutional organization, that is ingrained into a culture and society (Budnick 2014, personal communication). After explaining this, Budnick said he believed TA to be situated in the third level of activism because of its close ties to the Department of Transportation and elected officials. He said this relationship between the non-profit and the City is especially necessary to maintain because policymakers are the people actually making the bills into laws – they are the people with self-interest and must be shown that TA is working with them, not only against them (Budnick 2014, personal communication).

Budnick called TA’s approach a “hybrid” of activism and lobbying. On the one hand, TA focuses on the roughly 14 community campaigns that are run each year,
working closely with community activists and other volunteers to garner public support. However, TA seeks this support in part because their campaigns must first get approved by relevant community boards before continuing on to the city. Once approved, TA uses its liaisons with the DOT and lawmakers to get the policy passed into law. This proves to be a fairly successful and efficient form of activism, evidenced by TA’s many initiatives that have become realized. However, one must also note that the community level found at this type of activism in notably different than what is found in groups like Time’s Up!. Although TA wants to increase visibility and understanding of the bicycle movement, much of its efforts focus on assembling support for their own initiatives. Instead of relying on direct, community action to dictate the movement, they first study what needs to be changed, how this change can come about, and how to rally support behind it.

This top-down approach is necessary in bicycle activism because it connects the public with politicians in an effective way while also fostering good relationships with the legislators who have the political power to actually implement policy and infrastructural change. TA makes volunteers feel like they are a part of something bigger – a movement that actually holds the ability to affect the physical layout of New York City streets – by operating within existing political and regulatory frameworks. This is inherently different than the activism conducted by Times Up!: instead of relying on the power of numbers and centrality of action, TA fosters empowerment through the psychological and political connections it makes with institutional power structures.
Letters to Legislators and Car-free Campaigns

One of TA’s central approaches to activism is pushing its members and volunteers to write letters to their representatives expressing their approval of legislation supporting alternative transportation or their disapproval of the contrary. In addition to the dozens of online petitions posted on its website, TA organizes many initiatives aimed at facilitating the public-politician relationship. For instance, in 2010, TA sent thousands of letters to the New York State Legislature demanding bus lane enforcement cameras to ease congestion and increase bicyclist safety – the bill passed shortly after. Later that year, more than 2,500 handwritten letters from TA members and supporters were sent in advocating for the Complete Street movement and the extension of the 1st and 2nd Avenue bike lanes north to East Harlem – construction subsequently began on new terracotta Select Bus Service lanes and the bike lanes were extended to become the longest protected bike lanes in the nation (Transportation Alternatives 2014). This is no coincidence, as TA’s efforts have proven to make a significant impact on legislators’ decisions.

Figure 6: Transportation Alternatives staff members deliver 2,500 handwritten letters to Mayor Bloomberg, urging him to expand the 1st and 2nd Avenue bike lanes
This is activism in the form of civic engagement. TA pushes its members to reclaim the Right to the City in an incredibly democratic manner. TA uses its power in the community to act as a voice of a movement. By amassing so many letters of opinion from its members, TA acts as a middleman, facilitating interaction between the public sphere and its elected officials. This is particularly interesting when we consider the role that private interest plays in these interactions; all too often, politicians are heavily influenced by wealthy corporations and private development firms. However, Lindsey Ganson, Chief Operating Officer of TA, claims that TA is present to serve as a way to keep private interests from interfering with the public interest. She says TA is successful because it pushes the DOT and politicians further than they would normally go, acting as a catalyst for change and using their member base and grassroots organizing to influence policy (Lindsey Ganson 2014, personal communication).

This approach to activism shows the agency that can be taken by non-profit organizations in New York City’s bicycle activism community. Although TA is but one of many non-profits dedicated to promoting bicycling and fighting against automobility, it is indicative of a larger trend in non-profit activism acting as a catalyst for change. In comparing TA to Time’s Up!, it is certainly understandable that an event like Critical Mass does not stimulate concrete change in the political and physical milieu. However, Transportation Alternatives has the legitimacy and political reputation that allows it to harness the false reality that Critical Mass creates in order to make the necessary change happen to attain it. In this way, one could argue that TA politicizes the bicycle in a completely different way than do grassroots groups like Time’s Up!. Discussing this, Ganson claimed that a main issue in bicycle advocacy was that bicyclists tend not to
contact their representatives if they are in support of something; usually, calls and emails are made when there is something to complain about. This, Ganson argued, is what TA strives to reverse; the letter campaigns and petitions urge people to voice their opinions in favor of street reform instead of just against them – to allow the “voice of supports to drown out the voices of opposition” (Lindsey Ganson 2014, personal communication).

In addition to these letter and petition campaigns, TA focuses much of its attention on advocating for car-free public spaces. Since its conception, it has framed alternative transportation advocacy through the lens of environmental justice more broadly. This allows the organization to approach bicycle activism from both sides – pro-bike and anti-car – and results in a rather diverse constituency. There have been many car-free initiatives spearheaded by TA over the years, however the most notable are those concerned with permanently closing Central and Prospect Parks’ roads to car traffic. For safety, environmental, and accessibility reasons, TA believes car-free parks would be beneficial to everyone, as it would incite many drivers to switch over to alternative modes of transportation and allow those already using these modes to more effectively and safely use public space during peak hours. After many years of fighting this battle, the City finally passed a law in 2004 mandating car-free hours in Central Park every day from 7pm until 7am the following day. In Prospect Park, TA’s initiative took off even more successfully – the park is almost entirely car-free save for two hours each day (Transportation Alternatives 2014).

TA’s car-free activism rests upon its fundamental belief that public parks should be for park “users.” In response, many pro-car advocates argue that banning cars from parks is unfair because the street should cater to all uses. TA answers this with a claim
that touches on the very root of automobility’s effect on our idea of public space: “People who drive through the park are indeed using the physical space occupied by the park, but they are not using it *as a park*; rather, they are using it as a traffic artery” (Transportation Alternatives 2014). Systems of automobility have coerced us into understanding cars as having a fundamental right to the space. The normalization that I discuss in the second chapter of this thesis comes into play when it takes a large and powerful coalition of bicycle activists to get legislators to come to understand the way cars are in fact detrimental to much public space. The presence of cars in public parks is so normalized into New York City’s history, thanks to planners like Robert Moses, that asserting that they do not have the right to be there is revolutionary. These car-free movements strive to show society how cars should not be blindly accepted into public space.

**Conclusions**

Non-profit organizations like TA play a very distinct role in the New York City transportation system: they connect the public to policy and the governed to the government. In essence, TA attempts to use the democratic system as a way by which to advocate for the Right to the City. Its organized, hierarchical structure within both its community outreach team and its government affairs and lobbying team is what makes TA able to infiltrate what Budnick calls the “inside.” In fact, the idea of an inside versus an outside of politics indicates that certain actors in bicycle activism hold significantly more power and legitimacy than others. This would mean that those on the outside, Time’s Up!, as Budnick claims, are limited in the change they can promote and provoke. TA, on the other hand, is on the inside and thus has the power to harness mechanisms at a larger scope and subsequently spark change on a larger level.
The difference between grassroots and non-profit activism lies within this “inside or outside” mentality. Although the phraseology of this claim may imply that being on the outside is inferior, that is not the case. In fact, operating outside of formal politics allows the use of more physical, direct, and tangible approaches to activism. For instance, although TA has a large amount of influence over policy through lobbying, events like Critical Mass are first necessary to enable and empower individuals by creating an idea of what they are working towards. TA operating on the inside allows it to harness the empowerment that grassroots groups foster in order to channel this empowerment towards actually affecting policy in a meaningful and productive way. However, Budnick’s framework for understanding advocacy does point to the limitations concerning the Right to the City discussed within my theoretical framework. His idea of an “outside” of politics refers to a group of people who hold a very different relationship to the Right to the City than those in the “inside” have. In this regard, the Right to the City fails to create a meaningful connection between forms of activism outside of its role as their underlying objective.

We must also understand TA’s role in terms of combating automobility. As the car has completely reshaped our mental and physical understanding of the city streets, TA and its colleagues choose to combat it systematically, attempting to change policies that foster unsafe driving practices and marginalize alternative transportation methods. In Chapter 2, my analysis of automobility indicates that it relies on the systemic prioritization of automobiles in policy and the capitalist mentality. In this way, TA’s anti-car and pro-bike efforts are critical in addressing the root of the issue of the inequality of New York City’s streets: the policies that designate who can influence and use specific
spaces that subsequently delegitimize certain modes of transportation through regulatory practices and policies.

At the root of this thesis is the belief that varying types of bicycle activism use different mechanisms to produce distinctive change in social and political systems. Both case studies thus far illustrate important aspects of the bicycle activism community in New York City by complicating the idea that the Right to the City can be harnessed in one single way. Rather, to truly dismantle automobility and reclaim the city street as a space in which all actors have influence, differing approaches must be taken at multiple levels and in different forms.
Chapter 6
Citi Bike and the Institution as Activist

Citi Bike is New York City’s bike share program, launched in May 2013. Since it is a new system, much of its implications are yet to be fully known. However, by examining the proposal and implementation process, along with data and feedback from its first year in operation, we can understand the way “institutional activism” operates within the New York City bicycle activism community.

An Introduction to Citi Bike

Although New York City has what many deem to be an above-average public transportation system with far-reaching subway and bus systems, it lacked the new trend in urban and environmental planning appearing throughout the world: bike-sharing programs. Although programs similar to those we have now originated in Denmark in the early 1990s, it wasn’t until the implementation of a bike share program in Lyon, France, in 2005 that the true advantages of bike sharing became clear. Lyon’s program took off quickly and was the largest system to date – in 2005, it had 15,000 members and each bike was being used 6.5 times per day (DeMaio 2009). Seeing this success, Paris and many other European cities adopted the same model. Ever since, bike sharing has been celebrated, one could argue even normalized, within most major European cities. Despite the success of these programs in Europe a decade ago, American cities have been catching on to the trend more recently. After Boston, Washington D.C., and Denver saw success in implementing these new systems, Mayor Bloomberg and Transportation Commissioner Sadik-Khan understood that New York needed to follow suit.
After a series of economic and political setbacks and delays, Citi Bike was finally implemented in May of 2013, starting off with 6,000 bikes and 330 stations located in the southern half of Manhattan and selected areas of Brooklyn. In the first day alone the program saw 6,050 trips, and figures steadily increased after that (WNYC 2013). In the first seven days, the number rose to 65,000, with users riding a collective 200,000 miles (Gabbatt 2013). Although the program is not citywide (most parts of Brooklyn and Queens, the Bronx, and Staten Island have not yet been integrated into the system), the program is already proving to be wildly successful and has plans to expand in the coming months. In terms of membership pricing, the program is still not completely accessible to those of all incomes: an annual membership (consisting of unlimited 45-minute rides) is $95, a 7-day pass is $25 and a 24-hour pass is $9.95 (both consisting of unlimited 30-minute rides) (Citi Bike NYC 2014).

In terms of ridership statistics, the program reached its 100,000th annual member in late March of 2014. In February 2014, 224,736 Citi Bike rides took place, 97% of which were made from subscribers and only 3% coming from one-time customers. The average ride was approximately 14.5 minutes, and the median age was 36. This is a stark difference from the statistics of July 2013, during which subscribers made up only 79% of rides and the median age was 50 (Citi Bike NYC 2014). Although this data undoubtedly reflects changes in tourism and seasonal factors, its notable increase in subscribers indicates that a larger percentage of users are now daily commuters and users instead of tourists or residents giving the system a one-time trial. The dramatic drop in median age also signifies that the system has taken hold of a larger demographic, reaching the younger generation who most likely uses the program to commute to work.
or run errands. This data illustrates the way the Citi Bike system has become more tightly ingrained into the cultural and social environment of New York City.

Based on a video assembling Citi Bike data throughout the day and night of Tuesday, September 17th and Wednesday, September 18th, 2013, it is clear that annual members make up a dramatic portion of the program’s ridership, although the percentage of “casual ridership” spikes during the early and mid-afternoon. The video also clearly
illustrates the overwhelming annual ridership in Brooklyn, where it seems very few casual riders venture (linepointpath 2014). This could be partly because tourists tend to stay in the center city, touring the most popular attractions in Midtown and Central Park, but perhaps also indicates a problem of accessibility. The relatively few stations in Brooklyn at this time late in 2013 and the high price of both annual membership and daily rates make the program largely inaccessible to populations without the means to pay such fees or living in areas without stations. It is in this area that the program has very far to go in terms of creating a successful, accessible, and sustainable program for all New Yorkers and visitors.

Citi Bike is not a public program – in fact, it is a “corporate investment” made by the city that hopes to turn a profit in the future (Neal 2013). After putting out a request for design proposals from private bike share companies, the City chose Alta, a company based in Portland, OR to operate the system, and Bixi, to provide manufacturing and technology services (WNYC 2013). In addition to the city and these private companies both hoping to profit off the system, Citigroup Bank is also heavily involved: it bought naming rights for five years with a $41 million investment in the program (MasterCard also threw in another $6.5 million in sponsorship) (Neal 2013). Citi Bike thus exhibits an interesting dichotomy between its root in private interest and its function as a mode of public transit. Although it is clear why the City of New York didn’t choose to implement the system internally (to save public tax dollars and perhaps to evade the responsibility of having to develop technology themselves), this incredibly capitalist model poses risks when we examine the role of bike sharing in bicycle activism (DeMaioi 2009).
**Bikelash**

What is most important about including Citi Bike in this study is that it allows us to understand what happens when bicycle activism wins, and shows us that politicizing the bicycle can be done in many ways, many of which are not in the least positive. As the launch of Citi Bike garnered much enthusiasm and celebration among bicycle activists and users, there was also a notable backlash – or as it is now called in New York City, “bikelash” (Deprez & White 2012).

As shown in Chapter 3, bicycle activists have encountered opposition since the moment bicycling took off in urban areas. Of course, the introduction of thousands of blue Citi Bikes into an otherwise car-heavy New York City street would be no exception to this rule. There have been constant complaints about the loss of parking spaces, the “unsafe” bicyclists “wavering in the streets,” and so much more (Wall Street Journal 2013). This bikelash has been directed primarily towards Mayor Bloomberg and Transportation Commissioner Sadik-Khan; Dorothy Rabinowitz, a conservative editorial writer for the Wall Street Journal and fervent Citi Bike critic, claimed that the program is a result of “totalitarians running this government” who have “sneaked [Citi Bike] under the radar in the interest of the environment.” Her argument, which is shared among many of her anti-Bloomberg and anti-Citi Bike cohorts, believes that a new “enterprising” mayor should rip out the program and instead “preserve our traffic patterns” (Wall Street Journal 2013).

Unsurprisingly, much of this criticism arrived during the heightened period around the launch in May, 2013. Undeniably, the appearance of hundreds of new bike stations around the city was bound to ruffle some feathers – many business owners feared
that the decrease in parking would affect their businesses, wealthy residents felt the stations were eyesores, and Rabinowitz viewed them as “begriming” the city’s most beautiful neighborhoods (Wall Street Journal 2013). However, much of this criticism taking place around the launch eventually died down; at a certain point, it became a question not of ripping out the stations (or the program entirely) but of relocating stations and making compromises. This indicates a slow (yet successful) dismantling of the systems of automobility that previously inhibited bicycle infrastructure; as New York City residents watched as more and more blue bikes circled around their streets, it became clear that bicyclists had begun to reclaim the Right to occupy the street safely and efficiently.

Citi Bike is an example of bicycle activism’s success; Transportation Alternatives and many of its partner organizations have pushed for a bike share program for ages. In this case, activism has become city policy – it has solidified itself in the government, in the culture, and in the public psyche of the city. However, the experience of Citi Bike shows that even once activism achieves a goal, city policy is by no means inherently legitimate or uncontested. The very nature of “politics” suggests the presence of issues, of disputes and battling interests. Thus, the bikelash behind Citi Bike shows that automobility is still not impenetrable – even when bicycle activists have an ally or two in a high office willing to make change happen on the city street, public opposition is virtually inevitable. As Deputy Mayor Howard Wolfson claimed, “Change in New York doesn’t really happen without someone becoming unhappy” (Miller 2013). In this way, combating automobility by changing policy is not the be-all-end-all of bicycle activism. Rather, it puts the City in a position in which they can negotiate with the public. It
presents the opportunity to navigate the political environment in which a revolutionary 
new concept collides with the streets that systems of automobility have created. Citi Bike 
is thus an example of what I deem to be “institutional activism,” which holds the same 
political motives and objectives as other activists, but requires a completely different set 
of mechanisms to promote and execute it. Based on this idea, I argue that Citi Bike 
politicizes the bicycle by provoking impassioned bikelash, thereby allowing the City to 
understand the reality of the bicycle’s future in the New York City street and providing a 
realistic basis on which other levels of activism can base their campaigns and approaches 
off of.

_Institutionalization versus Identity_

Since the program has been implemented, you cannot walk down a New York 
City street without seeing a blue Citi Bike ride swiftly past you. The institutionalization 
of bikes has increased visibility of bicyclists and their rights, but it also complicates the 
notion of the Right to the City. I argue this because the fundamentals of the Right to the 
City – the right to shape public space – can become so normalized within the 
institutionalized program that identity formation is affected.

To explore this further, it is necessary to note how important the formation of a 
bicyclist identity is to bicycle activism. As explored in my examination of Time’s Up! 
and Critical Mass, I show how empowerment on the individual level is essential in 
creating a mass social movement. This empowerment is both a consequence and a cause 
of the identity that people who use bikes form as “bicyclists.” Ascribing oneself to this 
identity, and placing enough importance on it, is critical to carrying out bicycle activism 
because it makes people feel personally connected to and affected by the issues.
Understanding oneself to be a “bicyclist” instead of just someone who uses a bicycle as a mode of transportation is thus critical in achieving real change in policy and infrastructure. Once bicyclists begin to feel personally marginalized, they are more likely to fight to reclaim the Right to the City, as their own rights to safety and legitimacy are at stake. This fight is thus heartily dependent on the formation of bicyclist identities through activism like Critical Mass as well as the letter-writing campaigns carried out by Transportation Alternatives.

The institutionalization of bicycling in Citi Bike threatens to undermine this identity formation by normalizing bicycling to a point at which it becomes taken for granted. As Noah Budnick of TA argued, the largest level of political movements has no reason to exist once it’s ingrained both in culture and policy. Data shows that Citi Bike is already incredibly embedded in the New York City urban fabric, as stations are ubiquitous around Manhattan and bike lanes are growing safer and more prevalent. This runs the risk of taking the identity out of bicycling in the city – more and more people will use the bicycle casually in their day-to-day lives, without thinking critically about their experiences as bicyclists in relation to other forms of transportation and the city street in general. Additionally, the program also threatens to cultivate complacency among city legislators who may feel that Citi Bike accomplishes all that bicycle activists are pushing for so vehemently. More simply, Citi Bike could perhaps be an “easy way out” for politicians faced with the issue of combating automobility in the city. In thinking back to Budnick’s claim about an inside and an outside of politics within the activism community, placing Citi Bike within this framework is hard to accomplish; the program
is even more than being inside politics, it is politics – it embodies the capitalist private interests that are inherent in most legislation.

This examination of the relationship between institutionalization and identity formation is not to argue explicitly that Citi Bike is not a productive element in the bicycle activism community; in essence, the program is exemplary of what activists aim to accomplish – the solidification and legitimization of bicycling in physical space and policy. In this regard, Citi Bike is not detrimental to furthering bicycle advocacy. By examining the “bikelash” detailed previously, it is clear that New York City bicyclists and their allies in government are still under siege when it comes to their Right to the City. As city policy shifts toward pro-bicycle (and anti-car) constituencies, bicycle activism becomes less abstract and much more visible to the greater public, sparking debate and opposition that politicizes the issue of the bicycle. This bikelash that followed the installation of Citi Bike served to combat the risks associated with the institutionalization of bicycling to ensure that a “bicyclist” identity still exists and that other levels of bicycle activism are still necessary and sought out.

Conclusions

A study of Citi Bike is critical to understanding the bicycle activism community in New York City because it illustrates what occurs when activism becomes law. That is not to say that all grassroots groups and non-profit organizations have the sole aim to achieve a bike share program, rather that Citi Bike is undoubtedly symbolic for a larger trend in creating more complete streets and reclaiming the Right to the City for bicyclists. After many years of implementing bike lanes, the Bloomberg administration (with the help of Transportation Commissioner Sadik-Khan) was able to achieve such a sweeping
and revolutionary change. This change will have long-lasting effects for New York City, as well as all cities around the world hoping to follow in its footsteps. Despite nay-sayers like Dorothy Rabinowitz who assert, “New York is not London or Paris or Amsterdam” (in the sense that their bicycling culture took off quite quickly), the program is likely to become one of the most successful bike sharing systems in the world (Wall Street Journal 2013). This, as Bloomberg and Sadik-Khan argue, places New York City at the forefront of the urban environmental movement and provides a framework for many other cities to use in the future.

In an interview about Citi Bike, Howard Wolfson said, “You know, God bless the advocacy community for pushing the issue” (Miller 2013). In this regard, activist organizations like Time’s Up! and Transportation Alternatives play meaningful roles in influencing policy. They garner public support for the issue and push people to become politically involved. Citi Bike’s high approval ratings are evidence of this public support (a 2013 New York Times study found that 73% of residents approved of the program) (Barbaro & Thee-Brenan 2013). The high usage and support of this program indicates that perhaps society’s skewed ideas of personal mobility, discussed in my theoretical framework, pose the possibility of changing. If automobility were to be dismantled even further, bicycle advocacy could perhaps push for even more drastic and comprehensive changes to the city street.

Citi Bike has presented legislators and the public with the opportunity to navigate and operate within a new streets system. It has created a city in which more pro-bicycle advocacy is possible, as there is an entirely new framework around which activists can work. This is the very root of what “institutional activism” serves to accomplish. So,
although there are undoubtedly problems with institutionalization of bicycling and the program’s technology and accessibility, its existence and relative success represents a meaningful step to a more sustainable and safe city street, in which bicyclists and pedestrians have just as much say and respect as drivers.
Chapter 7
Concluding Remarks

When we think of activism as one large, singular movement, it is easy to forget that there are in fact many different actors at play within it, and that they all rely on one another to make meaningful change possible. It would be difficult, most likely impossible, for one kind of activism to be successful without another. In order to understand these dynamics of the activism community, I identify the ways types of activism harness different mechanisms to politicize the bicycle in various ways.

Starting at the least formal (although by no means the least important) mode of activism, grassroots groups play the crucial role of centralizing and organizing individuals into a mass movement. Events like Critical Mass foster empowerment while simultaneously increasing visibility. It seeks to show that bicyclists don’t disrupt traffic – they *are* traffic. This direct approach to activism harnesses the power of possibility, the power to make an ideal a reality, if only for an hour. More concretely, CM and Time’s Up! reclaim the Right to the City by physically taking over the space and shaping it according to their vision. The creation of a safe, enjoyable, and empowering space to ride a bicycle through the city is enough to bring new people to bicycling as well as to inspire veterans to join the fight against automobility’s injustices.

At the next level, more formal organizations play an altogether different role within bicycle activism that is focused more on political action rather than direct action. Non-profits and other more formal organizations like Transportation Alternatives help to connect these individuals inspired by Critical Mass to the political process. By providing these individuals with a more structured framework to work within, a framework that
ultimately connects to the city’s legislators, TA elicits a unique kind of cooperation between the public and policymakers. Non-profit organizations can be said to harness this kind of “hybrid” activism in order to forge these connections and eventually effectively influence lawmakers. The politicization at this level occurs through this mix of community outreach and government lobbying to produce a closer link between those who use public space and those who shape it, or those who want the Right to the City and those who have it.

Lastly, I discuss the institutional bike share program, Citi Bike, to illustrate what occurs when bicycle activism begins achieving its goals. Citi Bike is indeed an indicator that bicycle transportation is on its way to becoming better respected and legitimized within policy. Citi Bike allows us to understand the implications of institutionalizing bicycling, both in terms of its effect on identity formation as well as its ability to spark harsh criticism. This criticism is particularly important when studying Citi Bike because it allows the City to negotiate its way through shifting public opinion to produce a real, viable system that has the potential to serve as a framework for cities around the world.

Clearly, these three modes of activism are both dependent upon and implicative of one another. Without groups like Time’s Up!, Transportation Alternatives would not have the member base it needs who are wiling to pay dues and go out of their way to write letters to their representatives. Without TA, Citi Bike might not even exist, as non-profit and formal organizations played an incredibly large role in pushing legislators towards the program and debunking false criticisms. And, if Citi Bike didn’t exist, it would not be clear if bicycling would ever realistically reach a true “critical mass.” The
mechanisms in play at this highest end of activism are important because they are more concrete and provide hard evidence once the program is on the ground.

This study highlights the importance of the singularity and cohesiveness of these different types of activism, indicating that they are most effective when operating both independently yet simultaneously. Moreover, it illustrates who has the power to do what within the activism community and how that affects the subsequent outcome. For instance, Citi Bike is a direct consequence of the social and political movements occurring in New York City for decades, even a century one could argue. Grassroots and non-profits in tandem thus have the ability to create physical and psychological change, manifested in the form of programs run by the city. In fact, this is a cyclical relationship because institutional programs and the negotiation that results allow bicycle activism at lower levels to keep pushing for more.

In this sense, we can understand the Right to the City and automobility to be two overlapping ways to describe efforts to reorganize control of public transportation and public space in New York City. The three cases I discuss in this thesis show that phases of revolution, negotiation, and institutionalization must go hand in hand to generate comprehensive and meaningful change. None is mutually exclusive; rather, they rely on one another in complex and dynamic ways that change in accordance with the political and social environments within which they operate. Thus the politicization of the bicycle must happen in different forms and through different entities in order to spark a successful shift in the dominant mentality of the public and policymakers. This important link connecting Time’s Up!, Transportation Alternatives, and Citi Bike is crucial to understanding activism as a whole. It informs us that the concept of “activism” is not
one-dimensional. Rather, activism is an amalgamation of various efforts that strive to create shifts in political and social discourse at differing levels. Activism is not a singular practice; it is a process consisting of multiple struggles that occur at the same time at different scales.

There is much that can still be studied within this topic of New York City bicycle activism. This thesis utilizes case studies to indicate larger trends within levels of activism; a more focused study looking at each of these three levels more closely, using multiple examples for each, would allow us to more clearly understand trends within these three levels instead of only between them. This would allow for more extensive, and perhaps more conclusive, findings. Additionally, I believe a study of the role of the police in each level of activism would be warranted in more fully understanding this topic since the NYPD play a crucial role in regulating bicycling, many times unfairly. A study such as this would not only provide greater detail on what I hope this thesis presents, but would also identify ways that certain forms of activism work against one another – how certain levels are treated differently than others. Further research in these areas could provide a greater depth to this study and could perhaps allow the bicycle activism community to navigate around and amongst one another more effectively.

There also must be an understanding that “activism” itself is a slightly vague term. Although the efforts I detail in this study fall within the term’s jurisdiction, there are many other actors working at different levels and scales that also play a large role in political movements. The politicization of the bicycle must not only be understood as occurring exclusively through the activist communities I have discussed; rather, these groups and organizations are just some of the formal entities working towards the
common goal of sustainable and equal cities. Each New York City resident that chooses to forgo buying or using a car and instead rides a bicycle plays a crucial role in the progression of a bike-friendly New York. In this respect, the term “activism” that I employ frequently within this thesis does have its limitations, as it does not encompass all of the individual actors who make up a substantial part of the public movement surrounding bicycles.

From studying this topic so in-depth, I have acquired a newfound admiration for the activism community as a whole. Undertaking such a sweeping project, which allowed me to study so many different aspects of bicycle advocacy, has shown me that even the smallest, seemingly insignificant forms of activism are all somehow connected to the larger network of activists working towards a common goal at the highest level. This experience has also taught me that any and all involvement is necessary in political movements because measuring effectiveness is almost impossible – because really, what does “effective” bicycle activism entail? Changing the car-dependent mentality? Reconstructing the city street? Making bicycling a cultural norm? Creating economic incentives? There are so many ways that activism can succeed, or contribute to success. Studying New York City’s activism community in such detail has only instilled within me a greater enthusiasm for the bicycle movement and a desire to learn more and do more to create more sustainable and successful cities.
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Images


Figure 2: Friends of Ocean Parkway. 2014. “Ocean Parkways Bicycle Parade 1896 Draws Thousands.” February 15. www.friendsofoceanparkway.org

Figure 3: New York City Department of Transportation. 2012. “Measuring the Street: New Metrics for 21st Century Streets.”

Figure 4: Bergin, Peter. 2003.

Figure 5: Szymaszek, Jennifer. 2004.


Figure 7: New York City Department of Transportation. 2014. “Citi Bike Station Map.” http://a841-tpweb.nyc.gov/bikeshare/station-map/.
Appendix

Map of New York City’s Bike Lanes, Bike Paths, and Greenways